Coriolanus Study Guide

Coriolanus by William Shakespeare

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Introduction

Critics generally agree that *Coriolanus* was written in 1608, although a variety of composition dates ranging from 1605 to 1609 have been establ1shed as possible. The drama was first published in the First Folio of 1623, and this remains the only authoritative text. According to scholarly opinion this copy of the play was likely printed directly from a manuscript in Shakespeare's own handwriting with little editorial revision. The primary source for *Coriolanus* is the Greek historian Plutarch's "I.ife of Caius Marcus Coriolanus," included in his *lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans.* Shakespeare most likely read this work in Sir Thomas North's English translation. In fact, as critics have often noted, *Coriolanus* derives its characters, Its sequence of events, and even some of its language directly from North

As is true of Shakespeare's work in general, the dramatist took great liberties in altering the source material for *Coriolanus.* His most significant changes include his development of the character of Menenius Agrippa, who appears only briefly in the historical source; his expansion of Volumnia's role and influence over events in the actIon; his emphasis on the grain shortage as the cause of citizen riots in Rome, and, most Importantly, his complex portrayal of

Coriolanus, whose failure in Plutarch's biography is simply the result of a defective upbringing and education. *Coriolanus* has puzzled commentators throughout its critical history I.ike Its title character, who is the principal subject of the majority of critical discussion, the tragedy has been both admired and condemned. Generally, scholars have praised the work's lively characterization, and particularly the dramatic potency of the proud warn or's fall brought about by his rash behavior and personality. However, many early critics found the work marred by Shakespeare's harsh rhetoric, constricting Imagery, and presentation of an arrogant and unsympathetic hero.

The play is usually considered Shakespeare's final tragedy, but departs from the norm of the dramatist's tragic works in Its emphasis on politics. Indeed, the two most prominent modern lines of Critical thought concerning *Coriolanus* relate to its political nature, as a representation of class conflict between commoners (Roman plebeians) and aristocrats (patricians), and to Its psychological exploration of Its principal characters and their motivations-a subject often focused on the nature of Coriolanus's relationship with his mother, Volumnia. A third and related topic of critical interest considers the ethical dimension of the playas an examination of the Virtue of honor in both political and psychological contexts

Plot Summary

Facing a dire shortage of food and the possibility of famine, the citizens of Rome spill into the streets demanding the death of Caius Marcius, an aristocratic general. Menenius arrives, hoping to forestall the riot and calm the unruly citizens. He recites a fable to them, in an effort to defend the aristocracy and its actions. The people remain displeased until Menenius adds that they may elect tribunes, or judges, to represent them. The arrival of the arrogant Caius Marcius threatens to enflame the mob again until news of a military threat by the V oiscians, a neighboring tribe led by Tullus Aufidius, surfaces. The Roman consul, Cominius, his general, Lartius, and several senators urge Marcius to prepare for the defense of Rome. They depart and the tribunes Sicinius and Brutus- comment on Marcius's military prowess and excessive pride.

The scene shIfts to Corioles, where the Volscian senators and their military commander, Aufidius, prepare to launch an attack on Rome. Elsewhere, Marcius's mother, Volumnia, scolds her daughter-in-law, VIrgilia, chiding her for fears that Marcius may be injured or killed during the fight. Volumnia imagines with joy the wounds her son will receive on the battlefield and the glory that will be bestowed upon him, upsetting Virgilia's sensitive nature. The lady Valeria enters. She speaks of young Marcius, son of Virgilia and Caius Marcius, and brings news that the Roman siege of Corioles is under way.

During the battle, Marcius's forces lose their morale and retreat. Cursing theIr cowardice, Marcius storms the gates of Corioles alone. Lartius and the Roman soldiers believe that Marcius has been slain, but he miraculously appears at the gates, bleeding and chased by Volscian soldIers. Rallied by their general's bravery, the Roman troops attack and capture the city. Though he is wounded, Marcius insists that he press the assault and jom Cominius, whose forces are engaged with those of Aufidius. Lartius leaves Corioles in the charge of his lieutenant and catches up with Marcius, who has forced Aufidius and his men to retreat. Victorious, the Romans honor Marcius, giving him the name Coriolanus in celebration of his fearlessness at Corioles. Meanwhile, defeated once again by Coriolanus, Aufidius swears he will have revenge, even if he must resort to treachery to achieve It.

Characters

Adrian:

He appears in IV.iii, where the designation for his speeches is the anonymous "Volscian." While traveling from Antium to Rome, Adrian unexpectedly meets Nicanor, a Roman spy. Adrian welcomes the news that Nicanor is bringing to Antium: Coriolanus has been banished, the Roman nobles are irate, and the political situation is unstable.

Aediles:

They are minor public officials who serve as assistants to the tribunes. In III.i, after Brutus and Sicinius declare that Coriolanus is a traitor, the aediles are instructed to seize him. Coriolanus resists arrest and strikes the aediles. In III.iii, following orders from the tribunes, an aedile assembles a crowd of plebeians and tells them what to say and do when Coriolanus returns to the marketplace to answer the charges against him. The aedile helps inflame the mob against Coriolanus. In IV.vi, a report about the Volscian army's renewed attack on Roman territories is relayed to the tribunes by an aedile. The tribunes scoff at the news and dismiss it as a rumor.

Aufidius:

He is the Volsces' preeminent military hero. Like Coriolanus, his identity is closely tied to his fame as a warrior. The two men share a longstanding rivalry; their personal combat in I.viii represents the fifth time they have met on a battlefield. Though their hatred of each other is intense, so is their mutual admiration. As many commentators have pointed out, Aufidius's speech at IV.v. 101- 35□when he discovers that his uninvited guest is Coriolanus□has strong elements of homoeroticism. "Let me twine / Mine arms about that body," cries Aufidius (IV.v. 106-07). The sight of Coriolanus makes him happier, Aufidius says, than he was when he saw his bride crossing the threshold on their wedding day.

Though Aufidius's attitude changes when Coriolanus becomes the popular favorite of the Volscian soldiers, he shows profound insight into Coriolanus's character. In a conversation with his lieutenant in IV.vii, he notes that Coriolanus is uncomfortable when people praise him□that it makes him uneasy. Aufidius suggests several reasons to explain what led to Coriolanus's banishment: his pride, a "defect of judgment" (IV.vii.39), or his temperament, that served him supremely well as a warrior but that would be fatal in a political leader. Commentators have suggested that the reason Aufidius understands Coriolanus so well is because they are so much alike.

In many ways, however, Aufidius is very different from his rival. He's a pragmatist and a clever analyzer of circumstances. He's willing to affect an attitude of continued good will toward Coriolanus even while he waits for the right moment to undermine him. And he's

prepared to use any means□ whether they're honorable or not□to accomplish his goal. Aufidius seems to have no qualms about manipulating Coriolanus or about using the Volscian people to carry out his personal revenge. He knows just which charges will most incite Coriolanus into a rage□"traitor" and "boy"□and he employs them brilliantly in the play's final scene. The conspirators who have joined Aufidius in the plot against Coriolanus kill the Roman, and Aufidius arrogantly plants his foot on the corpse□until one of the Volscian lords orders him to remove it. Aufidius may be sincere when he begins his eulogy of Coriolanus by saying "My rage is gone, / And I am struck with sorrow" (V.vi.146-47). Since he has frequently acknowledged Coriolanus's superiority and found fault only with what Coriolanus did, not what he was, Aufidius's declaration that "he shall have a noble memory" (V.vi. 153) seems to ring true. There is justice in Aufidius's charge that Coriolanus betrayed his Volscian allies. But his scornful claim that Coriolanus was moved to spare Rome because of "a few drops of women's" tears (V.vi.45) reveals more about Aufidius's small mindedness than it does about Coriolanus's character.

Brutus:

See Tribunes

Caius Martius:

See Coriolanus

Citizens:

See Roman Citizens *and* Volscian Citizens

Cominius:

He is a consul and the commander of the Roman army. A sensible man, he generally speaks in a deliberate, cautious manner, though sometimes he shows a fondness for extravagant language. He is practical rather than idealistic, yet he is devoted to Rome and to his friend Coriolanus. When conflict develops between his country and his friend, Cominius is caught in the middle. His efforts to act as a mediator between them are unsuccessful.

Like the other patricians in the play, Cominius constantly fears that the delicate balance between social classes will collapse and that Rome will be plunged into civil war. When an ugly brawl erupts in the marketplace in III.i, Cominius scolds the tribunes and the plebeians. "That is the way to lay the city flat, / To bring the roof to the foundation," he warns them (III.i.203-04). Cominius recognizes that the senate cannot impose its choice for consul on the common people; they must be wooed and won over. At III.ii.93-95, he tells Coriolanus that unless he's prepared to remain calm when he goes back to the

marketplace, he shouldn't go at all. When Coriolanus says that he can't possibly play the part of a humble, contrite man, Cominius responds, "Come, come, we'll prompt you" (III.ii.l06). Cominius believes that there are times when a politician must compromise in order to be effective and that given the structure of the Roman republic, the power of the common citizens must be respected.

Cominius's tendency to exaggerate is most apparent in his speeches praising Coriolanus. In his address to the senators before they vote on Coriolanus's election to the consulship, Cominius vividly recreates Coriolanus's brilliant military career. "I shall lack voice" to adequately describe his merits, says Cominius (II.ii.82), but he rises to the occasion. In a lengthy speech filled with vivid descriptions, complex sentences, and images that intensify Coriolanus's valor, he depicts a superhuman hero (II.ii.82-122). Similarly, after Coriolanus has been banished and joined the enemy forces, Cominius reports that the Volscians have made Coriolanus "their god" (IV.vi.90). Once again there is the suggestion that Coriolanus is no mere mortal: "He leads them like a thing / Made by some other deity than nature" (IV.vi.90-91). And when Cominius returns to Rome after trying to persuade Coriolanus not to attack the city, his description of Coriolanus evokes awe: "he does sit in gold, his eye / Red as 'twould burn Rome" (V.i.63-64). The words of Cominius contribute significantly to Coriolanus's image in the play as a superhuman force.

Conspirators:

Allies of Aufidius, they appear in the final scene of the play. The conspirators point out to Aufidius that Coriolanus is more popular with the Volscian army than he is. They complain that the new treaty with Rome has deprived them of glory and the spoils of war, and they declare their willingness to help bring about Coriolanus's downfall. After Aufidius has taunted Coriolanus into an explosive rage, the conspirators clamor for his death, inciting the people further. A Volscian nobleman tries to calm the crowd, but after a final exchange of insults between Coriolanus and Aufidius, the conspirators rush at Coriolanus. Shouting "Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill" (V.vi.130), they stab him to death.

Coriolanus:

Caius Martius Coriolanus dominates the play. He is loud and boisterous, a man of action. His physical strength and courage are almost superhuman. Coriolanus is the greatest warrior of his age. His personal heroism inspires other soldiers, and the men who willingly follow him into battle worship him almost as a god. But the play does not portray him as a natural leader, at ease with his subordinates or respecting them. When the Romans are beaten back to their trenches outside the walls of Corioles, he turns the situation around by cursing his men. He roars for "boils and plagues" to cover their bodies, calls them "souls of geese, / That bear the shapes of men," and threatens to turn his sword against them if they don't "stand fast" (I.iv.31, 34-35, 41). The qualities that make him Rome's most celebrated soldier are not the ones necessary for effective political leadership. He seems to understand this himself, though he is not an

introspective man. Coriolanus's mother appears to be the impulse behind his decision to seek the office of consul. He himself is not adept at campaigning. He uses language as a blunt instrument, as in the passage cited above, not as a means of persuasion or cajoling. It goes against his nature, he says, to have to ask people for their votes: "It is a part / That I shall blush in acting" (II.ii. 144-45). Menenius tries to coach his performance and reminds him that "the worthiest men" in Rome have had to put on the robe of humility and appeal directly to the citizens (II.iii.49). Coriolanus acts as if his extraordinary military service entitles him to the office of consul □he shouldn't have to coax the people into voting for him.

He despises the citizens he would be required to serve if he were elected. "Bid them wash their faces, / And keep their teeth clean," he mockingly says as the first group of citizens he is supposed to talk to approaches him (II.iii.60-61). Coriolanus's contempt for the people is evident throughout the play. He calls them rogues, curs, rats, and foul-smelling cowards. His political beliefs stem from his conviction that only aristocrats are fit to rule. He thinks it was a grave mistake for the senators to distribute corn to the people at no charge: the common soldiers were cowardly in the battle out side the city of Corioles, he says, and they shouldn't be rewarded for "this kind of service" (III.i.123). The distribution of corn will only lead them to expect more hand-outs in the future, he argues. Furthermore, Coriolanus says, they will believe the senators acted out of fear, and this will encourage them to think they can intimidate their rulers. He thinks the citizens have been given too much power. He doesn't believe it's possible to have a stable government if ignorant citizens, as he regards them, have the right to help determine policy and elect officials.

Many commentators focus on Coriolanus's arrogance. They see his enormous pride as the key to his character. Several of them have called attention to what they regard as the hero's egotism or self-centeredness. Virtually everyone remarks on Coriolanus's ungovernable temper. His explosive rages repeatedly lead to disastrous consequences. The tribunes make use of this trait, baiting him until he roars his defiance of them and his contempt for the people. In effect, this guarantees his banishment. Aufidius similarly understands that Coriolanus can be trapped into furious and self-destructive rage, and he goads Coriolanus into an offensive display of wrath in the play's final scene. Like a child who hasn't learned to consider the impact of what he's about to say, Coriolanus expresses his emotions immediately and directly. "His heart's his mouth: / What his breast forges, that his tongue must vent," Menenius points out (III.i.256-57).

Coriolanus strikes many readers as being immature. He seems unusually dependent on his mother for praise and approval. He's willing to take a course of action that he knows is wrong□seeking the consulship□because it's what she wants him to do. In III.ii, he compromises his integrity when he gives in to her and agrees to pretend to the people that he's sorry for what he said. And he betrays his soldier's oath to the Volscians when, in V.iii, Volumnia makes her emotional appeal. Some commentators argue that Coriolanus is subconsciously aware of his immaturity, and thus when Aufidius calls him a "boy of tears" (V.vi.100), the charge strikes home and sends him into uncontrollable rage. Three times Coriolanus hurls the word "boy" back at Aufidius, as if in disbelief. To disprove the charge, he reminds everyone of what he accomplished at Corioles."Like an

eagle in a dove-cote," he scattered all before him and he did it single-handedly: "Alone I did it. Boy!" (V.vi.114, 116).

Coriolanus's stubbornness has sometimes been viewed as a sign of immaturity. But other commentators see it as a token of his unswerving commitment to the principles and ideals that he's been taught by his mother and his society. In Coriolanus's world, honor is an end in itself, and he cannot understand why he should compromise it for the sake of political expediency. "You are too absolute," his mother tells him (III.ii.39). Coriolanus disdains the idea that concessions must be made to the people, that he should betray his nature for the votes of ordinary citizens. He resists giving power to the people and creating the office of tribune because he knows these moves will diminish the authority of the patricians□the group to which he belongs and the only one that he believes has the ability to govern Rome. The ideals he seeks to uphold□telling the truth, keeping one's word, holding firmly to one's position□are virtues in a soldier. Unhappily, Coriolanus finds that they have less value in civil society.

His alienation from that society may be traced to this difference in values. Or it may be a result of arrogance. Whatever the reason, Coriolanus is a solitary man. He confides in no one and seems entirely self-sufficient. He sees no bond of humanity between himself and ordinary people. At I.ix.90- 92, after the battle of Corioles, he is unable to remember the name of the Volscian who once treated him with kindness; as a result, the man, now Coriolanus's contempt for the people is evident throughout the play. He calls them rogues, curs, rats, and foul-smelling cowards. His political beliefs stem from his conviction that only aristocrats are fit to rule." a Roman prisoner, will undoubtedly be killed. Coriolanus's lack of humanity is emphasized by other characters' frequent use of "thing" and inanimate and subhuman images when they talk about him. "When he walks, he moves like an engine," says Menenius (V.iv. 18-19). As Coriolanus leaves Rome for the last time, he compares himself to "a lonely dragon" (IV.i.30). And in his only soliloquy (IV.iv. 12-26), he purposefully distances himself from such emotions as love and friendship.

Ironically, as many commentators have pointed out, it is precisely at the moment when Coriolanus permits himself (or is persuaded) to show his common humanity with others that he assures his own destruction. When he agrees to spare Rome, he knows it will cost him his life. But for once the fierce warrior demonstrates a sense of compassion. He chooses his fate and accepts it. Indeed, in the play's final scene he almost seems to court death. He recklessly reminds the Volscians that he was responsible for the deaths of many of their country men, and they respond by demanding his life in return. "Cut me to pieces," he cries (V.vi.lll). Coriolanus's death represents an atonement for the lives of many Volscians as well as a courageous sacrifice on behalf of Rome.

Gentlewoman:

She is a companion or attendant of Volumnia. She appears in I.iii and announces that Valeria has "come to visit" (I.iii.26).

Herald:

He makes a formal speech, at II.i. 162-66, saluting Coriolanus as a hero and welcoming him back to Rome after the defeat of the Volscians.

Junius Brutus:

See Tribunes

Lartius:

He is one of Rome's leading generals. Though his fame and accomplishments are overshadowed by Coriolanus's, Lartius doesn't appear to resent this. When he learns that his friend has entered Corioles by himself and is likely dead, Lartius delivers an impromptu, though premature, eulogy (I.iv.52-61). As he evokes an image of a man who was a unique soldier and the terror of Rome's enemies, Coriolanus himself appears, covered in blood but most definitely alive. Inspired by his bravery and determination, Lartius and the Roman soldiers enter Corioles with their hero and seize control of the city. Lartius stays behind in Corioles, while his friend goes off to assist Cominius; he's only able to join the others when the battle is nearly over. In his last appearance in the play, Lartius comes to Rome with news about Aufidius. He tells Cominius and Coriolanus that the Volscian leader is presently living in Antium and that his enmity toward Coriolanus is stronger than ever.

Lictors:

Minor public officials, they serve as ushers for the tribunes. Lictors precede Sicinius and Brutus when they enter the senate chamber at II.ii.37.

Lieutenant:

See Roman Lieutenant *and* Volscian Lieutenant

Martius:

See Coriolanus

Menenius:

A Roman senator, he is a close friend to Coriolanus. He sees himself as Coriolanus's mentor and adviser. Menenius is constantly urging his friend to hold his temper in check, to appear humble in front of the people, and to moderate his harsh language. In

part, Menenius does so because he understands the need for tact and the effectiveness of mild words. He also wants desperately to avoid an uprising by the people. He believes that "the violent fit of the time" (III.ii.33) may lead to civil war unless Coriolanus answers the charges against him respectfully. Menenius knows the value of conciliatory language and frequently employs it himself.

His retelling of "the fable of the belly" (I.i.96- 163) is intended to calm the angry citizens and persuade them to accept their subordinate role in society. As many commentators have noted, the speech is ambiguous. On the surface, it is an allegory of a well-ordered state, in which each social group carries out its assigned function so that the welfare of the entire body politic is ensured. To some readers it appears patronizing□a trite old tale to which Menenius applies his own, self-interested interpretation. His reading of the allegory seems to suggest that the Roman aristocracy is determined to preserve the present order of society and that the country will go on with or without its common citizens. It also may imply that Menenius sees the body politic only in terms of the satisfaction of physical needs and desires. One citizen in his audience points out to him that his retelling of the tale omits mention of the higher operations of the body: intellect, imagination, and benevolence.

Menenius likes to describe himself as a genial old man who is fond of eating and drinking and telling stories. The tribunes seem to regard him as a charming, harmless fellow with a reputation for good-natured teasing. They fail to see that his insults are genuine; when he calls them asses and hypocritics and makes fun of their official duties, they brush his remarks aside as the usual jokes of a man who doesn't take himself or others too seriously. Other people, including some citizens, sense that his jokes have a darker meaning. In I.i, Menenius tries to downplay the shrewdness of one citizen's commentary on the fable of the belly by mocking the man as "the great toe" of the body politic (I.i. 155); his true estimation of the people becomes clear a moment later when he refers to them as the rats of Rome.

Menenius is a pitiful figure by the close of the play. Volscian guardsmen sneer at his claims that he's Coriolanus's dearest friend and mock his repeated attempts to persuade them he's a very important man. Coriolanus sends him away and refuses to listen to any more of his advice. This is the kind of treatment Cominius had warned Menenius to expect if he went to the Volscian camp. Perhaps it is to his credit that he endured this abuse and humiliation for the sake of Rome.

Messengers:

Roman messengers appear in six scenes throughout the play, sometimes bringing news of events and sometimes confirming or contradicting earlier reports by other messengers. The first messenger comes into the marketplace as Coriolanus is complaining bitterly about the government having granted the plebeians five tribunes "to defend their vulgar wisdoms" (I.i.215). Coriolanus is pleased to hear the messenger's news that the Volscian army is on the march. In I.iv, another messenger appears as Coriolanus and Lartius are preparing to attack the city of Corioles; he tells them that

Cominius and his forces have the enemy in view, but that the battle has not yet begun. In I.vi, a messenger reaches Cominius with incomplete information: he witnessed the Roman troops at Corioles being driven back to their trenches by the Volscians. Because he left immediately after the event, he's unaware that the Romans captured the city.

Brutus and Sicinius receive news from messengers on several occasions. In II.i, a messenger tells them they've been summoned to the Capitol, where the senators are about to meet. The messenger also reports that, as he passed through the streets, he saw people from every rank and station paying tribute to Coriolanus, the hero of the hour. In IV. vi, a messenger brings the tribunes another piece of unwanted news: an earlier report about the Volscian army making inroads into Roman territory has been con firmed. Furthermore, he tells them, there's a rumor that Coriolanus has gone over to the Volscians and now shares leadership of the army with Aufidius. The tribunes scoff at the rumor, but a second messenger arrives a moment later and confirms it. He paints a grim picture: "A fearful army, led by Caius Martius" (IV.vi.75), is laying waste to everything in its path. Two messengers also appear in V.iv. The first one tells Sicinius that the plebeians have seized Brutus and have vowed to kill him "by inches" (V.iv.39) if Volumnia and Virgilia's appeal to Coriolanus is not successful. Just as the first messenger completes his report, a second one arrives. He brings good news: the women have prevailed, the Volscians have broken camp, and Coriolanus has left.

Nicanor:

He appears in IV.iii, where the designation for his speeches is the anonymous "Roman." Nicanor is a spy. He is on his way to Antium when he meets a Volscian citizen named Adrian. Nicanor tells Adrian about the current struggles between the plebeians on the one hand, and "the senators, patricians and nobles" (IV.iii. 14-15) on the other. In Nicanor's opinion, the nobles are so disturbed by Coriolanus's banishment that they are ready to strip the people of all the power that has recently been granted them.

Officers:

Two minor functionaries, they appear at the beginning of II.ii. As they arrange cushions in the senate chamber in preparation for a meeting there, they discuss the consulship election. One officer asserts that Coriolanus is overly proud and "loves not the common people" (II.ii.6). He further declares that Coriolanus actively pursues the people's hate; in his opinion, this is just as bad as if he were "to flatter them for their love" (II.ii.23). The other officer defends Coriolanus, pointing out that "many great men ... have flattered the people" even though they "ne'er loved them" (II.ii.7-8). He believes that Coriolanus is indifferent to the people's regard and does not care whether they love him or hate him.

Patricians:

Roman noblemen, they appear on at least three occasions. They are on hand to witness Coriolanus's defiance of the tribunes and hear his reckless words in III.i. They

are also present in III.ii, when Volumnia and Coriolanus's friends try to persuade him to return to the marketplace and reassure the citizens. And several young patricians accompany Coriolanus to the gates of the city when he goes into exile.

Other characters frequently talk about the patricians, offering widely different perspectives on their actions and attitudes. For example, at I.i.65-66, Menenius says they are deeply committed to the welfare of the common citizens. They "care for you like fathers," he tells the plebeians (I.i.77). One citizen forcefully disputes this judgment: "Care for us? ... They ne'er cared for us yet" (I.i.79-80). He charges that the patricians are willing to let the people starve to death, even though the warehouses are full of grain.

The text of the play does not consistently distinguish between Roman patricians and senators. For more on the Roman nobility, see Roman Senators.

Plebeians:

See Roman Citizens

Roman Citizens:

A number of citizens, also known as of them, especially in the early scenes, are partially individualized characters, but none of them is given a name. Their speech headings are first citizen, second citizen, and so on. These headings refer to the order in which the citizens speak within a specific scene. Thus the first citizen in Li is not necessarily the same individual as the first citizen in II.iii, for example.

The Roman citizens have drawn a variety of reactions from readers and commentators. Many believe that they have genuine grievances. The citizens' charge about the shortage of corn□that the government has a sufficient supply in storage but refuses to distribute it at prices ordinary people can afford□is never denied by either Menenius or Coriolanus. The citizens also complain that the senate passes laws that favor the rich rather than the poor and that it holds them in low regard. Though senators in the play acknowledge the right of citizens to participate in elections and sometimes grant them special dispensations, they generally do so only when a citizen uprising looks as if it might erupt into civil war.

Individual citizens frequently demonstrate political insight and understanding of the issues at stake. In I.i, the first citizen sees the flaws in Menenius's interpretation of "the fable of the belly," pointing out that several significant parts of the body are missing in his version of the allegory: the head for judgment, the eye for vision, and the heart for compassion. In II.iii, before Coriolanus's first appearance in the marketplace to solicit their votes, a group of citizens thoughtfully discuss whether they are obligated to support him. In a series of interviews with him, they are honest and direct, and they raise important issues. For example, the third citizen is realistic; he reminds Coriolanus that he should be aware that "if we give you anything, we hope to gain by you" (n.iii.71-

72). When Coriolanus asks what is the "price o' th' consulship?", the first citizen replies reasonably: "The price is, to ask it kindly" (II.iii.73-74, 75).

The citizens' hesitations about electing Coriolanus to the consulship are understandable. They know he despises them and has consistently opposed government policies that would benefit them. To their faces he has called them untrustworthy dogs, incapable of appreciating the fine points of political issues. The citizens also recognize that Coriolanus's temperament makes him unsuitable for the role of a national leader who must put aside his biases and govern on behalf of all the people. As soon as they've given him their votes, they begin to express their doubts. Influenced, perhaps, by the effect of this legendary hero appearing before them in the robe of humility and personally appealing for their votes, they do not question his sincerity until afterwards. "He mock'd us," says one citizen (II.iii.159). The tribunes exploit the citizens' uneasiness and turn it to their own advantage.

Some commentators have warned against idealizing the Roman citizens, arguing that the play shows them to be politically unsophisticated. Others have been harsher in their judgment, describing them as gullible, cowardly, greedy, and ungrateful. The citizens' propensity for violence is evident at the very beginning of the play, when they rush through the streets of Rome carrying sticks and clubs, prepared to force the patricians to come to terms with them. And from Act III onward they are easily led, manipulated by the tribunes and reacting according to the directions given them by the aediles. They appear overjoyed at the downfall of their traditional enemy and celebrate his banishment with great enthusiasm, showing no understanding of what this may mean to Rome. It has been noted that as individuals the Roman citizens are admirable, even sympathetic characters. But when they be come part of a mob, they lose any capacity they have to judge wisely and act rationally.

Roman Lieutenant:

When Lartius leaves the captured city of Corioles to join Cominius and Coriolanus on the battlefield, he entrusts the city to one of his lieutenants (I.vii).

Roman Senators:

They serve as advisers to the consuls, whom they have the power to appoint. These appointments, however, must be confirmed by a vote of the citizens. The senators are all wealthy patricians, members of Rome' s most prominent families. Their attitude toward the common citizens is ambiguous, yet they generally seem to recognize the limits of their own authority and to acknowledge the rights of the plebeians. One citizen, however, claims that the senators have so little concern for the populace that they will allow them to starve to death rather than reduce the price of grain. Further, he charges that they've passed laws encouraging usury, repealed statutes that placed restraints on wealthy people, and consistently enacted legislation that makes life difficult for the poor. Menenius, on the other hand who is himself a senator says that the senate is the

source of everything that benefits the common citizens. And Coriolanus declares that if it weren't for the vigilance of "the noble Senate" (I.i.186), the plebeians would constantly be at each other's throats.

In II.ii, the senators address the tribunes—the people's representatives—with deference. However, they apparently intend to appoint Coriolanus to the consulship, and they do. In III.i, they escort him to the marketplace. As he becomes increasingly impatient with the tribunes, the senators urge him to moderate his words. When the mob arrives, the senators are caught up in the tumult. They draw their weapons and try to separate Coriolanus from the people. After Coriolanus leaves, they speak to the tribunes respectfully and urge them to allow him another chance to address the populace. In III.ii, some senators join Volumnia and others in trying to persuade Coriolanus to return to the marketplace and pacify the people. As one of them points out (III.ii.26-28), the senators fear there will be a civil war unless Coriolanus retracts his words. The senators are equally fearful of an invasion by the Volscians. When Volumnia and her party return from the Volscian encampment outside Rome— having persuaded Coriolanus not to attack the city— the senators lead a celebration in honor of their success.

Roman Soldiers:

On some occasions they fight bravely and earn their leaders' praise. At other times their actions are less than admirable. In I.iv, the Volscian army launches a surprise attack outside the walls of Corioles and quickly gains the upper hand against the Romans. Coriolanus curses his soldiers and threatens to turn on them himself unless they help him repel the Volscians. They respond well and the enemy is beaten back to the city gates. Coriolanus enters the city after the retreating Volscians, but the Roman soldiers declare this is folly and refuse to follow him. In I.v, after the city has been captured, three Roman soldiers are seen carrying off booty. Coriolanus calls them "base slaves" (I.v.7) and sneers at the insignificant items they've taken. In I.vi, the soldiers respond enthusiastically to Coriolanus's stirring challenge to return to the battlefield; indeed, more soldiers volunteer to follow him than are actually needed.

Senators:

See Roman Senators *and* Volscian Senators

Servants:

Members of Aufidius's household, they appear in IV.v. Their attitude toward Coriolanus is as changeable as the Roman citizens'. When Coriolanus first enters Aufidius's house—dressed in rags—the servants treat him with scorn; however, after he has been enthusiastically welcomed by Aufidius and offered the leadership of half the Volscian army, they express a different view of him. "He is simply the rarest man i' th' world," says one servant (IV.v.l 60-61), and they all agree that he is a more valiant soldier than their master Aufidius. They marvel at his strength. "He turned me about with his finger

and his thumb, as one would set up a top" (IV.v. 152-53), claims a servant who had tried to eject Coriolanus from the house. All the servants are elated by the prospect of renewed war with Rome. Peace is dull and boring, they say, and produces nothing of worth—only rusting iron, an increase in the population, and full employment for tailors and writers of ballads. Peace "makes men hate one another," remarks one servant (IV.v.230), and another agrees.

Sicinius Velutus:

See Tribunes

Soldiers:

See Roman Soldiers *and* Volscian Soldiers

Titus Lartius:

See Lartius

Tribunes:

Junius Brutus and Sicinius Velutus are two of the tribunes chosen near the beginning of the play to act on behalf of the Roman citizens. Their principal function is to protect the people's rights by keeping them informed of what is happening in the senate and summoning them together to solicit their opinions. As the citizens' representatives, they are justified in regarding Coriolanus's hatred of the plebeians as a reason to reject him for the consulship. They may honestly feel, as Brutus says at II.iii.256-57, that the small mutiny they are encouraging will ease political pressures and prevent a more widespread civil war in the future. As politicians, they show a clear understanding of effective electioneering. They have a good sense of organization, and they make sure—through the aediles—that people turn out to vote.

But Sicinius and Brutus far exceed their duties. Most commentators judge that they corrupt the office of tribune. They seem much less concerned about service to the people than with maintaining their own power. Coriolanus is their enemy, as well as the citizen's, and they recognize this. If he were to be elected, their positions would be in peril, and this seems to be their principal motivation. They recognize that Coriolanus's arrogance is a political weakness, and they cleverly trap him into exposing it before the people. They appear jealous of the enthusiastic welcome he receives when he returns from Corioles, and this may contribute to the actions they take to bring him down. They taunt him with words they know will inflame him—for example, "traitor"—and wait for the reaction they know will come.

They seem not so clever in their conversations with Menenius, who makes fools of them without their realizing it. In the days of peace that follow Coriolanus's banishment, they are complacent, remarking that "the world goes well" and commenting on tradesmen contentedly "singing in their shops and going about their functions friendly" (IV.vi.5, 8-9). The renewal of hostilities by the Volscians, led by Coriolanus, takes them by surprise, and at first they deny this could possibly happen. But the people have not forgotten who orchestrated the banishment of Coriolanus. In V.iv, Sicinius is informed that the citizens have seized Brutus; further, they're hauling him "up and down" and threatening to kill him "by inches" (V.iv.37, 39) if the women's appeal to Coriolanus is not successful. Sicinius fervently thanks the messenger who brings him word that Volumnia has persuaded her son not to attack Rome; presumably Brutus's life is spared as well.

Tullus Aufidius:

See Aufidius

Usher:

An attendant to Valeria, he accompanies her when she pays a visit to Virgilia and Volumnia in I.iii.

Valeria:

She is a friend of Volumnia and Virgilia, and in I.ii she pays them a visit. Valeria describes to them a recent occasion when she witnessed young Martius playing with a butterfly. She relates how he repeatedly caught and released the butterfly□and then tore it to shreds. Her story over, she invites Virgilia and Volumnia to go with her to visit a mutual friend. Volumnia is willing, but Virgilia declines. Only then does Valeria tell them the news she's heard about Coriolanus and the Roman army: they are fully prepared to meet the Volscians, and the war will undoubtedly be over quickly.

Valeria appears in three more scenes, but she has little or nothing to say there. She is with the other women when they inform Menenius and the tribunes that the war is over and Coriolanus has performed heroically, and when Coriolanus is welcomed back to Rome (II.i). She accompanies them to the Volscian camp when Volumnia and Virgilia plead with Coriolanus to spare the city. The most lengthy description of Valeria by another character comes at V.iii.65-67, where Coriolanus refers to her in chilling terms: "The moon of Rome, chaste as the icicle / That's curdied by the frost from purest snow / And hangs on Dian's temple." (Diana is the patroness of virgins.)

Virgilia:

The wife of Coriolanus, she embodies virtues that are rarely demonstrated elsewhere in the play: integrity, composure, quiet dignity, and tenderness. She takes no part in the

political maneuvering and appears relatively uninterested in honors or appearances. Many commentators note that Coriolanus appears to love Virgilia as much as he can love anyone. Coriolanus refers to Virgilia as "my sweet wife" (IV.i.48) and salutes her on his return from the Volscian war as "my gracious silence" (II.i. 175). In their final meeting, he calls her "best of my flesh" (V.iii.42), lingers over a kiss, and swears that he is ever true to her.

Virgilia's view of war and her tenderheartedness place her in sharp contrast with her mother-in-law. Volumnia glories in imagining her son in the heat of battle and pictures him wiping the blood from his forehead as he charges against the enemy. "His bloody brow? O Jupiter, no blood!" pleads Virgilia (I.iii.38). Virgilia's frequent tears provoke scorn from her mother-in-law and gentle teasing from her husband. But several commentators have argued that her tears are signs of a sensitive nature rather than an indication of weakness. Virgilia stands fast against the coaxing of Volumnia and Valeria, who want her to accompany them on a social visit. "I will not out of doors," she says, "till my lord return from the wars" (I.iii.71, 75). In IV.ii, Virgilia speaks sharply to Sicinius, one of the tribunes responsible for her husband's banishment□and he accuses her of being unfeminine. Later in that scene, Volumnia orders her to cease her weeping and "lament as I do, / In anger" (IV.ii.52-53). Virgilia is criticized first for acting like a man and then for being too soft or womanly. Perhaps the only Roman who comes close to appreciating her virtues is her husband.

Volscian Citizens:

One anonymous citizen of Antium appears briefly in IV.iv and directs Coriolanus□disguised as a poor man□to the house of Aufidius. At V.vi.49, the sounds of Volscian citizens welcoming Coriolanus back to Antium reach the ears of Aufidius and the conspirators. One conspirator complains bitterly that whereas Aufidius re-entered Antium with no more notice than if he'd been a block of wood, Coriolanus is being greeted with ear-splitting shouts from the throats of "patient fools, / Whose children he hath slain" (V.vi.51-52). The specter of the Volscian defeat at Corioli is raised by Coriolanus himself, later in that scene. Aufidius and the conspirators seize on this reference and inflame the citizens. The conspirators carry out the people's demand that Coriolanus be killed.

Volscian Lieutenant:

An aide to Aufidius, he appears in IV.vii. The lieutenant resents Coriolanus's popularity with the Volscian soldiers. He suggests to Aufidius that it was a mistake to allow Coriolanus to command one half of the army. According to the lieutenant,

Coriolanus has taken on an almost godlike stature among the Volscian soldiers and Aufidius's the lieutenant's resentment and promises that one day, when the time is ripe, he will destroy Coriolanus.

Volscian Lords:

These noblemen appear in only one scene, V.vi. They greet Aufidius after he has returned to Antium and tell him they've read the letter he's sent to them charging that Coriolanus has betrayed his allies. The first lord declares that there can be "no excuse" (V.vi.68) for breaking off hostilities with Rome just when the Volscians were on the verge of success. However, when the Volscian citizens demand Coriolanus's death, the second lord tries to reason with them. "The man is noble," he reminds them (V.vi. 124), and deserves the benefit of a formal trial. But the second lord's voice is drowned out by the shouts of Coriolanus, Aufidius, and the conspirators. The lords are shocked by the vicious stabbing of Coriolanus. When Aufidius places his booted foot on Coriolanus's corpse, the third lord orders him to remove it. The first lord commands that the body be taken away and mourned sincerely for it is "the most noble" corpse (V.vi. 143) that ever was interred. The second lord offers a less exalted estimation of Coriolanus, suggesting that the hero's quick temper was a significant factor in his death. "Let's make the best" of the situation, he says pragmatically (V.vi. 146).

Volscian Senators:

In I.ii, they meet with Aufidus to discuss a letter he has received from a spy in Rome, reporting that the Romans have learned of Volscian preparations for war. Aufidius is angry, for this means the Volscians have lost the element of surprise, and their intention to capture several Roman towns quickly will now be impossible to carry out. The Volscian senators are more complacent. They doubt whether the Romans are ready for war, and they assure Aufidius that they are capable of defending Corioles. In IV.v, two Volscian senators appear on the city walls to address the Roman soldiers before the battle of Corioles begins. Though the city is under threat, they speak defiantly. On another occasion, several Volscian senators are dining with Aufidius on the evening that Coriolanus arrives in Antium (IV.v). They treat Coriolanus with great respect and offer him the command of half their army; in return, Coriolanus promises to lead the Volscians through the gates of Rome and into the city. This episode occurs off-stage and is described by one of Aufidius's servingmen at IV.v.191-202.

Volscian Soldiers:

They appear or are referred to in several scenes. In I.iv, a force of Volscian soldiers rushes out of Corioles and attacks the Roman army, driving the enemy "back to their trenches" (S.D.I.iv.30). Coriolanus rouses his troops, however, and the Volscians are forced to retreat. In I.viii, a number of Volscian soldiers intervene in the combat between Aufidius and Coriolanus; they rescue their leader, and Aufidius is humiliated by their interference. In I.x, two or three Volscian soldiers accompany the wounded Aufidius as he leaves the battlefield. The Volscian soldiers' loyalty passes to Coriolanus after he is banished from Rome and becomes a leader of their army. According to Aufidius's lieutenant, the soldiers now talk of nothing else but Coriolanus's bravery, and he has replaced Aufidius as their hero (IV.vii.2-6).

Columbia:

She is Coriolanus's mother and the most complex female character in the play. From one perspective, she may be seen as the ideal Roman matron: a fiercely patriotic woman who has raised her only son to seek honor in the service of his country. Indeed, Volumnia proudly acknowledges that she would be willing to see her son Coriolanus killed in battle, if it would contribute to his glory and Rome's welfare. However, her warlike ferocity and bloodthirstiness make many modern readers uneasy. Her preference for the image of blood spurting from a hero's brow over that of a mother nursing her child seems shocking and unnatural.

She repeatedly expresses contempt for her daughter- in-law Virgilia's tenderheartedness. When Virgilia asks her how she would feel if Coriolanus were to die in battle, Volumnia responds that she would regard the noble reputation that lived after him as a substitute for her son.

Volumnia's relationship with Coriolanus has raised many questions among readers and commentators. Some believe that her determination to see him wreathed with military honors reflects her own desire to be a warrior□a role that Roman society would not allow her to assume. She is the first one to suggest, after his glorious victory at Corioles, that now there is only "one thing wanting" (II.i.201), that is, the consulship. Whether this is a suitable position for him is a question that does not arise: it would be the culmination of her ambitions for him. There are also disturbing elements of incestuousness in Volumnia's references to Coriolanus. "If my son were my husband," she says to Valeria, she would rejoice more "in that absence wherein he won honor, than in the embracements of his bed, where he would show most love" (I.iii.2-3, 3-5).

Her passion is sometimes offset by her practicality. She wants her son to be elected consul, and she carefully calculates how this should be achieved. The number of his wounds is important, and at II.i.146-50, 153-54, she adds them up, pointing out the political importance of scars "to show the people" (II.i.147) when he seeks political office. She urges her son to compromise his principles□ the very ones she instilled in him□in order to win the people's votes. Though she has taught him to disdain the common citizens and to be fiercely proud of his integrity, she pleads with him in III.ii to set those things aside and pretend to be something he isn't. In part because he's been taught to be a submissive son, Coriolanus obeys her.

Once more, near the close of the play, she asks him to compromise his honor. Pleading with him to spare Rome, she wants him to be a peacemaker, apparently unaware of the irony: she has raised him and educated him to be a warrior. She asserts that "no man in the world" has been "More bound to's mother" (V.iii. 158-59) for what he has achieved, and yet, she claims, "Thou hast never in thy life / Show'd thy dear mother any courtesy" (V.iii.160- 61). She shames him by kneeling to him□a shocking reversal of ancient Roman standards calling for children to show reverence to their parents. And she concludes by picturing him as responsible for her death: "So we will home to Rome / And die among our neighbours.... I am hush'd until our city be afire, / And then I'll speak

a little" (V.iii. 172-73, 181-82). She seems not to understand that if he leads the Volscians away from Rome it will mean his death. After Coriolanus gives in and points out to Volumnia the implications of his concession to her, she is silent. When the women return to Rome, they are greeted by a tumultuous welcome. Volumnia does not respond to the senator who congratulates her on her achievement.

Watch:

Volscian guards or watchmen, they appear in V.ii. When Menenius goes to the Volscian camp to appeal to Coriolanus not to attack Rome, they bar his way. They treat him with contempt, calling him a foolish old man and mocking his claims to be Coriolanus's closest friend and adviser. After Menenius's brief and unsuccessful interview with Coriolanus, the guards deride him again and send him back to Rome thoroughly humiliated.

Young Martius:

He is the son of Coriolanus and Virgilia. In V.iii, he goes to the Volscian camp with his mother and his grandmother to plead with Coriolanus not to attack Rome. On that occasion he shows a bold spirit similar to his father's (V.iii. 127-28). Valeria's description of young Martius playing with a butterfly (I.iii.57-65) is much more significant than his single appearance in the play. Most commentators view his reported actions□repeatedly catching a butterfly, then releasing it, and finally tearing it to pieces□as sadistic. He must have been in one of his "father's moods," Volumnia comments (I.iii.67). He's "a noble child," responds Valeria (I.iii.66). He's a lively boy, his mother adds.

Character Studies

Coriolanus

In the figure of Coriolanus Shakespeare presented a truly paradoxical hero. He appears cold and aloof yet undeniably passionate, scornful but noble, indomitable in battle but submissive toward his mother, steadfast but traitorous, pitiless yet ultimately merciful. Coriolanus despises the common man, and fails to see that the plebeians have any significant role to play in society. Yet, he is not political by nature. The idea of compromise does not enter in his motivations or actions. He bases his decisions on honor and the military ideals of a warrior.

Critics have frequently judged Coriolanus as unsympathetic, seeing in his motivation to protect Rome not a sense of duty, but rather expressions of his grandiose pride and warlike nature. Coriolanus is also cited for his lack of an introspective capacity or of any significant self-awareness, as well as for his inflexibility and complete inability to adequately function in ambiguous situations that require compromise. Not surprisingly, many scholars have suggested that Coriolanus brings disaster upon himself.

The degree to which Coriolanus, like other tragic Shakespearean heroes, exhibits any internal conflict also remains an object of contention. This is especially true considering the lack of soliloquies in the play, which the dramatist ordinarily employs for the purpose of expressing a protagonist's thoughts concerning his or her situation. Although a majority view has associated Coriolanus with his propensity for action rather than for thought and reflection, the investigation for evidence of his internal struggle is an ongoing line of critical study.

Volumnia

Because critics generally see Volumnia as warlike and cruel, most concur that she plays a role in her son's downfall. Many commentators attribute Coriolanus's excessive pride, his arrogance, and even his ultimate tragedy to the influence of his mother. Significantly, numerous similarities in Volumnia's character and that of Coriolanus have been observed, including their shared sense of pride, their contempt for the plebeians, and their indomitable spirits. Volumnia's spirit, however, proves superior, owing in large part to her flexibility - a quality her son severely lacks - and her ability to dissemble, allowing her to disguise her true feelings and motivations.

Volumnia's "masculine" traits - her dominance over Coriolanus and her preference for warfare over love or nurturing- are frequently discussed by critics. Some contrast her with Coriolanus in this respect and also in her belief in political necessity as superior to the warrior's ideal of honor. More recent assessments of Volumnia, however, have proposed that she possesses a certain degree of humanity. Instead of appearing cold and brutal, Volumnia is thought to possess a level of self-awareness that greatly

surpasses Coriolanus's own, and is even said to display remorse for her complicity in his death.

Virgilia

Perceived as quiet, meek, and passive, Virgilia has failed to elicit more than a small amount of critical comment, although this trend has begun to change. In *Coriolanus* she speaks only about one hundred words, but her presence is felt, scholars note, in many ways, with a few commentators suggesting that she offers a significant and alternative point of view on the action of the play. In her first scene, Virgilia engages in a debate with Volumnia about heroic virtues, with Coriolanus being the natural subject of such a discussion. Significantly, Virgilia holds her own in the argument and succeeds in expressing her feelings of dread and repulsion concerning her husband's war making.

When in Act II Virgilia welcomes home Coriolanus she weeps- one of the only displays of tender emotion in the entire drama- signifying her compassion and love for her husband. Later, Virgilia condemns the Roman tribunes for their banishment of Coriolanus. At this point, some critics have noted that Virgilia and Volumnia actually move toward a similar position in their attitudes toward Coriolanus and the heroic ideals he represents, in contrast to the opposing viewpoints both held at the opening of the play. In the final supplication scene, as Virgilia and others arrive to urge Coriolanus that he spare Rome, the proud warrior kneels before her. Some critics acknowledge that her sympathetic presence persuades him to halt his attack in a manner that the aggressive Volumnia cannot accomplish alone.

Aufidius

The representative figure of the V olscians, Aufidius embodies the traits of this warlike people who are in perpetual conflict with their neighbors, the Romans. Critics observe Aufidius's characterization as brave and noble, even to the degree that Coriolanus himself praises him as a worthy adversary. Aufidius confesses that he has suffered numerous battlefield defeats to the Roman warrior. His desire to emulate his noble adversary eventually fades, however, and Aufidius is left with only the desire to crush his opponent by any means necessary. Thirsty for revenge by the time the action of the play has commenced, Aufidius determines to forsake his honor in return for victory at any cost.

Critics note that Shakespeare does not depict Aufidius as a crudely evil figure. He is thought to match Coriolanus when on the battlefield, where their adversarial relationship serves to fuel the competition between Rome and Antium to the betterment of both men. However, from the moment that Aufidius determines to pursue a treacherous scheme in order to defeat Coriolanus, commentators observe a crucial turning point in his character. A changed man, Aufidius conspires with killers to dispose of Coriolanus ignobly, using the flimsy pretext that the Roman warrior has committed treachery in his refusal to attack his home city. After the execution is complete, critics note, Aufidius

reveals something of his noble character again and expresses his remorse for having used such despicable methods to overcome a worthy opponent.

Conclusion

Coriolanus remains an anomaly among Shakespeare's tragedies. Commentators tend to agree that the source of the play's unique status is the principal character himself, whose arrogance, class pride, and violent behavior seriously undermine his role as a tragic hero. Furthermore, the irony and paradox in Shakespeare's treatment of Coriolanus have additionally limited audiences' sympathy for his downfall. For most scholars these perplexing elements of the tragedy are clear indicators that *Coriolanus* defies conclusive appraisals and escapes final and definitive analysis. Indeed, if it is the true mark of Shakespeare's genius that his works consistently resist definition, then perhaps this elusive tragedy may be, as T. S. Eliot declared, "Shakespeare's most assured artistic success."

(See also *Shakespearean Criticism,* Vols. 9, 17, and 30)

Themes

Politics and Society

One of the most prominent qualities of *Coriolanus,* and one scholars have commonly regarded as atypical of Shakespearean tragedy, is its emphasis on politics. In the dramatist's presentation of plebeians and patricians clashing in open debate over questions of authority and power, critics have identified an uncharacteristic preoccupation with public rather than private crises, with the social rather than the personal aspects of tragedy. The play's uniqueness in this respect has led many commentators to view *it* as a rare exposition of Shakespeare's own political views.

Various scenes in the drama reflect a preoccupation with social conflict, notably several involving Shakespeare's depiction of the Roman citizenry arising as an unruly mob; a portrayal that a few critics have asserted is characteristic of the dramatist's tendency to devalue the multitude of common men. More specifically, some critics have viewed the work as a declaration of Shakespeare's belief in the superiority of aristocratic over democratic rule. Furthermore, Menenius's metaphor of the "body politic" has sparked a great deal of interest among commentators. Early in the play, as rioting plebeians demanding food occupy the streets of Rome, Menenius steps forward to tell his fable of the belly, which presents an aristocratic perspective on the way society should be ordered. Critics see another dimen sion of the play's political dialogue in Coriolanus's haughty views on the inferiority of plebeians. Accordingly, many commentators see the resulting corrosion of mutual trust in the community as ultimately leading to the destructive social state that exists in the drama.

Another avenue of critical inquiry has been to interpret *Coriolanus* as a metaphorical representation of the significant social and political events that occurred in England during Shakespeare's lifetime, including riots in the Midlands over the lack of grain, Enclosure Acts that expelled small farmers from their lands, and class conflicts between commoners and aristocrats. While many of these topical interests are generally considered to have some value by scholars, most critics have demonstrated that Shakespeare was interested in portraying social interaction on a more universal scale by abstracting these events from English history and examining them in the ethical contexts offered by the analogous culture of republican Rome.

Honor and Heroism

Many critics have concentrated on the ethical component of *Coriolanus* as a drama of values and virtue. Analyzing the figure of Coriolanus, scholars have frequently viewed his uncompromising sense of personal honor and fierce integrity as the defining qualities of an aristocratic ideal under assault during the course of the play.

While many commentators acknowledge that Coriolanus's unbending personal honor is the principal reason for his heroism and god-like skill in battle, most also note that these same virtues of honor and constancy translate poorly when Coriolanus finds himself in civil society rather than on the battlefield. The warrior's aristocratic pride proves detrimental in such contexts, and manifests itself in his haughty disdain for the common people. Additionally, personal inflexibility prevents him from engaging in the give-and-take compromise so crucial to political exchange between groups holding radically different views. Thus, when Coriolanus, who measures his worth in terms of his heroic and honorable exploits in war, finds himself in the ambiguous and equally dangerous realm of power politics he reveals the seriousness of his social flaws.

Critics have also studied the destructive potential of an aristocratic conception of honor in relation to Volumnia. For the Roman matron, commentators assert, honor predominates over love, leading some to view her as the ultimate source of Coriolanus's problems. I.ikewise, many have investigated honor as a paradoxical virtue in a warrior society; one that, while valuable, inevitably leads to bloodshed.

Mother-Son Relationship

Focusing on psychological rather than moral or political readings of *Coriolanus,* many critics have found the relationship between Volumnia and Coriolanus to be the touchstone of the tragedy. While enumerating the similarities of these two characters, commentators have seen them as locked in a psychological struggle with one another. So-called pre-Oedipal interpretations have commonly been proposed, which examine the role of the domineering and affectionless Volumnia in determining the fate of her son. Such readings generally probe the play's imagery of nursing, which equates this process with the bloody realities of warfare. Naturally, these interpretations locate the source of Coriolanus's aggression as a displaced feeling of neglect and isolation derived from his relationship with an uncaring mother.

A related subject involves Volumnia's manipulation of Coriolanus throughout the play. Many commentators note that she is the only figure whose will is strong enough to persuade her son, and that the otherwise indomitable warrior shrinks when confronted by the disapproval of his mother. The dissonance created by this relationship and the tragic choices it prompts ultimately bring about Coriolanus's destruction. Forced to repress the uncontrolled sense of pride and honor bestowed upon him by his mother, Coriolanus must call off his attack of Rome at her request. Thereafter declared a traitor to the V olscians, Coriolanus meets his doom at the hands of Aufidius's conspirators.

Modern Connections

Coriolanus has been called Shakespeare's most political play. It depicts a society in the midst of rapid change, struggling to adjust to a new form of government. Until recently, Rome was ruled by a king, and the people had no independent voice. Now, in the early years of the republic, they participate in the election of consuls, and they have tribunes to represent their interests and defend them against abuses of power. Similar situations exist around the world in the late twentieth century. Many nations are presently coping with drastic changes in their governments and dealing with the threat of political instability. After the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe in the 1990s, states that were formerly under authoritarian rule began to move toward democracy. In this decade as well, South Africa experienced a dramatic change in the structure of its government; recently, for the first time in its history, the country held an election in which all its citizens were encouraged to vote. In Asia, the pressures of Westernization are affecting political life as well as national economies. In countries without a tradition of self-government, ordinary citizens and their leaders face an almost overwhelming challenge. Those who formerly held political power are reluctant to let go of it. Those who never had it before must learn the responsibilities as well as the benefits of power.

These kinds of adjustments are made more difficult when a society is deeply divided on the basis of economic or social class. In *Coriolanus,* the patricians don't believe ordinary citizens are intelligent enough to make thoughtful political decisions. The plebeians are convinced that the senate is only looking out for the interests of the elite class. Yet virtually everyone in the play claims to have the well-being of Rome□not self-interest□as their guiding principle. Is it possible for people to place the unity of a nation above their own interests? Political parties in modern democracies are frequently seen as representing certain groups or factions rather than "all the people." The issue of national identity or integrity sometimes gets lost in the effort to advance the ideas of one group or another, or to protect partisan interests. Do we trust each other□or our political leaders□to make unselfish choices and impartial decisions? The ordinary citizens of Rome don't trust Coriolanus. His mother and his friends tell him that in order to be elected by the people, he must hide his true feelings□pretend to be what he is not. In modern democracies, candidates for public office emphasize certain elements in their background and try to downplay others. Pollsters report current public opinion, and advisers suggest campaign strategies that will appeal to a majority of voters. Political pragmatism is not considered dishonorable, at least among politicians: that's how elections are won. In *Coriolanus,* the characters who urge the hero to misrepresent himself to the people appear to be less virtuous than their candidate, who insists on person al integrity. Yet the play seems to suggest that Coriolanus's rigid inflexibility is as wrong as the other people's willingness to compromise their beliefs.

The play also raises non-political issues. One of these relates to the role of violence in Roman culture. Volumnia's bloodthirstiness is shocking□ yet, to a degree, her attitude is a reflection of her society. She happily counts the number of Coriolanus's wounds in part because she knows they represent a political asset: the people will want to see each scar for themselves. In a culture whose greatest heroes are the ones who make

war and destroy enemies, is it surprising that ordinary citizens take up whatever weapons they have at hand when they set out to defend their rights? Young Martius□shredding the butterfly, then later vowing that no one will ever tread on him□shows how a child becomes familiar with the cult of violence and learns to imitate his elders. What factors in modern society contribute to violent behavior? Are our popular heroes those who try to avoid conflict or those who seem to delight in it?

Finally, many commentators have pointed out that *Coriolanus* is unique in its heavy reliance on what other people say or report about the play's hero. In effect, the tragedy raises an important question: what is "character"? Is it what we do? What we say? What others say about us? The "character" of Coriolanus is elusive and problematic. If we cannot determine, with any degree of certainty, the essence of a dramatic character, is it possible to do so in the case of a real person? Are we the authors of our own "characters," as Coriolanus says he wants to be, or do others□parents, teachers, friends and enemies□create them for us?

Overviews

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Critical Essay #1

Source: *"Coriolanus,"* in *The Riverside Shakespeare,* Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974, pp. 1392-95.

[In his critical Introduction to Coriolanus, Kermode surveys the principal areas of interest in the play. He examines Shakespeare's departure from the primary historical source of the drama, the writings of Plutarch. He comments on the deeply flawed char acter of Coriolanus, whose "aristocratic loutishness, " ferocity, and overdeveloped sense of virtues- the duty of a man- culminate in tragedy. Kermode mentions the relevance of Aristotle's dictum, "a man incapable of hung in society is either a god or a beast," as it applies to the figure of Coriolanus. Kermode likewise envisions the theme of the work as the Roman warrior's inability to curb the source of his strength- his brutality on the battlefield- when dealing in the political arena, an area that requires cunning and tact rather than the raw might Coriolanus possesses in abundance. Finally, Kermode considers the subject of language in the play, Including the overarching metaphor of the diseased body politic, and describes the "decorous power" of Shakespeare's verse.]

Coriolanus is by no means a favorite among Shakespeare's tragedies. It is harsh in its manner, political in its interests, and has a hero who is not- whatever else may be said of him- presented as a sympathetic character. Wyndham Lewis was not alone in finding Coriolanus the least lovable of tragic heroes; he calls the play "an astonishingly close picture of a particularly cheerless. . . snob, such as must have pullulated in the court of Elizabeth" - a schoolboy crazed with notions of privilege, and possessed of a "demented ideal of authority." Lewis uses him to illustrate the theme suggested by his title, *The I.ion and the Fox:* Aufidius plays fox to the stupid lion of Coriolanus; what stings the hero to his last fatal outburst of raw anger is a charge of disloyalty, and, significantly, the word "boy." He is an ugly political innocent: "What his breast forges, that his tongue must vent." There is no gap between his crude mind and his violent tongue. And such men are dangerous. Yet the gracelessness of the hero and the harshness of the verse do not in themselves discredit T. S. Eliot's judgment that *Coriolanus* is Shakespeare's finest artistic achievement in tragedy; and when Shaw called it the best of Shakespeare's comedies he was perhaps making much the same point by means of a paradox: this is a tragedy of ideas, schematic, finely controlled.

The style of *Omolanus* suggests a late date, and this is confirmed by the scanty external evidence. The simile of the "coal of fire upon the ice" (I.i.173) may have been suggested by fires built on the frozen Thames in January 1608; there had been no comparable frost since 1565. In Jonson's *Epicoene* (1609) there is what looks like another of his gibes at Shakespeare in the line "You have lurch'd your friends of the better half of the garland" (compare II.ii.101). More impressively, the play almost certainly contains allusions to serious riots and disturbances in the Midlands in 1607. In any case, *Coriolanus* could not have been written before the publication of Camden's *Remains* in 1605, since the fable of the belly (I.i.96 ff.), though mainly based on Plutarch, derives something from Camden's version of the same tale. On the whole, 1607-8 seems the

most likely date. The source of the play is North's version of Plutarch's *I.ife of Coriolanus,* and Shakespeare follows it in his usual way- sometimes very closely, with a liberal use of North's language, sometimes altering emphases, and changing the tone and balance by omission and addition. The events are transcribed almost in Plutarch's order, and the occasional closeness of the rendering of North's text may be gauged by a comparison with the source of the speech in which Coriolanus offers his services to Aufidius (IV.v.65 ff.) and that in which Volumnia pleads with her son to spare Rome (V.iii.94 ff.). Most of the characters are substantially taken from Plutarch, though Shakespeare modifies them in many ways.

Coriolanus himself is in Plutarch" churlish and uncivil, and altogether unfit for any man's conversation"; and although Shakespeare has his own view of the significance of this aristocratic loutishness, one cannot ignore the importance to his theme of Plutarch's prefatory observations on the hero's improper education. He represents this obliquely in the scene of the Roman ladies with their talk of the young Martius (I.iii), which has no source in Plutarch; and many of the alterations he makes are calculated to develop the idea that the education and presumptions of an aristocrat can make him unfit for rule in a complex society. Coriolanus has an imperfectly viable conception of *urtus,* of the duty of a man; it takes no account of social obligations, being based on a narrower concept of military courage and honor (see III.i.318-21). Thus he is able and honorable above all others in battle; and his modesty and piety in ordinary circumstances are suited to the role of happy warrior. But the spirit of anger, licensed in war, prevents him from dealing sensibly with the plebs, and such dealing is a necessary part of aristocracy, for which prospective leaders require a proper training. Volumnia, herself harshly embracing such narrow ideals of virtue and honor, could not give him this. Coriolanus' subservience to his mother is a mark of immaturity not only in family relationships but also in elementary politics: he is the ungoverned governor, the ill-educated prince.

Shakespeare therefore makes Volumnia more fierce than she is in Plutarch, and emphasizes the powerlessness of Virgilia's pacific spirit and her inability to affect the course of her husband's life, or even her son's. Menenius is much elaborated from the source, being useful as a commentator and as a link with the tribunes; but Shakespeare characterizes him with considerable exactness in such a way as to show that the strife between his class and the common people is not by any means the sole responsibility of Coriolanus, whose friends all share some responsibility for a situation they are anxious to ameliorate by hypocritical displays of compliance.

On the other side of the political dispute, Shakespeare is also at pains to make the behavior of the people and their tribunes somewhat less responsible and more treacherous than it is in the source. In Plutarch, the plebs have real cause for political action; before the Volscian war they are oppressed by usurers, and after it by famine. Shakespeare pays more attention to the characteristic fickleness of the mob, and to their dangerous demands, than to their needs; he does not deny members of the crowd sense and even generosity, but he will not represent their factiousness as the legitimate protest of a starving populace. He also makes them cowards in war, which in Plutarch they are not. *As* to the tribunes, Plutarch represents them as politicians exploiting new opportunities of power, but in nothing like the same base degree as Shakespeare. For

Shakespeare looked at the story not with the sentimental republicanism of Plutarch but with a predisposition to deplore the attribution of power to the people. Given a state without kings (and *Coriolanus* is set in a Rome which has only recently exiled them), the proper focus of power is in Coriolanus and his friends; but they are tragically inept in its use, and negligent of the love they owe to inferiors.

The analogy of the body politic with the human body, so prominently stated in the opening scene, is vital to an understanding of the political *donnees* of the play, and much more important in Shakespeare than in Plutarch, though this does not mean that Shakespeare endorses the actions of his aristocrats or of Coriolanus in his double betrayal of Rome and Corioles. Coriolanus is habitually negligent of his inferiors- Shakespeare reminds us of this when he cancels out the hero's impulse of generosity towards a plebeian benefactor, whose name he can't remember at the important moment. In Plutarch this man is a patrician.

That there is a considerable element of political debate in the play is undoubted. Telling a story of early Republican Rome in the England of James I, Shakespeare not only modified certain Plutarchian details and emphases concerning institutions, but remembered the recent agrarian disturbances in the Midlands. Tudors and Stuarts alike feared mobs, and made propaganda against all forms of levelling; and Shakespeare's mobs, from Henry *VI* on, are dangerous beasts, in which upstart passions have taken control of reason. The risings of 1607 were part of a series of ominous events which had caused foreign observers to prophesy revolution; a royal proclamation of 1607 announced that it was "a thing notorious that many of the meanest sort of our people have presumed lately to assemble themselves riotously in multitudes." Various forms of religious communism gave the genuine grievances of some of these insurgents an ideological coloring. And a few years before *Coriolanus* there had been, in the rebellion of Essex, an aristocratic threat to state security. Essex too was an ungoverned governor; and it was said of him at the time that "great natures prove either excellently good or dangerously wicked: it is spoken by Plato but applied by Plutarch unto Coriolanus, a gallant young, but a discontented Roman, who might make a fit parallel for the late Earl, if you read his life." As in *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare here adapted Plutarch to fit more urgent interests; he is never merely telling an old tale.

We know Shakespeare as a master of the seminal opening scene, and *Coriolanus* provides a fine example. Here begins a clash of interests and prejudices between members of one body, and the result is disease in the body politic. By the time we reach Act III we can see why Shakespeare has allowed Menenius so deliberate an exposition of his parable. In III.i the imagery of the state as a diseased body becomes dominant. Coriolanus calls the people "measles" that "tetter us" (78-79), speaks of the wars they fear as touching "the navel of the state" (123), and refers to the common people as a "bosom" (stomach) (131), so reversing the allegory of Menenius; they are a "multitudinous tongue" (156) licking up a poison that will kill the state. Meanwhile Coriolanus himself appears to the tribunes as "a disease that must be cut away" (293) and as a gangrened foot (305) .

Between the opening scene and this crisis, Shakespeare has proceeded economically, even schematically. At the outset Coriolanus calls the citizens "scabs" (I.i.166); but a war intervenes, and produces a situation in which he is the master-man, and they are weak cowards. As a soldier, Coriolanus is a kind of engine of war- we hear of "the thunder-like percussion" of his sounds (I.iv.59); "before him he carries noise, and behind him he leaves tears" (1I.i.158-59). But out of his occupation of war, he feels *himself* reduced to a mere actor, forced to seek the suffrage of those who left him to enter the gates of Corioles alone; and it is this one-sidedness of Coriolanus that invites not only the vengeful meditation of Aufidius at the end of Act I but the fox-like stratagems of the tribunes in the next part of the play, which concerns Coriolanus in his role of suitor to the electorate.

As we have seen, the idea of the diseased body politic informs this central section, up to the banishment of Coriolanus. Health depends upon his ability to "temp'rately transport his honors" (1I.i.224) from the field to the arena of politics; and the tribunes are right in thinking that he cannot- indeed, this is the theme of the tragedy. It has been intelligently suggested that Shakespeare had consciously in mind the saying of Aristotle- which circulated widely at the time- that a man "incapable of living in a society is either a god or a beast." Coriolanus evidently is thus incapable; and it is as a "lonely dragon" that he eventually is cast out from Rome into the void, though he finds again the medium of his narrow nobility in the Volscian service. Throughout the central section, up to his banishment, Coriolanus is repeatedly examined in relation to the concept of "nobility." If it consists in the licensed rage of war, he is noble enough to be a god; if it is the conduct of a man in civil society, he is a beast. He finds the behavior of the tribunes impossible for a nobleman to bear, and calls the people "foes to nobleness" (III.i.45); Sicinius sneeringly but accurately informs him that he needs "a gentler spirit" to "be so noble as a consul" (55-56). To him the plebs are merely necessary and ignoble "voices"; "his natUre is too noble for the world" (254). But by the time Menenius says this, we have heard the words *noble* and *nobility* acquire much irony, and the patrician use of the word sometimes applies best to the behavior of the young Martius as he "mammocks" the butterfly.

The truth about the nobility of Coriolanus is most fully stated in the great speech of Aufidius at the end of the fourth act, where he finds his rival not moving

From th' casque to th' cushion, but command
ing peace
Even with the same austerity and garb
As he controll'd the war.
(IV.vii.42-45)

Nobility requires a proper decorum in war and also in peaceful council (the "cushion" of the Senate). In the first, it may display itself as mere "sovereignty of nature"; in the second it calls for arts of dissimulation such as Machiavelli urges upon princes for the good of their people. There is no question that men of Coriolanus' stamp ought to be obeyed; and that is why they must be properly educated to power. This was a preoccupation shared by the Renaissance with Plutarch; and although Coriolanus

brings his troubles upon himself through lack of such education, we are left in no doubt that the health of the Roman body politic suffers from his absence. Rome without Coriolanus is at the mercy of its enemies; the momentary calm, the period when the citizens, unprotected by their lion, worked peacefully in their shops, was merely a dangerous illusion. "You have made good work!"

Leading the Volscians against Rome, Coriolanus, in the final movement of the play, can again behave like a god (IV.vi.90); but the only love or piety he recognizes that excessive respect for his mother which uses up all the love he needs for good government- finally overthrows him. To put it differently, Volumnia forces him to surrender a position in which it is enough for him to be a soldier, and to plunge *himself* into complexities with which it is impossible for him to deal. There is nO moment in the play when one feels more sympathy for him than when he recognizes the implications of this surrender, he sees that it is dangerous, "if not most mortal" (V.iii.189). The final disaster happens because Aufidius has correctly estimated the temper of Coriolanus; with a burst of his old, narrowly military nobility he combats the most dreaded of insults:

If you have writ your annals true, 'tis there
That, like an eagle in a dove-cote, I
Flutter'd your Volscians in Corioles.
Alone I did it.
(V.vi.l13-l6)

At the end, when our minds are charged with many ambiguous senses of the word, Aufidius grants him "a *noble* memory" (V.vi.l53).

Cariolanus has been called a debate rather than a tragedy; but this is incautious. It has admittedly proved its durability as political comment (there was a famous Paris performance between the wars at which both Communists and Fascists rioted because they construed the playas propaganda against their respective causes). But it is, as is usual in Shakespeare, much more of a vivid dramatic meditation on certain political themes than a dramatized political debate; and at the heart of it is a hero. Deeply flawed, like Timon and Antony, he is also for the most part unsympathetic, harsh, and graceless; but that he is a great man, that his decision before Rome is crucial and painful- and must (as his mother explains) be in any case wrong- involves us in his fate, exactly as the Rome he "banished" was involved in it. Few plays so completely state their own theme. The skill with which Shakespeare relates the behavior of Coriolanus to his imperfect education is one instance; the brilliant invention of the scene at Aufidius' house is another, when the hero, who in departing from Rome seems to have departed from life, materializes suddenly, presenting himself in an enemy household as an inhabitant of "th' city of kites and crows" (IV.vA2) and, dressed in his poor and worn clothes, asserts his *virtus* not merely over the servants but over Aufidius and the senators of Corioles.

The verse of the play has its own absolutely decorous power. There is more to be said of the late verse of Shakespeare, as to what makes it seem "late," than talk of verse paragraphing, of weak and feminine endings, can yield. Here is verse so far from

smooth that it is as if deliberately written in the vein of Hotspur's speech in *I Henry IV.* Hotspur would

rather hear a brazen caristick turn'd,
Or a dry wheel grate on the axle-tree,

than have his teeth set on edge by "mincing poetry" (III.i.129-32); and some of the verse of *Coriolanus* has this grating vigor. It has been observed that in this play there is an unusual degree of comment from various characters on the central figure. This is so; but it should also be observed that Shakespeare's turning inward of all the attention upon the hero (before society excludes him altogether) is a movement paralleled by that of the poetry. The verse is whirled about by the anger of Coriolanus; it clanks and thunders and revels in images of physical violence; it denies itself any more gracious aspect. (Virgilia, the tenderest of the characters, is famous for her silence.) Decorum ("which it is the grand masterpiece to observe") was something Shakespeare had continued to learn about. He had known the long, slow pleasures of accurate rhetorical expatiation, and indulged them in *Titus*- even, perhaps, as late as *Richard II* But with *Coriolanus* we reach an extreme where no indecorous sweetness of language intrudes upon the military violence of the theme. Students come to recognize a certain extraordinary harshness of diction and violence of imagination as characteristics of late Shakespeare. Nowhere is it more exactly reined and controlled than here. The tone is set by the opening words of Coriolanus; then others use it in celebrating his triumph ("[he] struck / Corioles like a planet"). It infects the tribunes, as in Brutus' description of the crowd (II.i.20521); it is heard finely in the mouth of Aufidius at the end of Act IV. But it is the voice of Coriolanus, the hard tone of nobility understood as military potency. He himself hums like a battery, and so does his play. Against this noise Shakespeare counterpoints the brisk character-writer's patter of Menenius, the elegant conversation of ladies, the lively, unheroic prose of the good fellows in the crowd. But the dominant noise is the exasperated shout of the beast-god Coriolanus. The energy of it is as superb as the control. We never feel that the author allows the hero to come very close to him or to us, but in spite of his keeping Coriolanus at a critical arm's length, Shakespeare can rarely have more fully extended his powers than he does here. There is a sense in which this inhospitable play is one of the supreme tests of a genuine understanding of Shakespeare's achievement.

Critical Essay #2

Norman Rabkin has considered Shakespeare's representation of the body politic in *Coriolanus,* and finds his vision to be deeply pessimistic. Beginning with Coriolanus's passionate sense of honor, Rabkin has argued, Shakespeare undertakes a critique of political interaction in *Coriolanus* that is the culmination of many views on human society and history offered throughout his dramas. L. C. Knights has contended that *Coriolanus* demonstrates that "public crisis is rooted in the personal," and has considered both the hero's and his mother's behavior harmful to the well-being of society. The haughty warrior's view of plebeians as inferior, as little more than objects to control, is, in the critic's opinion, destructive of the mutual respect and cooperation essential to social order.

H. M. Richmond has observed that Coriolanus cannot be held solely responsible for the dire political situation in Rome, viewing this perception as a simplification of the complex drama of conflict between aristocratic and popular political views represented in the play. James Holstun has highlighted Menenius's much stUdied political metaphor, his fable of the belly. Some critics have envisioned this story- which associates the aristocracy with the nourishing belly and the commoners with the lower extremities of the body- as a key to Shakespeare's view of hierarchical political order. Holstun, however, points out that the dramatist made satirical use of this Renaissance theory in order to criticize a conception of society that grants no say to the citizenry in political matters. Another commentator who has examined the fable of the belly, E. A. J. Honigmann, has perceived it as one of many examples Shakespeare employed to manipulate audience responses-in this case by presenting one possible view of social order, then later providing a critique of it.

Source: *"Coriolanus,"* in *Shakespeare's Political Plays,* Ran dom House, 1967, pp. 218-36.

[Below Richmond studies political themes in Coriolanus, *specifically the relationship of the play's protagonist to the Roman state. Observing Coriolanus's universal contempt for the citi. zenry and their accusations of his treachery, Richmond nonetheless argues that the Roman warrior 'proves invariably law abiding." Overall, the critic maintains that Shakespeare offered a challenge to simplified political judgments in* Coriolanus. *The critic continues by noting that in the figure of Coriolanus Shakespeare demonstrated that unbending virtue cannot govern or maintain authority over a society ruled by mob mentality.]*

Coriolanus is the last major play of Shakespeare's in which political issues are central both to the action and to the characterization. It is true that Coriolanus displays an eccentric extreme of temperament similar to that shown in *Timon of Athens,* a play in which moral and philosophical values predominate, and we can see in Coriolanus a further step in that investigation of "difficult" personalities which had already presented audiences with *Macbeth* and *Othello.* But while these last-named plays certainly have political overtones (particularly the former), the function of Coriolanus' character is

inseparable from the sense of Roman society as a complex and evolving political structure. Although there are full historical foundations in Plutarch for Shakespeare's narrative and for his characterizations in *Coriolanus,* it is clear that it marks the final step in his own investigation of the fateful interaction between private judgment and public values, which had explained the sinister conspiracy of the nobles in *Henry V* through the painful study of Brutus. Brutus, however, has emerged as a paradox: a figure who is both charismatic and, at the same time, unaware both of himself and of the society around him. Coriolanus is both more extreme and more plausible. It is not simply irony that makes this supreme study of heroism come close to being the supreme study in treachery. Shakespeare demonstrates conclusively that individual excellence is at best tangential to political supremacy, and often wholly incompatible with it. Coriolanus is apolitical disaster for Rome not because, as in the case of Brutus, his virtues are mingled with astounding limitations, but because his absolute integrity and his ruthless directness are both his strength in moments of crisis when the need for them is manifest, and intolerable when peace diminishes the inevitability of their logic. Just as *Othello* displays the moral disaster that inevitably awaits the superman, so *Coriolanus* is a study of his inevitably disastrous political impact.

In many ways Coriolanus, of all Shakespeare's heroes, comes closest to Aristotle's magnanimous man in Book IV of the *Nichomachean Ethics,* "who values himself highly and at the same time justly." Though Aristotle goes on to describe an ideal, it is surprising how many traits correspond to those of Coriolanus: he will incur great dangers, and when he does venture he is prodigal of his life as knowing that there are tenns on which it is not worth his while to live. He is the sort of man to do kindnesses, but he is ashamed to receive them, the former putting a man ill a position of superiority, the latter in that of inferiority; accordingly he will greatly overpay any kindness done to him. . . . Such men seem likewise to remember those they have done kindnesses to, but not those from whom they have received them. . .. Further, it is characteristic of the great-minded man to ask favours not at all, or very reluctantly, but to do a service very readily. . .. It is a property of him also to be open, both in his dislikes and his likings, because concealment is a consequent of fear. I.ikewise to be careful for reality rather than appearance, and talk and act openly (for his contempt for others makes him a bold man, for which same reason he is apt to speak the truth, except when the principle of reserve comes in).

Scarcely an act of Shakespeare's Coriolanus fails to match this pattern, even down to the wish (I.ix.82ff.) to pay back the hospitality of his poor host, who is among the captives taken by Romans, but whose name the hero cannot remember, once his own "gratitude" has been publicly noted.

Obviously such a man is both an enormous asset to the state in emergencies, and also an enormous provocation to the citizens and democratically elected officials of anything less than a tyranny. A sense of one's own superior wisdom does not make for easy political relationships, and Shakespeare goes out of his way to establish both the transcendent military potency of Coriolanus and the moral and spiritual insignificance of those who understandably but unwisely resent his pride. Yet the crucial difference between the values of Aristotle and Shakespeare appears in the fact that, while the

latter recognizes the worth of Coriolanus unreservedly, he also establishes the complete interdependence of that worth and the tnediocrity of the average citizen, who lends weight, along with his fellows, to the cutting edge that Coriolanus employs to hew down *Rome's* enemies. Menenius' fable of the belly and the other organs (I.i.99ff.) displays the interdependence of *all* the parts of the body politic: if the citizenry cannot afford to dispense with the aristocracy? neither can the latter afford to follow the example of Coriolanus and repudiate the *former,* no matter how justifiably, without thereby fatally rending the fabric of the state.

Furthermore, while the prowess and the merciless realism of Coriolanus are firmly portrayed, the key to his temperament is presented with the bluntness of a case history (which in a political sense this whole play also resembles). It is fatally easy to "pluck out the heart of his mystery," for this is no tragedy of man's most inward intuitions, as is *Hamlet,* but a study of the interaction of simple political *forces* with conventional excellence. It is no accident that a Freudian approach rationalizes Coriolanus' bizarre consistency of character, just as it debases Hamlet's *more* elusive subtlety. In one of the earliest speeches of the play, one of the citizens accurately analyzes the motivations of Coriolanus for the "services he has done for his country":

I say unto you, what he hath done famously, he did it to that end: though soft-conscienced men can be content to say he did it for his country, he did it to please his mother, and to be partly proud; which he is, even to the altitude of his virtue.
(I.i.3 6- 41)

The figure of Volumnia dominates our impression of her *son,* both here, in his relentless, mother-conditioned pursuit of honor, and later, in his rationalization of his seemingly arbitrary return to loyalty to *Rome,* when he finally spares the city from destruction at the hands of the army he is leading against those who exiled him from his native land. Coriolanus is obviously mother fixated to an unusual degree, and we have in Volumnia yet another Shakespearean illustration of the disequilibrium that results from a woman intruding *too* directly -as Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra do- in affairs that are held to be proper only to men. It is thus surely intended that one be shocked by her quite unfeminine brutality in reproaching the natural apprehensions of her daughter-in-law at the thought of the bloody wounds of Coriolanus:

Away, you fool! it more becomes a man Than gilt Ius trophy: the breasts of Hecuba,
When she did suckle Hector, look'd not
lovelier
Than Hector's forehead when it spit forth
blood
At Grecian sword, contemning.
(I.iii.42-6)

Even the thought of her *son's* death scarcely affects her: if he had died, "Then his good report should have been my *son;* I therein would have found issue" (I.iii.223). Coriolanus' heroic absolutism thus finds a plausible explanation that is denied us in the comparable case of Hotspur. Shakespeare obviously feels that the overzealous woman

both displays, and induces, a *too* relentless concern with basic issues, which she *forces* to a solution at any *cost.* This we see not only in the negative example of Lady Macbeth, but in the worthier, yet no less fatal severity of Desdemona and Cordelia. Coriolanus is no *more* able to mitigate the indiscreet precision of his judgments than they are; but just as we cannot afford to dismiss the harsh trUth of their observations, *so* we must not only credit Coriolanus with the virtue of accurate observation, we must also recognize that at no point before his exile does he depart from the strict letter of duty and civil obligation. He not only fights magnificently and reproaches his inferiors justly; he also *forces* himself to meet *all* the conventional requirements for election as consul, with obvious success.

It is clear that Coriolanus' exile results less from his direct provocations, than from the calculated initiatives of those, like the tribunes, whose inadequacy cannot endure the humiliating contrast provided by a hero's mere existence. Nevertheless, it is true that Coriolanus is a scathing critic of the common people. Just before his supreme feat of single- handed invasion of the city of Corioli, Coriolanus blisteringly denounces his timorous Roman *troops,* who have broken before the enemy's first assault:

You souls of geese,
That bear the shapes of men, how have you
run
From slaves that apes would beat! Pluto and
hell! All hurt behind; backs red, and faces pale With flight and agued fear! Mend and charge
home, Or, by the fires of heaven, I'llleave the foe And make my wars on you.
(I.iv.34-40)

The bitter threat is obviously not accidental, prefiguring as it does the ultimate result of his exile. This is imposed through the exploitation (by the shoddier elements in the Roman state) of the popular resentment at such legitimate reproaches. It is in this censorious frame of mind that Coriolanus also reacts to the enhancement of democratic representation in the Roman constitution, by the creation of popularly elected tribunes, or magistrates:

The common file- a plague! tribunes for
them!
The mouse ne'er shunn'd the cat as they did
budge
From rascals worse than they.
(Lvi.43-5)

Yet, under the inspiration of his example, the Roman troops universally rally in the battle at Corioli where he earns his name, and win the compliment of their leader: "which of you / But is four Volsces" (I.vi.77-8). Coriolanus can be frank in praise as well as censure. Nor does he have an exaggerated sense of his own worth, as the citizens often imply. He sees it for what it is: by the highest standards, only what *every* citizen

owes to the state. Thus he refuses any unusual reward in good faith, allying himself, like Henry V at Agincourt, with all who have fought with him against the common enemy:

I thank you, general;
But cannot make my heart consent to take A bribe to pay my sword: 1 do refuse it; And stand upon my common part with
those
That have beheld the doing.
(1.ix.36-40)

He thus requires of himself no less than he exacts of others, and if he has a fault it is only that of rather naively measuring others against what he frequently announces to be his own routine virtues. He is merely the good citizen in his own eyes; anyone doing less is properly censured, while he himself expects no unusual praise or reward for fulfilling his obligations. What we have in this play then is the confrontation of the mediocre by the true norm of civic responsibility. Its repudiation by the masses is a kind of political analogue to the crucifixion of Christ as a criminal; for, as we have noted, never until the climactic monstrosity of his exile does Coriolanus effectively fail in the visible discharge of his political obligations.

It is not by accident that two anonymous officers of the Roman state debate the issues and reluctantly conclude that Coriolanus cannot properly be censured for his lack of diplomacy. There is choric force in their final judgment of his status:

He hath deserved worthily of his country: and his ascent is not by such easy degrees as those who, having been supple and courteous to the people, bonneted, without any further deed to have them at all into their estimation and report: but he hath so planted his honours in their eyes, and his actions in their hearts, that for their tongues to be silent, and not confess so much, were a kind of ingrateful injury; to report otherwise, were a malice, that giving itself the lie, would pluck reproof and rebuke from every ear that heard it.
(l1.ii.27-38)

This is the political situation that Shakespeare has worked to establish: the confrontation of political institutions by a hero of undisguised virtue, a Henry V without cunning. The story of their interaction displays the inadequacy of the purely ethical view of politics that was taken by the *Mirrors far Magistrates,* with which the sixteenth century had attempted to vindicate the correlation between the failure of a ruler and his disregard of Christian ethics. Coriolanus seems to initially lack the Christian virtue of mercifulness (though even this he ultimately acquires), but he transgresses against few other premises of excellence in such moralizing historians as Hall: he is deliberately made a kind of classical Henry V in all but that guilefulness in which Shakespeare suggests that the Lancastrian kings anticipated Machiavelli. Shakespeare is thus able to demonstrate plausibly that unqualified virtue is not able to function 111 a normal political environment. Without his guile, Shakespeare implies, Henry V would readily have fallen into conspiracies himself, as his father had always anticipated that he would *(IHIV,* III.ii.122ff.).

Nor does Shakespeare allow us any simple escape from this sinister demonstration that your innocent man is your best traitor. It is true that Coriolanus' ultimate ambition for the consulship results from his unwise assent to the full extravagance of his mother's aspirations:

1 have lived
To see inherited my very wishes
And the buildings of my fancy: only
There's one thing wanting, which I doubt
not but
Our Rome will cast upon thee.
(II.i.214-18)

Coriolanus' own good sense somewhat drily points up the difficulty that seeking the supreme political office will present for him:

Know, good mother,
1 had rather be their servant in my way
Than sway with them ill theirs.
(I1.i.218-20)

But it will not serve to quote some of Coriolanus' later speeches in order to prove that he is unworthy of such political office because of that gross contempt for the citizenry which he ultimately extends to censure of the democratically amended constitution. The fact that he has, with whatever bad grace, undergone the full rigor of popular solicitation of votes and legally secured election, is formally established by Menenius:

You have stood your limitation; and the
tribunes
Endue you with the people's voice: remains
That, in the official marks invested, you
Anon do meet the senate.
(II.iii.146-9)

It is the unjust attempt of the envious tribunes to revoke this concluded election (II.iii.225ff.) that alone launches Coriolanus onto a denunciation of the political situation:

This double worship
Where one part does disdain with cause, the
other
Insult without all reason, where gentry, title,
wisdom,
Cannot conclude but by the yea and no
Of general ignorance,- it must omit
Real necessitIes, and give way the while
To unstable slightness: purpose so barr'd, it
follows

Nothing is done to purpose.
(III.i.142-9)

He derives from this understandable judgment the inexpedient conclusion that the office of popularly elected tribune should be discontinued. The tribunes' flagrant abuse of authority in recalling the consular election, while it justifies his immediate personal reaction, does not necessarily justify the broader political conclusions he draws from it. Volumnia is right to reproach him only for sacrificing the ultimate authority of the consulship merely to indulge in local resentments, however natural:

You are too absolute; Though therein you can never be too noble, But when extremities speak. I have heard you
say,
Honour and policy, like unsever'd friends,
I' the war do grow together: grant that, and
tell me,
In peace what each of them by other lose, That they combine not here.
(III.ii.39-45)

The admonition is just- and it is significant that Volumnia is already losing the initiative. It is no longer the sanction of her own ambition that she invokes, but the precision of Coriolanus' own best judgments. Once again, Coriolanus proves ultimately amenable to good sense: despite his disgust at the "harlot's spirit" required (III.ii.112), he undertakes to adjust himself to the requirements of the political situation without any reservation or hesitation: "the word is 'mildly.'" (III.ii.142) It is only the willful malice of the tribunes that could cause him to break this promise, and it is hard to *see* how he could avoid resentment at the charge of being "a traitor to the people" (III.iii.66), in view of the near-fatal risks he has so recently borne in Rome's service. Indeed, to endure the charge would be almost as dangerous as to denounce it. It is apparent that we have here the political equivalent of Cordelia's ethical dilemma in the face of Lear's invitation to participate in her sisters' dishonest and mercenary protestations of filial devotion. The real traitors to Rome are, of course, the tribunes who (unlike Coriolanus) *haw* violated the constitution; but by the viciousness implicit in this very act they are enabled without a qualm to slander with the name of their own guilt anyone whose position threatens theirs.

Strict virtue is shown to be immediately powerless in such a situation, though it is not ultimately *so*- for both Cordelia and Coriolanus lead an enemy army against the homeland whose magistrates have insisted on labeling them as traitors before the event. Their accusers thus almost succeed in bringing the initially false identification to the point of realization. If one is already treated as criminal , it is the rare spirit indeed that will not ultimately live up to the charge, as Shakespeare himself observed ruefully:

'Tis better to be vile than vile esteem'd, When not to be receives reproach of being, And the just pleasure lost which is so deem'd Not by our feeling but by others' seeing.
(Sonnet 121, 1-4)
The only effective way to meet the insidious designs of the corrupt politician at the

moment of crisis is thus to duplicate them, and this Coriolanus scrupulously refuses to do in any real sense. It is in this spirit of integrity that he reverses the tribunes' sentence of exile in the paradoxical assertion to the mob, "I banish you" (III.iii.123). In a very definite sense, he is the true spirit of Rome, and where he is, civic virtue is- thus, the people he leaves are really being separated from their own true state, and, as he says, "I shall be loved when I am lack'd" (IV.i.15)- just as Cordelia is.

One cannot see how Coriolanus could have behaved otherwise without dishonesty. The political syllogism is as complete and inescapable as the ethical dilemma that confronts Cordelia in defining the relationship between a loving father and a marriageable daughter. Menenius' rueful comment on Coriolanus is true of Cordelia as well: "His nature is too noble for the world" (III.i.255). In order to avoid simplifications of this almost irresolvable tension, Shakespeare is careful to define the elements of his argument early in *Coriolanus.* On the one hand, a citizen firmly establishes the real status of the electoral power to deny the consulship that is vested in the populace:

We have power in ourselves to do it, but it is a power that we have no power to do; for 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 our noble acceptance of them. Ingratitude is monstrous, and for the multitude to be ingrateful, were to make a monster of the multitude; of the which we being members, should
bring ourselves to be monstrous members.
(II.iii.4-13)

The withdrawal of the affirmed vote is thus a mon strous act in the very terms proposed by the play, nor do Coriolanus' sentiments justify it, even though they are couched in terms directly contrary to those of the citizen's speech above:

Better it is to die, better to starve,
Than crave the hire which first we do deserve. Why in this woolvish toge should I stand here,
To beg of Hob and Dick, that do appear, Their needless vouches? Custom calls me to't:
What custom wills, in all things should we
do't,
The dust on antique time would lie unswept And mountainous error be too highly heapt
For truth to o'er-peer. Rather than fool it so, Let the high office and the honour go
To one that would do thus. I am half
through;
The one part suffer'd, the other will I do.
(II.iii.120-31)

There is an interesting contrast between the citizens' speciousness, and the surly assent to duty of Coriolanus' last line and a half. Shakespeare's presentation of the two pattems provides an analogy to the parable of the Two Sons (Matthew, 21:28-32). There is no doubt who here corresponds to the son who accepts his father's orders as legitimate and then fails to abide by them, and who matches the son that denounces the orders but finally obeys them. Offensive as his speech may be to democrats and constitutionalists, Coriolanus is surly but honest; more important, he proves invariably

law-abiding in the long run, however unlikely this may appear, as, for example, when he is about to lead Rome's enemies into the city.

We sympathize with the citizen of whom Coriolanus crudely inquires, "I pray, your price o'the consulship?" only to get the modest reply: "The price is to ask it kindly" (II.ill.81). Improbably enough, Coriolanus finally agrees to do just that, although with a witty minimum of insincerity:

I will, sir, flatter my sworn brother, the people, to eam a dearer estimation of them; 'tis a condition they account gentle: and since the wisdom of their choice is rather to have my hat than my heart, I will practise the insinuating nod and be off to them most counterfeitly; that is, sir, I will counterfeit the bewitchment of some popular man and give it bountiful to the desirers. Therefore, beseech you, I may be consul.
(II iii.101-10)

It is a brilliantly ironic but scarcely dishonest performance, for once neatly designed to appear gracious yet not to disavow the speaker's contempt for solicited popularity. It cleverly states the issue in a form that is true to the speaker's belief yet inaccessible to the careless audience of citizens, who at once, symbolically, commit themselves to Coriolanus, a man who here really despises them. This is a neat validation of Coriolanus' argument against the judgment of the crowd, and the ambivalence of its usual heroes. Only a man who thus covertly despises the mob can rule it. However, for all his open contempt for the new constitution, the more carefully one examines the actual behavior of Coriolanus, the harder it is to show that he is guilty of any failure to observe the law before his exile. He merely *says* shocking and ungracious things; but it is a pitiful charge against a man to say that he has intolerant opinions or mother-induced motives, if all his *acts* reveal a genuine submission to the will of the majority. If we bear this in mind, it must seem strange to make his final mercy to Rome such a theme for contemptuous criticism as it often is.

We are now in a position to resolve such problems of characterization, and the political issues raised by the last two acts of the play, acts in which Coriolanus appears to behave in a way- both traitorous and vacillating- that belies the substantial integrity of his previous behavior. There is no doubt that for a time the simpler Coriolanus suit enders to that instinct for revenge that Hamlet is subtle enough to resist from the start, even though the admonition of his father's ghost is at least as compelling an incentive as -the Roman evaluation of Coriolanus as a confirmed traitor. In his overprompt reaction, Coriolanus thus makes the same mistake as Othello, confounding understandable private resentment with an objective justification for harsh punishment of the offender. *As* a result, Coriolanus is rapidly betrayed into the same kind of appalling dilemma as faced Macbeth: he cannot either proceed or abandon his assault on Rome, without betraying himself: "Returning were as tedious as go o'er."

The bitter irony of Coriolanus' last campaign is that he cannot win it- as his mother, reduced at last to mere wisdom, lucidly points out:

Thou know'st, great son,
The end of war's uncertain, but this is certain,
That, if thou conquer Rome, the benefit
Which thou shalt thereby reap is such a
name,
Whose reputation shall be dogg'd with curses, Whose chronicle thus writ: 'The man was noble,
But WIth his last attempt he wiped it out; Destroy'd his country, and his name remains
To the ensuing age abhorr'd.'
(V.iii.140-8)

The only conceivable alternative to this, as she plausibly represents it, is that:

. . . thou
Must, as a foreign recreant, be led
With manacles through our streets.
(V.iii.113-15)

It is this pair of equally impossible alternatives that accounts for the otherwise implausible surrender of command of the Coriolian army to Coriolanus by his bitterest enemy, Aufidius. The Coriolian perceives the ultimate impossibility of Coriolanus' position and is therefore content to give way to him, because:

When, Caius, Rome is thine,
Thou art poor'st of all; then shortly art thou
mine.
(IV.vii.56-7)

In contemplating the solution to the dilemma achieved by Coriolanus, we must note how the whole situation irresistibly frames itself in Christian terms, which proved far less relevant to *Julius Caesar.* It appears that, the more deeply Shakespeare saturates himself in the politics of pagan Rome, the more inescapable become the terms of reference proposed to him by the New Testament. Thus, when Cominius reports the terms of Coriolanus' refusal of his pleas, he unmistakably reverses Christ's parable of the weeds in the wheat (Matthew, 13:24-30):

I offer'd to awaken his regard
For's private friends: his answer to me was, He could not stay to pick them in a pile
Of noisome musty chaff: he said 'twas folly, For one poor grain or two, to leave unbumt,
And still to nose the offence.
(V.i.23-8)

The contrast with even the less liberal spirit of the Old Testament is conspicuous: Abraham's negotiations with God to spare Sodom (Genesis, 18:23-32) ultimately secure the agreement that the city will be spared if a mere ten of its citizens prove virtuous. The fiercer severity of Coriolanus is testimony to his nearly diabolical resentment. Cominius rightly presents him as a kind of pathological case: "He was a end of nothing" (V.i.13).

Coriolanus has become, as the result of his monstrous treatment, unamenable to traditional terms:

He is their god: he leads them like a thing
Made by some other deity than nature.
(IV.vi.90-1)

As long as Coriolanus remains in this non-human state of mind, Rome is doomed by the results of its own actions. Menenius can do no more than ruefully anticipate the terms of Christianity, as the Romans' only (and, unlikely) hope:

We are all undone, unless
The noble man have mercy.
(IV.vi.107-8)

How paradoxical such an act must appear in a pagan context is suggested when Aufidius begins to realize that it is toward this course that Coriolanus is directing himself:

I am glad thou hast set thy mercy and thy
honour At difference in thee: out of that I'll work Myself a former fortune.
(V.iii.199-201)

To Aufidius, it is a dangerous weakness that one's personal honor (and well-being) should be subject to a higher and often conflicting order of values, which might be deliberately preferred.

As for Coriolanus, what makes him conscious of this higher order is, of course, the self-abasement of his once lordly mother. He suddenly realizes that, if any order is to be maintained in the world, it must be at the price of surrendering the inflexible application of principle, which otherwise will end by turning the world upside-down:

What is this:
Your knees to me? to your corrected son? Then let the pebbles on the hungry beach
Fillip the stars; then let the mutinous winds Strike the proud cedars 'gainst the fiery sun;
Murdering impossibility, to make
What cannot be, slight work
(V.iii.56-62)

The son recognizes that his mother's gesture of humility is an example to him, in his relation to his erring motherland, for which she is a kind of figure at this point. Unlike Lear or Macbeth, Coriolanus does not allow his resentment against the fallibility of the world to commit him even temporarily to a nihilistic delight in universal disorder. Exactly as he has earlier stopped short of the brink of anarchic individualism, just when it had seemed that his ideas must commit him to unqualified action against the state's traditional forms, so now he subjects his instincts and his judgment to an intuition of a higher order of behavior, which preserves the state even while he is suffering from its deficiencies. He now consciously assents to that deep humility in the face of his wrongs

which he had hitherto affected resentfully from time to time through mere policy, or outside pressure. I.ike Hamlet, Coriolanus ends by understanding and thus mastering his predicament.

The solution of his dilemma that is arrived at by Coriolanus is at the same time adequate, paradoxical, and personally fatal:

Behold, the heavens do
ope,
The gods look down, and this unnatural
scene They laugh at. O my mother, mother! O! You have won a happy victory to Rome;
But, for your son,- believe it, 0, believe it, Most dangerously you have with him prevail'd,
If not most mortal to him. But, let it come. Aufidius, though I cannot make true wars, I'll frame convenient peace.
(V.iii.183-91)

The speech reflects a fascinating evolution of personality in that the dashing, bellicose young leader of the first act, ever spoiling for a fight, has now evolved into a peacemaker whose personal honor and very life is to be laid down in the interest of peace, "a man by his own alms empoison'd, / And with his charity slain" (V.vi.11-12). And it must be pointed out that the terms of the treaty are in fact happy for all parties: the sack of Rome has been averted, but the Coriolanus army returns home laden with spoils, and with more advantage over Rome than they had ever hoped for in the past. Aufidius is able to alienate his compatriots from Coriolanus only by preventing the terms of the treaty from being publicly proclaimed. The play thus ends on a final note of irony: Coriolanus has won for Corioli as much by peaceful methods as he had won for Rome by war- and in each case he is ultimately rewarded by bitter popular hatred. Rome, under the influence of the tribunes, execrated and exiled him; Coriolans, through a similar conspiracy led by Aufidius, also turns against him, and assassinates the worthiest man among them. It thus appears that the mob cannot be governed by the purely virtuous, in either state.

Plutarch drily notes that the Coriolans paid for their folly far more dearly than did the Romans. Once Coriolanus had been murdered, the Roman resurgence began, and "the whole state of the Volsces heartily wished him alive again." Finally "the Romans overcame them in battle, in which [Aufidius] was slain in the field, and the flower of all their force was put to the sword; so that they were compelled to accept most shameful conditions of peace." Shakespeare shows us none of this, except to display the Coriolians' crude misunderstanding of the last phase of Coriolanus' career:

His own impatience
Takes from Aufidius a great part of the blame. Let's make the best of it.
(V.vi.146-8)

Obviously Shakespeare has little hope of an advance or even a variation in political awareness as a result of Coriolanus' career. Yet the truth remains that Coriolanus'

conduct has been a salutary example of how- even by audiences, and by generations of critics like ourselves facts are often forgotten, so that the best may readily appear the worst. More positively, the play shows how an attempt at the greatest wrong may lead to awareness of the highest good.

Perhaps Shakespeare was also not unaware of the theme's relevance to the execution of Essex, the friend of his patron, for similarly challenging the established order. Unfortunately, Essex had few of Coriolanus' moral virtues and most of his political defects, so that his career could never stand as an epitome of the irresolvable tension between the virtues that vindicate a leader and the dubious skills by which he necessarily maintains his authority. In *Coriolanus* Shakespeare convinced himself that these opposites could *not* be reconciled; thereafter, he concerned himself chiefly with man as a complex individual primarily learning how to manage his personal relationships- often at the cost of political success. In a sense, our own responses to Coriolanus suggest why politics no longer seems worthy of interest to Shakespeare. He demonstrates that, in political affairs, men are not meaningfully interested in what others really do, but only in what they seem to be. Coriolanus is thus the great corollary of Milton's Satan: Satan appears truly heroic, yet acts with uniform destructiveness; Coriolanus perpetually appears intolerable to us, yet always acts for the best. Both are studies addressed to the purging of misjudgment from their audiences. Looking back over the similar reversals of our expectations revealed in our study of earlier Shakespearean characters, like Henry V and Brutus, we may well conclude that it is indeed just this kind of challenge to simplifying political judgments which constitutes the distinctive cathartic function of Shakespeare's political plays.

Critical Essay #3

Many critics have examined the destructive potential of Coriolanus's uncompromising belief in personal honor. Charles Mitchell has equated Coriolanus's obsession with honor with his quest for political power. As Coriolanus is a man of action, his ethical perspective derives principally from his belief in the aristocratic virtue of honor even if this belief is detrimental to society as a whole. Mitchell contends that "for Coriolanus public power signifies personal honor" and the Roman "cannot concede the possibility of power's being divided between master (the aristocrat) and servant (the plebeian)." Eugene M. Waith has enumerated Coriolanus's godlike qualities and argued that the hero's acts of courage correspond to those of the classical Greek demi-god Hercules and that Shakespeare's work, therefore, is a "heroic drama" rather than a tragedy." D. J. Gordon has analyzed Shakespeare's critique of honor in *Coriolanus,* seeing the playas a demonstration of the destructive results that honor won in war may bring about when displaced onto civil society.

Other commentators have also recognized the negative effects of Coriolanus's heroic nature, but acknowledged Shakespeare's ironic and paradoxical use of aristocratic virtues in characterizing his protagonist. Matthew N. Proser has considered Coriolanus's heroic flaw of un yielding constancy, which when linked to the Roman warrior's lack of an introspective capacity worsens the chaotic situation in Rome. Phyllis Rackin has described the tragedy as a critique of the Roman ideal of *'lirtus,* a narrow concept of valor that prizes "masculine" traits and considers warfare superior to love. Rackin has also underscored the irony in the fact that a woman, Volumnia, is responsible for Coriolanus's rigid adherence to this limited ideal and for his rejection of the values that "bind the human community together."

Source: "The Herculean Hero" (originally entitled "Shakespeare"), in *The Herculean Hero in Marlowe, Chapman, Shakespeare and Dryden,* 1962. Reprinted in *Modern Critical Interpretations: William Shakespeare's 'Cariolanus,'* edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House Publishers, 1988, pp. 9-31.

[In the excerpt below (originally published in 1962), Waith views the figure of Cariolanus as a hero in the tradition of Hercules. Pride and anger are Coriolanus's defining characteristics, according to Waith, and lead to his tragjc end The critic emphasizes the paradoxical quality of Coriolanus's nature, and observes the method of Coriolanus's heroic characterization, which he sees as achieved through contrast with Aufidius, Volumnia, and Menenius. Coriolanus envies the nobility of Aufidius. He also larks the sound judgment 0/ M enemies, and is motivated by honor rather than a thirst for power-unlike V olumnia. However Waith observes, these qualities render Coriolanus in flexible and unsympathetic, and ironically they precipitate his downfall at the moment he demonstrates a lapse in his proud nature by giving in to the demands of his mother.]

As Coriolanus marches on Rome at the head of a Volscian army, the Roman general, Cominius, describes him thus to his old enemies, the tribunes:

He is their god. He leads them like a thing Made by some other deity than Nature, That shapes man bener; and they follow him Against us brats with no less confidence Than boys pursuing summer bunerflies
Or butchers killing flies.
He will shake
Your Rome about your ears
(4.6,90.94, 98-99)

To which Menenius adds: *"As* Hercules / Did shake down mellow fruit." In these words Coriolanus is not only presented as a god and compared to Hercules; he is "like a thing / Made by some other deity than Nature." So extraordinary is he that even his troops, inspired by him, feel themselves to be as much superior to the Romans as boys to butterflies or butchers to flies. I.ike Menaphon's description of Tamburlaine ("Such breadth of shoulders as might mainly bear / Old Atlas' burthen") and Cleopatra's of Antony ("His legs bestrid the ocean"), this description of Coriolanus is central to Shakespeare's depiction of his hero. His superhuman bearing and his opposition to Rome are the two most important facts about him.

The godlike qualities of Shakespeare's Coriolanus need to be emphasized in an era which has tended to belittle him. He has been treated recently as a delayed adolescent who has never come to maturity, a "splendid oaf [John Palmer]," a mother's boy, a figure so lacking in dignity that he cannot be considered a tragic hero. The catastrophe has been said to awaken amusement seasoned with contempt. In spite of some impressive protests against this denigration, the heroic stature of one of Shakespeare's largest figures remains somewhat obscured.

That he often cuts an unsympathetic figure (especially in the eyes of the twentieth century) is not surprising. His very superiority repels sympathy, while his aristocratic contempt of the plebeians shocks the egalitarian. His pride and anger provide a convenient and conventional basis of disapproval for those who share the tribunes' view that:

Caius Marcius was
A worthy officer i' th' war, but insolent,
O'ercome with pride, ambitious past all
thinking,
Self-loving
(4.6.29-32)

Pride and anger, as we have seen [elsewhere], are among the distinguishing characteristics of the Herculean hero; without them he would not be what he is.

In one major respect the story of Coriolanus departs from that of his heroic prototype: Coriolanus submits to the entreaties of Volumnia and spares Rome. At this moment he is more human and more humane than at any other in the play, and it is the decision of this moment which leads directly to his destruction. Ironically, the one action of which

most of his critics approve is "most mortal" to him. He is murdered not so much because he is proud as because of an intermission in his pride.

The portrait of Coriolanus is built up by means of contrasts. Some of them are absolute, such as those with the people and the tribunes. Others are modified by resemblances: the contrasts with his fellow-patricians, his enemy Aufidius, and his mother Volumnia. Such a dialectical method of presentation is reminiscent of Seneca and recalls even more precisely the technique of Marlowe in *Tamburlaine.* Something closely akin to it is used in *Bussy D'Ambois* and *Antony and Cleopatra.* In all of these plays sharply divergent views of the hero call attention to an essential paradox in his nature. The technique is brilliantly suited to the dramatization of such heroes, but, as the critical response to these plays has shown, it has the disadvantage of stirring serious doubts about the genuineness of the heroism. Readers, as opposed to spectators, have been especially susceptible to these misgivings, since they had before them no actor to counter by the very nobility of his bearing the devastating effect of hostile views. Readers of *Coriolanus* seem to have adopted some *or* all of the opposition views of the hero's character.

The contrast between Coriolanus and the citizens of Rome is antipodal. Whatever he most basically is they are not, and this contrast is used as the introduction to his character. The "mutinous citizens" who occupy the stage as the play begins are not entirely a despicable lot. It is clear enough that they represent a dangerous threat to the established order, bur some of them speak with wisdom and tolerance. For one citizen who opposes Coriolanus because "he's a very dog to the commonalty" (ll. 28-29) there is another who *recalls* the warrior's services to Rome, and resentment of his pride is balanced against recognition of his lack of covetousness. These citizens, in their opening words and later in their conversation with Menenius, are neither remarkably bright nor stupid, neither models of good nature nor of malice. They are average people, and this may be the most important point about them. Their failings are as common as their virtues: in both we see the limitations of their horizons. Incapable of heroic action themselves, they are equally incapable of undemanding a heroic nature. The more tolerant citizen in the first scene excuses the pride of Coriolanus by saying he cannot help it *(l.* 42), and hence should not be judged too harshly. In a later scene the citizens complain to Coriolanus that he doesn't love them. One of them tells him that the price of the consulship is "to ask it kindly" (2.3.81), a demand which has received enthusiastic approval from several modem critics. The citizens want the great warrior to be jolly and friendly with them, so that they may indulge in the luxury of treating him as a lovable eccentric. From the moment of his first entrance it is obvious that he will never allow them this luxury.

The first impression we are given of him is of his intemperance and his scorn of the people. Menenius Agrippa, one that, in the words of the Second Citizen, "hath always loved the people," has just cajoled them with his fable of the belly into a less rebellious mood when the warrior enters and delivers himself of a blistering tirade. The citizens are "dissentious rogues," "scabs," "curs," "hares," "geese," finally "fragments." He reminds them of their cowardice and inconstancy. But the most devastating part of his speech is

the accusation that the citizens prefer to give their allegiance to a man humbled by a punishment which they will call unjust:

Your virtue is
To make him worthy whose offense subdues
him
And curse that justice did it.
(1.1.178-80)

What they cannot tolerate except in the crises of war is a greatness which lifts a man far beyond their reach.

In making his accusations Caius Marcius, as he is then called, reveals his reverence for valour, constancy and a great spirit, as well as his utter contempt for those who will never attain such virtues. We may suspect immediately what the rest of the play makes clear, that these are his own virtues. However, since they are displayed by a speech whose tone is so angry and contemptuous- so politically outrageous, when compared to the clever performance of Menenius- they are less apt to win liking than respect. We are confronted by the extraordinary in the midst of the average, a whole man amidst "fragments."

In succeeding scenes with the citizenry the indications of the first scene are developed. The battle at Corioles, where he wins his cognomen Coriolanus, is of course the key scene for the demonstration of valour, "the chiefest virtue,"_ as Cominius later reminds the senators in describing the exploits of Coriolanus (2.2.87-88). Before the sally of the V olscians the Roman soldiers flee in miserable confusion, providing a pat example of their cowardice and bringing on themselves another volley of curses from their leader. Everything in the scene heightens the contrast between him and them.

"I'll leave the foe / And make *my* wars on you!" he threatens; "Follow me!" (1.4.39-42). When his courageous pursuit of the Volscians into their city is followed by the closing of their gate we are p resented with the ultimate contrast and an emblem O the hero's situation: he is one against the many, whether the many are enemies or fellow countrymen. As Shakespeare presents this astounding feat it borders on the supernatural. Coriolanus is given Herculean strength. The simple statement of a soldier sums it up: "He is himself alone,

/ To answer all the city (11.51-52). Titus Lartius, supposing him dead, adds an encomium in which the qualities he has just demonstrated are converted into an icon:

A carbuncle entire, as big as thou art,
Were not so rich a jewel. Thou wast a soldier
Even to Cato's wish, not fierce and terrible
Only in strokes, but with thy grim looks and
The thunder-like percussion of thy sounds
Thou mad'st thine enemies shake, as if the
world

Were feverous and did tremble.
(1.4.55-61)

When the battle is won, the soldiers set about plundering the city; Caius Marcius, matching his valour with generosity, refuses any reward but the name of Coriolanus which he has earned. No doubt there is a touch of pride in such conspicuous self-denial, but the magnificence of the gesture is what counts. It is not contrasted with true humility but with pusillanimity and covetousness.

Coriolanus is not indifferent to the opinion of others, but he insists upon being valued for his accomplishments, and not for "asking kindly"_:

Better it is to die, better to starve,
Than crave the hire which first we do deserve.
(2.3.120-21)

The question of his absolute worth- the central question of the play-- is posed in an uncompromising form in the scenes where Coriolanus is made to seek the approval of the citizens. Though his reluctance to boast of his exploits, to show his wounds, or to speak to the people with any genuine warmth does not immediately lose him their votes, it has cost him the approval of many critics. In itself, however, this reluctance stems from a virtue and a major one. He refuses to seem other than he is and refuses to change his principles to suit the situation. The citizens, meanwhile, unsure what to think, first give him their "voices,'" and then are easily persuaded by the tribunes to change their minds. Again the contrast is pat, and however unlovely the rigidity of Coriolanus may be, its merit is plain when seen next to such paltry shifting. That it is a terrible and in some ways inhuman merit is suggested in the ironical words of the tribune Brutus: "You speak 0' th' people / As if you were a god to punish, not / A man of their infirmity" (3.1.80-82). Later Menenius says without irony: "His nature is too noble for the world.

/ He would not flatter Neptune for his trident / Or Jove for's power to thunder" (3.1.255-57).

The greatness of Coriolanus is seen not only in his extraordinary valour and generosity but in his absolute rejection of anything in which he does not believe. In this scene he is urged to beg for something which he deserves, to flatter people whom he despises, and to conceal or modify his true *beliefs.* His refusal to do any of these things is manifested in a crescendo of wrath, defending his heroic integrity. The cumination is a violent denunciation of the plebeians for their ignorance, cowardice, disloyalty and inconsistency. Both friends and enemies attempt to stop the flow of this tirade, but Coriolanus rushes on with the force of an avalanche. The quality of the speech can be seen only in an extensive quotation:

No, take more'
What may be sworn by, both divine and
human,
Seal what I end withal! This double wor

ship
Where one part does disdain with cause, the
other
Insult without all reason; where gentry, title,
wisdom
Cannot conclude but by the yea and no
Of general ignorance- it must omit
Real necessities, and give way the while
To unstable slightness. Purpose so barr'd, It
follows
Nothing is done to purpose. Therefore,
beseech you
You that will be less fearful than discreet; That love the fundamental part of state More than you doubt the change on't; that
prefer
A noble life before a long, and wish
To jump a body with a dangerous physIc That's sure of death without it- at once
pluck out
The multitudinous tongue; let them not lick The sweet which is their poison. Your
dishonour
Mangles true judgment, and bereaves the state Of that integnty which should become't,
Not having the power to do the good it
would
For th'ill which doth control't.
(3.1.140-61)

It seems almost impertinent to object to the lack of moderation in this speech. In the great tumble of words, whose forward movement is constantly altered and augmented by parenthetical developments, excess is as characteristic of the presentation as of the emotions expressed, yet one hardly feels that such excess is a matter of degree. What is conveyed here could not be brought within the range of a normally acceptable political statement by modifying here and there an overforceful phrase. It is of another order entirely, and excess is its mode of being. The words of Coriolanus's denunciation of the plebeians are the exact analogue of the sword-strokes with which he fights his way alone into Corioles. Rapid, violent and unbelievably numerous, they express the wrath which accompanies heroic valour. However horrifying they may be, they are also magnificent. Both approval and disapproval give way to awe, as they do in the terrible scenes of Hercules' wrath.

In the scenes which bring to a cumination the quarrel of Coriolanus and the Roman people the great voice of the hero is constantly surrounded by lesser voices which oppose it- the friends, who urge moderation, the tribunes, who foment discord, and the people, who respond to each new suggestion. The words "tongue," "mouth" and "voice" are reiterated, "voice" often having the meaning of "vote." We hear the scorn of Coriolanus for the voices of the many in his words: "The tongues 0' th' common mouth," "Have I had children's voices?" "Must these have voices, that can yield them now / And straight disclaim their tongues? . . . You being their mouths, why rule you not their

teeth?" "at once pluck out / The multitudinous tongue" (3.1.22, 30, 34-36, 155-56). *As* for the hero, we are told by Menenius, "His heart's his mouth; / What his breast forges, that his tongue must vent" (3.1.257-58), and when, shortly after, the "multitudinous tongue" accuses him of being a traitor to the people, he makes the speech which leads directly to his banishment: "The fires i' th' lowest hell fold-in the people!" (3.3.68). It is the final answer of the heroic voice to the lesser voices.

The contrast is also realized dramatically in the movement of these scenes, for around the figure of Coriolanus, standing his ground and fighting, the crowd swirls and eddies. Coriolanus and the patricians enter to a flourish of trumpets; to them the tribunes enter. After the hero's lengthy denunciation of the people, they are sent for by the tribunes. The stage business is clearly indicated in the directions: "Enter a rabble of *Plebeians* with the *A ediles." "They cdl bustle about Coriolanus. " "Coriolanus dram his sword." "In this mutiny the Tribunes, the Aediles, and the People are beat in" "A mise within"* "Enter *Brutus* and *Sicinius* with the *Rabble* again" (3.1.180, 185, 223, 229, 260, 263).

If Shakespeare does not make the many-voiced, ceaselessly shifting people hateful, he also makes it impossible to respect them. M. W. MacCallum shows that while the people are given more reason to fear Coriolanus than they are in Plutarch, their original uprising is made considerably less justifiable. Whether or not Shakespeare reveals a patrician bias in his portrayal of them, there can be no doubt that he shares the distrust of popular government common to his time. Condescension qualifies whatever sympathy he shows.

Coriolanus cannot be condescended to. He belongs to another world, as he makes clear ill his final denunciation of the people in response to their verdict of banishment:

You common cry of curs, whose breath I hate As reek 0' th' rotten fens, whose loves I prize
As the dead carcasses of unburied men
That do corrupt my air, I banish you!
Despising
For you the city, thus I turn my back
There is world elsewhere.
(3.3.120-23, 133-35)

That world is the forbidding world of heroes, from which he promises his friends:

you shall
Hear from me still, and never of me aught
But what is like me formerly.
(4.1.51-53)

The tribunes are portrayed much less favourably than the people, though, surprisingly, they have eager apologists among the critics. Less foolish than the plebeians, they are more malicious. Motivated by political ambition, they provoke sedition, encouraging the plebeians to change their votes, and baiting Coriolanus with insults. When the exiled

Coriolanus is marching on Rome "like a thing / Made by some other deity than nature," they appear almost as small and insignificant as the people themselves.

The contrast with these scheming politicians establishes the honesty of Coriolanus and his lack of ulterior motives. He has political convictions rather than ambitions. Though he believes that his services to Rome deserve the reward of the consulship, the wielding of political power does not in itself interest him, nor is it necessary to him as an expression of authority. He is dictatorial without being like a modem dictator. The tribunes, who accuse him of pride, are fully as jealous of their prerogatives as he is, and far more interested in increasing them. Coriolanus's nature, compared to theirs, seems both larger and more pure.

Certain aspects of this heroic nature come out most clearly in contrasts between Coriolanus and his fellow patricians. Menenius is to Coriolanus what Horatio is to Hamlet. Horatio's poise and his freedom from the tyranny of passion show him to be what would be called today a "better adjusted" person than Hamlet; yet Hamlet's lack of what he admires in his friend reveals the stresses of a much rarer nature. No one mistakes Horatio for a hero. Similarly, Menenius is far better than Coriolanus at "getting on" with people. In the first scene of the play his famous fable of the belly, told with a fine combination of good humour and firmness, calms the plebeians. When Coriolanus, after his glorious victory, objects to soliciting votes by showing his wounds in the Forum, Menenius urges, "Pray you go fit you to the custom" (2.2.146). After the banishment he says to the tribunes in a conciliating fashion, "All's well, and might have been much better if / He could have temporiz'd" (4.6.16-17). Menenius's ability to temporize and fit himself to the custom has made him liked on all sides, but this striking evidence of political success does not guarantee him the unqualified respect of the spectator. Dennis erred only in exaggerating, when he called Menenius a buffoon.

In contrast to this jolly patrician, always ready to compromise, the austerity and fixity of Coriolanus stand out. To Plutarch, writing as a moralist and historian, it is lamentable that Coriolanus lacks "the gravity and affability that is gotten with judgement of learning and reason, which only is to be looked for in a governor of state," but though the lack is equally apparent in Shakespeare's tragedy, the conclusion to be drawn differs as the point of view of tragedy differs from that of history. Plutarch judges Coriolanus as a potential governor. He finds that a deficient education has made him "too full of passion and choler" and of wilfulness, which Plutarch says "is the thing of the world, which a governor of a commonwealth for pleasing should shun, being that which Plato called solitariness." The tragedy of *Coriolanus,* for all its political concern, is not contrived to expose either the deficiencies of the protagonist as a governor (though all the evidence is presented) or the unreliability of the plebeians and their representatives (which could be taken for granted). What Shakespeare insists on is an extraordinary force of will and a terrible "solitariness" characteristic of this hero. No contrast in the play brings these out more clearly than the contrast with Menenius.

The change in emphasis from history to the heroic is clearly evident in Shakespeare's treatment of Aufidius. In Plutarch's account he is not mentioned until the time of the banishment, when Coriolanus offers himself as a general to the Volsces. At this point,

however, Plutarch states that Aufidius was noble and valiant, that the two had often encountered in battle and that they had "a marvellous private hate one against the other." From these hints Shakespeare makes the figure of the worthy antagonist, who is a part of the story of so many heroes. The rivalry is mentioned in the very first scene of the play, and is made one of the deepest motives of the hero's conduct. He envies the nobility of Aufidius,

And were I anything but what I am,
I would wish me only he. . . .
Were half to half the world by th'ears, and he Upon my party, I'd revolt, to make
Only my wars with him. He is a lion
That I am proud to hunt.
(1.1.235-40)

To fight with Aufidius is the ultimate test of Coriolanus's valour- of his warrior's arête. And because the rival warrior most nearly shares his own ideals, the relation ship takes on an intense intimacy. Shakespeare introduces Aufidius unhistorically into the battle at Corioles. We discover that although Aufidius reciprocates the feelings of Coriolanus, he is prepared after his defeat at Corioles to use dishonourable means, if necessary, to destroy his enemy, but of this Coriolanus knows nothing, nor is there any hint of it when Aufidius later welcomes Coriolanus as an ally:

Let me twine
Mine arms about that body whereagainst My grained ash an hundred times hath broke
And scarr'd the moon with splinters.
Know thou first,
I lov'd the maid I married; never man Sigh'd truer breath. But that I see thee here, Thou noble thing, more dances my rapt heart Than when I first my wedded mistress saw
Bestride my threshold.
(4.5.111-14, 118-23)

Plutarch's Aufidius makes only a brief and formal speech acknowledging the honour Coriolanus does him. Shakespeare's invention of a long speech, loaded with the metaphors of love, is the more strikIng at this point, since the preceding speech by Coriolanus follows Plutarch very closely indeed. The strong bond between the rival warriors is obviously important.

It is sometimes thought highly ironic that Coriolanus, who prides himself on his constancy, should be guilty of the supreme inconstancy of treason to his country. In fact, however reprehensible he may be, he is not inconstant. Shakespeare makes it clear that his first allegiance is always to his personal honour. The fickleness of the mob and the scheming of the tribunes have deprived him of his deserts, much as Agamemnon's seizure of Briseis deprives Achilles. Both this threat to his honour and an ambivalent love-hatred draw Coriolanus to the enemy whom he considers almost an alter ego.

Resemblances or fancied resemblances between the two warriors establish the supremacy of the heroic ideal in Coriolanus's scale of values, but we cannot doubt

which of them more nearly encompasses the ideal. As we watch the progress of their alliance, we see Aufidius becoming increasingly jealous and finally working for the destruction of his rival even while he treats him almost as a mistress. In defence of his conduct he asserts that Coriolanus has seduced his friends with flattery, but there is no evidence to support this unlikely accusation. Malice and double-dealing are quite absent from the nature of Coriolanus.

The ill-will mixed with Aufidius's love serves another purpose than contrast, however: it adds considerable weight to his praise of Coriolanus to other characters, such as that contained in a long speech to his lieutenant:

All places yield to him ere he SItS down, And the nobility of Rome are his;
The senators and patricians love him too. The tribunes are no soldiers, and their people
Will be as rash in the repeal as hasty
To expel him thence. I think he'll be to
Rome
As is the osprey to the fish, who takes it By sovereignty of nature. First he was
A noble servant to them, but he could not Carry his honours even. Whether 'twas pride,
Which out of daily fortune ever taints
The happy man; whether defect of Judgment, To fail in the disposing of those chances
Which he was lord of; or whether nature, Not to be other than one thing, not mOVing
From th' casque to th' cushion, but com
manding peace
Even with the same austerity and garb
As he controll'd the war; but one of these (As he hath spices of them all, not all,
For I dare so far free him) made him
fear'd,
So hated, and so banish'd. But he has a
ment
To choke it in the utt'rance. So our virtues I.ie in th' interpretation of the time;
And power, unto itself most commend
able,
Hath not a tomb so eVident as a chair Textol what it hath done.
One fire drives out one fire; one nail, one
nail;
Rights by rights falter, strengths by strengths
do fail.
Come, let's away. When, Caius, Rome is
thine,
Thou art poor'st of all; then shortly art thou
mine.
(4.7.28-57)

Surely, what is most remarkable in this account of failure is the emphasis on virtue. One thinks of Monsieur, telling Guise that Nature's gift of virtue is responsible for the death to which Bussy hastens at that very moment, led on by plots of Monsieur's contriving. In both cases the interests of the speaker are so exactly contrary to the tenor of their

remarks that the character-analysis is given the force of absolute truth. Aufidius's speech has to be taken in its entirety, so dependent are its component parts on one another. Its frame is a realistic appraisal of the situation at Rome and of his own malicious purposes. Within is an intricate structure of praise and underlies the entire speech: the superiority of Coriolanus to Rome is as much in the order of nature as is the predominance of the osprey, who was thought to have the power of fascinating fish. Next comes Coriolanus's lack of equilibrium, a point which the play has thoroughly established. Aufidius then men tions three possible causes of failure, carefully qualifying the list by saying that in all probability only one was operative. Pride, the first, is presented as the natural temptation of the happy man, as it is in the medieval conception of fortune's wheel. The defect of judgment, mentioned next, recalls the contrast with Menenius, and the patent inability of Coriolanus to take advantage of his situation- to dispose" of those chances / Which he was lord of." Thus, the first cause of failure is a generic fault of the fortunate, while the second is a fault which distinguishes Coriolanus from a lesser man. The third is the inflexibility which makes him austere and fierce at all times. This is not only the most persuasive as an explanation of his troubles but is also the most characteristic of him. The comments which follow immediately- on the" merit to choke it in the utt'rance" and the virtues which "lie in th' interpretation of the time" - suggest redeeming features. They are not simply good qualities which can be balanced against the bad, but virtues inherent in some of the faults which have just been enumerated, or qualities which might be interpreted as either virtues or faults. The inflexibility is the best example. It is closely related to the other faults, to the lack of equilibrium, the pride, and the defect of judgment. Yet it is impossible to regard Coriolanus's refusal to compromise as entirely a fault. It is also his greatest strength. The concluding lines of the speech put forth a paradox even more bewildering, that power, rights and strengths often destroy themselves. Aufidius need only wait for his rival's success to have him in his power. The final emphasis falls entirely on virtue, with no mention of weakness or deficiency.

The eloquent couplet which sums up this paradox,
One fire drives out one fire; one nail, one nail;
Rights by rights falter, strengths by strengths
do fail
is very like the lines. . . from Chapman's nearly con temporaneous *Tragedy of Charles, Duke if Byron:*
We have not any strength but weakens us,
No greatness but doth crush us into air.
Our knowledges do light us but to err.

From this melancholy point of view the hero is only more cenainly doomed than the average man.

Next to Coriolanus Volumnia is the most interesting character in the play- the Roman mother, whose influence over her son is so great and ultimately so fatal. In the first scene a citizen says of Coriolanus's services to Rome, "Though soft-conscienc'd men can be content to say it was for his country, he did it to please his mother and to be

partly proud, which he is, even to the altitude of his virtue" (11. 37-41). In the last act Coriolanus says,

O my mother, mother! O!
You have won a happy victory to Rome; But for your son- believe it, O believe it!Most dangerously you have with him
prevail'd,
If not most mortal to him.
(5.3.185-89)

But powerful and obvious as this influence is, it should not be allowed to obscure the major differences between mother and son. Volumnia belongs to the world which Coriolanus, as hero, both opposes and seeks to redeem. She represents the city of Rome much more completely than Zenocrate represents the city of Damascus. She is by far the strongest of the forces which Rome brings to bear on him, and much of her strength derives from the fact that she seems at first so thoroughly committed to everything in which he believes. Only gradually do we discover what she truly represents.

In her first scene she is every inch the mother of a warrior, shocking timid Virgilia with grim speeches about a soldier's honour. We next see her welcome Coriolanus after his victory at Corioles, and make the significant remark that only one thing is wanting to fulfil her dreams- one thing "which I doubt not but / Our Rome will cast upon thee" (2.1.217-18)- obviously the consulship. Her son's reply foreshadows the conflict between them:

Know, good mother,
I had rather be their servant in my way
Than sway with them in theirs.
(2.1.218-20)

Volumnia wants power for her son as much as Lady Macbeth wants it for her husband. Coriolanus wants above all to do things "in his way."_

Close to the center of the play occurs the first of the two conflicts between mother and son. There is no basis for the scene in Plutarch. It is an addition of great importance, contributing to the characterization of the principals and preparing for the famous interview in which Coriolanus is deterred from his vengeance on Rome. The issues engaged here are what separate Coriolanus from every other character.

He has just delivered his lengthy excoriation of the people, and is being urged by his friends to apologize. As Volumnia enters he asks her if she would wish him to be milder- to be false to his nature, and she, who proclaimed to Virgilia that life was not too great a price to pay for honour, gives him an answer based solely on political expediency: "I would have had you put your power well on, / Before you had worn it out" (3.2.1718). She observes with great shrewdness, "You might have been enough the man you are /

With striving less to be so," but she adds a sentence which shows that what she is advocating is politic concealment of Coriolanus's true nature:

Lesser had been
The thwarting of your dispositions, if
You had not show'd them how ye were
dispos'd
Ere they lack'd power to cross you.
(ll. 19-23)

In the previous scene, where Coriolanus defied the people and the tribunes, the sincerity of his voice as compared to theirs was expressed in Menenius's words, "His heart's his mouth; / What his breast forges, that his tongue must vent.'" The same imagery is caught up here in the words in which Volumnia characterizes her attitude towards apologizing:

I have a heart as little apt as yours,
But yet a brain that leads my use of anger To better vantage.
(ll. 29-31)

It is not in the least surprising that Menenius applauds this speech, as he does a later and longer one in which Volumnia urges Coriolanus to speak to the people not what his heart prompts,

But with such words that are but roted in Your tongue, though but bastards and
syllables
Of no allowance to your bosom's truth.
(ll. 55-57)

Hean opposes the politician's brain and the orator's tongue in these speeches as honour opposes policy, even though Volumnia tries, by a specious parallel with the tactics of war, to persuade her son that honour can be mixed with a little policy and no harm done. Coriolanus, whom she accuses of being "too absolute," sees plainly that the two are not compatible:

Must I
With my base tongue give to my noble heart A lie that it must bear?
(ll. 99-101)

Volumnia has allgned herself firmly with the advocates of policy: that is, of compromise and hypocrisy. Without admitting it, she is one of the enemies of the "noble hean."

Under the stress of her passionate urging (she does not hesitate to mention that she will undoubtedly die with the rest of them if he refuses to take her advice), Coriolanus finally agrees to conceal his true nature, as Bussy, at the request of Tamyra, agrees that "policy shall be flanked with policy.'" Some critics, taking a line similar to that of Volumnia, have chided Coriolanus for going from one extreme to another in his response to his mother. He says:

Well, I must do't. Away, my disposition, and possess me Some harlot's spirit!
(11. 110-12)

It is very difficult, however, to deny the keenness of his perception. He has agreed with great reluctance to do as his mother wishes, but he is well aware that she is asking him to betray an ideal and to sell himself.

The drama of this confrontation is infinitely heightened by our awareness that Volumnia desires more than anything else the honour of her son, though she, rather than his enemies, moves him towards the loss of it. In the following scene the tribunes are largely responsible for Coriolanus's reassertion of his heroic integrity. In words which fit into the now familiar imagery Brutus announces their strategy for provoking another outburst:

Put him to choler straight
Being once chaf'd, he cannot
Be rein'd again to temperance; then he speaks What's ill Ius heart, and that is there which looks With us to break his neck.
(3 3 25, 27-30)

The successful execution of their plan makes Coriolanus go back on his promise to dissimulate, and leads to his banishment. The city on which he turns his back to seek "a world elsewhere" is made up of his friends and his foes, but at this point in the play it is clear that they all belong almost equally to the world which he rejects.

The last two acts of the play are illuminated by the implications of the words, "There is a world elsewhere."' The world which Coriolanus now inhabits is neither the world of the Romans nor that of the Volscians. It is a world of absolutes- the world, as I have already suggested, of heroes. When Cominius comes to intercede for Rome, he refuses to answer to his name, insisting that he must forge a new name in the fire of burning Rome; he sits "in gold, his eye / Red as 'twould bum Rome" (5.1.11-15, 63-64). The fierceness of his adherence to his principles has translated him almost beyond humanity. Menenius is rejected in his turn, with the comment: "This man, Aufidius, / Was my belov'd in Rome; yet thou behold'st."' "You keep a constant temper," Aufidius replies (5.2.98-100). The loss of humanity is brought out again in the half-humorous description given by Menenius:

The tartness of his face sours ripe grapes. When he walks, he moves like an engine, and the ground shrinks before his treading. He is able to pierce a corslet with his eye, talks like a knell, and his hum is a battery. He sits in his state, as a thing made for Alexander. What he bids be done is finish'd with his bidding. He wants nothing of a god but eternity and a heaven to throne in. (5.4.18-26)

The hard metallic imagery which G. Wilson Knight has noted throughout the play is very telling in this passage. Coriolanus has steeled himself to become a Tamburlaine and administer divine chastisement, refusing to be softened by considerations of friendship.

Unlike Tamburlaine, however, Shakespeare's Herculean hero finds that in despising a petty and corrupt world he is also denying nature. Tamburlaine is obliged to accept the limitations of nature only when he is faced with death; the situation forces Coriolanus to submit sooner. As Hermann Heuer says, "'Nature' becomes the keyword of the great scene" of the hero's second conflict with his formidable mother. As he sees them approach, the battle is already engaged in his mind between nature and heroic constancy:

Shall I be tempted to infringe my vow In the same time 'tis made? I will not. (5.3.20-21)

And a moment later:

But out, affection!
All bond and privilege of nature, break! Let It be virtuous to be obstinate.
(ll. 24-26)
I'll never
Be such a gosling to obey instinct, but stand
As if a man were author of himself
And knew no other kin.
(ll. 34-36)

Nowhere in the play is the conflict between the heroic and the human more clear-cut. Only the demigod which Coriolanus aspires to be could resist the appeal made by Volumnia and Virgilia. Tamburlaine could refuse Zenocrate before the gates of Damascus, but Marlowe made him more nearly the embodiment of a myth. Coriolanus belongs to a more familiar world and his tragedy can be put very generally as the impossibility in this world, as in the world of Bussy D'Ambois, of reliving a myth. Heroic aspiration is not proof here against the urgent reality of human feelings. Already sensing his weakness, Coriolanus begs Virgilia not to urge forgiveness of the Romans, and to Volumnia he says:

Do not bid me Dismiss my soldiers or capitulate
Again with Rome's mechanics. Tell me not Wherein I seem unnatural. Desire not
T'allay my rages and revenges WIth
Your colder reasons.
(ll. 81-86)

There is unconscious irony in the phrase, "colder reasons," for Volumnia's appeal is nothing if not emotional. It begins and ends with the pitiable plight of Coriolanus's family- a direct assault upon his feelings and instincts. Enclosed in this context is the appeal to his honour. No longer does Volumnia urge mixing honour with policy. It is her strategy now to make the course she recommends appear to be dictated by pure honour. She suggests that if he makes peace between the two sides, even the V olscians will respect him (presumably overlooking his abandonment of their cause), while if he goes on to conquer Rome he will wipe out the nobility of his name. Honour as she now presents it is a godlike sparing of offenders:

Think'st thou it honourable for a noble man Still to remember wrongs?
(ll. 154-55)

The final, and successful, appeal, however, is personal:

This fellow had a Volscian to his mother;
His wife is in Corioles, and this child
I.ike him by chance.
(ll. 178-80)

Aufidius, shonly after, shows that he has understood perfectly the essential nature of the appeal:

I am glad thou hast set thy mercy and thy
honour At difference in thee. Out of that I'll work Myself a former fortune.
(11. 200-202)

I have emphasized Volumnia's rhetorical strategy more than the validity of her arguments, because it is important that Coriolanus is broken by a splendid oration. Eloquence, as is well known, was highly prized by the Elizabethans, and we have seen it in Tamburlaine as a further evidence of heroic superiority. But the rhetorical training of the Elizabethans made them acutely aware of the trickiness of oratory, and eloquence on their stage could be a danger-signal as well as a badge of virtue. The case of Volumnia's appeal to Coriolanus is as far from being clear-cut as it could be. The plea for mercy and the forgetting of injuries commands assent; yet one is well aware that the nature of the injuries, and hence the validity of the vow Coriolanus has taken, are never mentioned. . . .

As it is, Volumnia's rhetoric identifies the cause of mercy with the lives of the pleaders, and Coriolanus must choose between his vow and his family. He must indeed defy nature if he resists his mother's plea. Of this she is very well aware, and she plays on her son's attachment to her just as she had done previously, when urging on him a course of moderate hypocrisy. After her victory, judgment between the conflicting issues remains as puzzling as it was before.

When Volumnia's lack of principle and her association with the political world of Rome are fully perceived, it becomes more difficult to be sure of the significance of Coriolanus's capitulation. We know from him that it is likely to be "most mortal," and we know that Aufidius will do whatever he can to make it so. We know, that is, that the hero is now a broken man, but has he been ennobled by choosing the course glorified by Volumnia's eloquence? This is not the impression made by the last scenes. MacCallum says, "Still this collapse of Coriolanus's purpose means nothing more than the victory of his strongest impulse. There is no acknowledgement of offence, there is no renovation of character.'" His choice is a recognition of the claims of nature, but this recognition makes possible no new affirmation such as Antony's after the bitterness of his defeat. Nature, as amoral as fecund, seems to melt the valour and stoic integrity of Antony, but in the new growth stimulated by this nature, valour and integrity appear again,

transformed. To Coriolanus nature comes in the guise of a moral duty, which is also a temptation to betray his principles. The idea of fecundity is present only as Volumnia uses it for a persuasive weapon, threat ening him with the horror of treading on his mother's womb. The melting that follows this persuasion leads to mere destruction. Nature, instead of opening a new way to the hero, blocks an old one and teaches him his moral finitude.

The decision Coriolanus is asked to make is an impossible one. In the situation as Shakespeare presents it, it is almost inconceivable that he should deny the claims made by Volumnia; yet in acknowledging them he accomplishes nothing positively good. He avoids an act of shocking inhumanity and thereby surrenders control of his world to the forces of policy and compromise the enemies of the "noble heart."' Volumnia and Virgilia are hailed by the Romans, whose one thought is gratefulness to be alive. In Corioles Aufidius contrives the assassination of the hero, who is of no further use. What Coriolanus says of the scene of his submission might be applied to the entire ending of the play:

Behold, the heavens do
ope,
The gods look down, and this unnatural
scene
They laugh at.
(5.3.183-85)

For if the natural order seems to be preserved when Coriolanus decides to spare his country, it is wrecked when the one man of principle is defeated and then murdered. The colossal folly of destroying what far outweighs everything that is preserved is sufficient to provoke the laughter of the gods.

Yet the play does not end on the note of ironic laughter. The final note is affirmation. There is no new vision to affirm and no transcendent world to which the hero willingly goes. Coriolanus will not "join flames with Hercules."' What the last scene of the play affirms with compelling force is the value of what the world is losing in the death of the hero. The incident of the assassination dramatizes the essential heroism which Coriolanus has displayed throughout the action. Instead of the comfort of an apotheosis we are given the tragic fact of irremediable loss. After the success of the conspiracyeven Aufidius is "struck with sorrow," and closes the play with the prophecy: "Yet he shall have a noble memory."'

The handling of the assassination scene restores a much needed clarity after the puzzling ambiguities of Coriolanus's submission to his mother. Envy, meanness, and an underhand way of seeking revenge all make Aufidius the equivalent of the tribunes in earlier scenes. He baits Coriolanus in a similar way and provokes an exactly comparable self-assertion on the pan of the hero. As the accusation "traitor" inflamed him before, it does so again, but here there is an interesting difference. After calling him traitor, Aufidius addresses him as Marcius, stripping him of his title of Coriolanus, and finally calls him "thou boy of tears" (5.6.84-99), referring of course to his giving in to his

mother's plea. Coriolanus protests each term, but it is "boy" which raises him to the height of his rage:

Boy! O slave!
O1t me to pieces, Volsces. Men and lads,
Stain all your edges on me. Boy? False
hound!
If you have writ your annals true, 'tis there, That, like an eagle in a dovecote, I
Flutter'd your Volscians in Corioles.
Alone I did it. Boy?
(5.6.103, 111-16)

What hurts most is the impugning of his manhood- his heroic *virtus.* He asserts it by the magnificently foolhardy reminiscence of his single-handed victory over the very people he is addressing-" Alone I did it."' His words recall the earlier description of him, "He is himself alone, / To answer all the city" (1.4.51-52). Shakespeare's alteration of history, making Coriolanus "alone" is one of the touches which reveals most unequivocally his heroic conception of the character. In Coriolanus the opposition of the individual might of the hero to the superior forces of nature and fate is pushed to the uttermost.

It is characteristic of Shakespeare's Coriolanus that he resents "boy"_ more than "traitor," for it is clear throughout that the honour and integrity to which Coriolanus is committed are intensely personal. In this respect he resembles Antony in his final moments. When James Thomson wrote his *Cariolanus* in the middle of the eighteenth century, he reversed the order of the accusations. Thomson's Tullus does not call Coriolanus "boy," but he reminds him of his capitulation and condescendingly offers to protect him from the Volscians. Coriolanus, in return, recalls his victory at Corioles, though he says nothing of being alone. Tullus then insults the Romans and finally accuses Coriolanus of being a traitor both to them and to the Volscians. To the slurs on Rome Coriolanus replies:

Whate'er her blots, whate'er her giddy factions,
There is more virtue in one single year
Of *Roman* story, than your *V olscian* annals
Can boast thro' all your creeping dark
duration!

This patriotic emphasis, which Thomson presumably felt necessary as a means of getting sympathy for his hero, makes all the plainer the consequences of Shakespeare's climactic emphasis on Coriolanus as an individual who can never be completely assimilated into a city, his own or another.

John Philip Kemble's acting version combined Thomson and Shakespeare. He kept the patriotic defence of Rome from Thomson, but followed it with the speeches from Shakespeare prompted by the accusation "traitor."' The culmination of the interchange is once more the hero's indignant repetition of "boy!," which Kemble made memorable by his way of saying it. Slightly later, Macready was especially pleased that he could

rival Kemble's success in the inflection of this crucial monosyllable. These actors, who made "boy!" the high point of their portrayal of heroic dignity, were much closer to the core of Shakespeare's character than are the critics who see him as in fact boyish and small. The whole effect of the last scene depends on a recognition very similar to Cleopatra's after the death of Antony:

The soldier's pole is fall'n! Young boys and
girls
Are level now with men. The odds is gone, And there is nothing left remarkable Beneath the visiting moon.
(4.15.65-68)

Coriolanus is angular, granitic, and hence unlovable. Antony's faults are much more easily forgiven than this obduracy. Yet of the two it is Coriolanus who more cenainly commands respect and veneration.

Critical Essay #4

Source: *"Othello* and *Coriolanus:* The Image of the Warrior," in *The Heroic Image in Five Shakespearean Tragedies,* Princeton University Press, 1965, pp. 92-170.

[In the excerpted essay that follows, Proser examines Coriolanus's character and his relationship to the theme if honor, which the critic calls the "central paradox if the play." Proser finds Coriolanus's defining characteristic to be his constancy; he never changes, thus fueling his inability to perceive ambiguity and to read: to it appropriately. Proser notes the purity if Coriolanus's motivations- he is heroic and honorable to the death- but that he lacks a sense if self-recognition. The critic adds that Coriolanus's honor derives only from his warrior nature and not from any sense if duty to defend his country. I.ikewise, his honor has little to do with the pursuit if fame although Volumnia continually equates honor with renown. In the end, Proser obs erves, the plebeians, patricians, and Coriolanus all share responsibility for the disunity of Rom!. H owner, the greatest portion of blame lies with Coriolanus and his heroic, but stubbornly constant, nature.]

. . . In *Coriolanus* the scope of the human problem is deliberately magnified beyond the personal, and the participation of the community in the tragedy is more than implied. Caius Marcius' immense military heroism and immense limitations as an individual are literally a problem of Rome. But Rome has other problems too: the division of the plebs and the patricians over the distribution of corn precedes the difficulties Coriolanus offers. Yet the two problems become inextricably related. The senate's refusal to feed the populace is congruent with and complicated by Coriolanus' refusal to "feed" the plebs any form of political, indeed, human recognition. Thus does *Coriolanus* offer a distinct correspondence between the warped relations in the body politic and the distortions in the anatomy of its main character's soul. The story of Caius Marcius is a trag edy of state. . . ; paradoxically, it is the severe inner limitations of its major character that make it such.

Coriolanus' primary difficulty as a human being is his inability to see the ambiguity either in the situations he encounters or in himself. The supremacy of his military prowess and his knowledge of what it can accomplish wall him in from the rest of mankind; his aristocratic background divides him from the "common man.'" "Honor" and "aristocracy"_ are the backbone of his existence; "And I am constant" is his most characteristic remark This "constancy," in which he believes so devoutly, takes a number of forms. First of all, he is always "his own man," or at least he attempts to be, whether on the battlefield or in the public forum. For Caius Marcius, personal valor on the field of battle is the meaningful center of life; but if he fights well, he fights well alone, and this is never more clearly demonstrated than during the assault on Corioli's gates. The great soldier charges into the town, allows himself to be cut off from his own troops, and takes on the town's defenders by himself. Admittedly his act is audacious and heroic; nevertheless it is also foolhardy and irresponsible, a means first of all for accruing honor to his own name. Rome surely benefits from his action, but the benefit comes as a dividend, not as the principal aim.

Similarly, though Coriolanus is a member of the patrician class, his dedication is not chiefly to the ruling group in Rome, but to himself, to his own sense of dignity and honor. He can speak effectively about the anarchy which results". . . when two authorities are up, / Neither supreme. . . ," but his refusal to *buy* the plebs' *mercy* with "one fair word" derives not from any pristine loyalty to the patrician cause (which might be better served with temperance, if not temporizing), but from his absolute loyalty to himself. After castigating the plebs for annulling his election as consul, he says to his mother:

Why did you wish me milder? Would you
have me False to my nature? Rather say I play The man I am.
(III.ii.14-16)

Coriolanus' "constancy," his reluctance to temporize, to play the man he is not, though from one point of view a trait which might well be admired, from another is suggestive of the persistently negative quality of his personality, a quality reinforced by his scurrility. Barring the speeches later in the play when he acquiesces to his mother's plea to spare Rome, scurrility remains his most characteristic idiom. I.ike his sword, it acts as a weapon both offensive and defensive in nature. It "cuts up" the plebs, but its use, passionate and vindictive, prevents constructive thinking on his pan and defends him from the necessity of investigating his own moral stance. *Here* is Coriolanus addressing his "en *emy,"* the people:

Who deserves greatness
Deserves *your* hate; and *your* affections are
A sick man's appetite, who desires most that
Which would increase his evil. He that depends Upon *your* favours swims with fins of lead
And hews down oaks with rushes. Hang ye!
Trust ye?
With every minute you do change a mind,
And call him noble that was now your hate,
Him vile that was *your* garland.
(I.i.180-188)

Coriolanus, admittedly, has his point where the inconstant nature of the plebs is concerned. But as Second Officer says before the consular election:

. . . he [Coriolanus] seeks their hate with greater devotion than they can render it him, and leaves nothing undone that may fully discover him their Opposite. Now, to seem to affect the malice and displeasure of the people is as bad as that which he dislikes, to flatter them for their love. (II.ii.20- 25)

The intense loathing Coriolanus expresses for the plebs appears, among other things, a method of self-definition, a way of "proving" his heroic superiority over the "reechy" people. This method of self-definition, one by which he seeks to undermine the plebs in order to glorify himself, is carried over to his relationship with the senators. *Here* too the primarily negative quality of his character is constantly reiterated as he points out in one

situation after another what he will not do, what he cannot seem, what he is not. *More* honorable in his own eyes than any man, Coriolanus, nevertheless, seldom tells us what he is (his "modesty" precludes this); honor itself is negatively defined. After Corioli he cannot bring himself to accept acknowledgment for his heroism publicly. To Cominius he says:

I thank you, General;
But cannot make my heart consent to take
A bribe to pay my sword. I do refuse it,
And stand upon my common part with
thos e
That have beheld the doing
(I.ix.36-40)

When it comes to donning the ceremonial robe of humility as pan of the consular election, he immediately refuses:

I do beseech you,
Let me o'erleap that custom; for I cannot
Put on the gown, stand naked and entreat them
For my wounds' sake to give their sufferage.
(II.ii.139-142)

Nor can he repent for his surly language during the election:

For them! [the plebs] I cannot do it to the
gods;
Must I then do 't to them?
(III.ii.38-39)

And when it comes to smoothing over the situation after he has completely disaffected the plebs, this too is impossible for Coriolanus:

I'll know no further.
Let them pronounce the steep T arpeian death, Vagabond exile, flaying, pent to linger
But with a grain a day, I would not *buy*
Their mercy at the price of one fair word;
Nor check my courage for what they can give,
To have 't with saying "Good morrow." (III.iii.87-93)

It can be seen, therefore, that even the "fair words" Coriolanus gives himself are generally not stated directly, but must be inferred from his negative delivery of them. By such statements he implies his honor is great, but he will not say as much in so many words. His "modesty" is a case in point. Coriolanus will not boast, but his refusal to do so impresses us less as true modesty than as an attempt to hide his enormous estimation of himself. His incredible speeches to Cominius after the heroic conduct within Corioli's gates are self-conscious enough to make us feel he is posing. Surely modesty could not be responsible for such a barrage of language:

May these same instruments, which you profane, Never sound more! When drums and trumpets shall
l' th' field prove flatterers, let *courts* and cities
be
Made all of false-face'd soothing!
When steel grows soft as the parasite's silk,
Let him be made [a coverture] for th' wars!
No more, I say. *For* that I have not wash'd
My nose that bled, or foil'd some debile
wretch,
Which, without *note,* here's many else have
done,
You [shout] me forth
In acclamation hyperbo!ical,
As if I lov'd my little should be dieted
In praises sauc'd with lies.
(I.ix.41-53)

As Cominius says, "Too modest are you; / More cruel to your own good repon than grateful / To us that give you truly."'

But Coriolanus can see no ambiguity in himself or in his language. At those points in the play during which he is willing to make a positive identification of himself, such as at the play's conclusion when he calls himself an "eagle," or earlier, upon his departure from *Rome* into exile, when he calls himself a "lonely dragon," there is no recognition that eagles and dragons (like lions or, for that matter, foxes) are predatory creatures which kill their prey, not for the sake of honor, but because it is in their nature to kill. Eagles and dragons remain for him the symbols, simple and unambiguous, of a noble ideal and of the embodiment of that ideal in himself. Similarly, invective is for him a simple reflection of the purity of his nature and his motives (while for the audience it becomes an index of his willfulness, his passion, his spitefulness, his interior defilement, and his blindness to his own human nature). Nor is there for Coriolanus any possibility of self-recognition. For the truth of the matter remains that Coriolanus is constant, and the image he casts is unified. Unlike Othello, he has only one occupation- that of war. Othello, for all his faults, can love, and because he can, in the end he is capable of seeing at least part of the truth. Othello can momentarily envision the ambiguity in the role he has chosen and see the "other side of the picture."' The just avenger, he finds, can be a fool: *"0,* blood, blood, blood!" he cries, dedicating himself to the life of violence. But recognition comes with the direct parallel, "O fool, fool, fool!" However, as Rosen states, ". . . there is no . . . joumey toward painful discovery in *Coriolanus.* The Coriolanus of the first scene is the same Coriolanus at the end of the play. His opinions and attitude undergo no change."' To Coriolanus, the "picture" can have only one interpretation. It is up to the audience to infer the other side.

The single image the audience receives of Coriolanus contains in fact three parts, but these parts are inseparable and cast the same shadow. There is his relationship to war, his relationship to the community, and his relationship to his mother, the quality of the

first two deriving from the strength of the last. There can be no question of Volumnia's importance in Shakespeare's story of Caius Marcius. Plutarch recognizes her, but Shakespeare makes the relationship of mother and son the core of the play. In more than one respect, out of it everything develops:

Vol Thy valiantness was mine, thou suck'st it
from me,
But owe thy pride thyself.
(III.ii.129-130)

This judgment of Coriolanus by his mother is interesting not only because it suggests something about the intensity of their relationship, but also because it is not wholly accurate. Coriolanus' pride may not derive *com* pletely from his mother, but she is certainly involved in it. By having encouraged him to be the surpassing warrior she desires, she has helped to create the breach between him and the community which characterizes her. Coriolanus, when expressing his inability to flatter the plebs, can say, "Let them hang!" But Volumnia, despite her criticism of her son, can respond with equal vehemence, "Ay, and bum too!" Clearly, Volumnia's aristocratic separation from the Roman populace is magnified in Coriolanus. Furthermore, her ambitions for him playa significant pan in his life. It is Coriolanus who stands for consul; but it is Volumnia who desires the honor for him *more* than he desires it for himself:

Vol I have !iv'd
To see Inherited my very wishes
And the buildings of my fancy; only
There's one thing wanting, which I doubt
not but
Our Rome will cast upon thee.
Cor.Know, good mother,

I had rather be their servant in my way Than sway with them in theirs. (II.i.214-220)

To be brief, Volumnia's aristocratic and masculine spirit informs Coriolanus' character, and the extent of her influence can be seen even in the kind of education she chose for her son. I.ike Othello's, but far more severely, that education limits Coriolanus' emotional possibilities, positing, as it does, physical valor as the prime value of life. In the "hardness" which results are implicit both the heroism Coriolanus attains and his moral separation from the rest of the community. Volumnia describes the education she envisioned for Caius Marcius in the following way:

. . . When yet he was but tender- bodied and the only son of my womb, when youth with comeliness pluck'd all gaze his way, when for a day of kings' entreaties a mother should not sell him an hour from her beholding, I, considering how honour would become such a person, that It was no better than picture-like to hang by th' wall, if renown made it not stir, was pleas'd to let him seek danger where he was like to find fame. To a cruel war I sent hin; from whence he returri'd, his brows bound with oak. I tell thee, daughter, I

sprang not more in joy at first hearing he was a man-child than now in first seeing he had proved himself a man. (I.iii.5-19)

The intensity of Volumnia's language surely witnesses her attachment to her son. However, perhaps it is fair to say that what appears from one point of view a positive human bond, from another assumes a negative quality. In sending her son out to fight at a time " . . . when for a day of kings' entreaties a mother should not sell him an hour from her beholding," she impairs permanently his ability to relate to the rest of mankind. Involved in soldiering, in fighting, in killing from his youth, Coriolanus persistently associates "honor" with the amount of havoc he can cause among the ranks of his "enemies." The nobility of Volumnia's sacrifice is undermined by the "hardness" in it, a "hardness" mirrored in Coriolanus' typical solution for the problems he comes to face: destruction, be it verbal or real, for his adversaries.

Honor for Coriolanus, then, lies not so much in defending his country, but in the simple fact of being a warrior. In him the military occupation of the aristocrat is disconnected from its value as a service and is made valuable in its own right- somewhat in the same manner this disconnection is made in *Macbeth.* And in battle Coriolanus is a veritable holocaust, a power all but immortal in its capacity to destroy. But if there is something "immortal" in his military prowess, by definition there is something inhuman as well, and this "inhuman" feature also develops out of the great soldier's relationship with his mother. Their bond, whIch should be the basis of human understanding and sympathy, is charged by Volumnia with a "divinity" in the epic sense. "Junolike" Volumnia produces a "Mars-like" Caius Marcius, and their bond instead of representing the kind of human interconnection applicable finally to mankind at large, restricts the two in a tight relationship that will acknowledge no connection with the common herd. The mother invests herself with more than human powers of maternal sacrifice (quite blind to the possibilities this sacrifice might lead to), and the son attempts to enact the "divine" manliness the mother delivers to him as the utmost value in life.

Nevertheless, ironically, Coriolanus' sense of honor is even more restrictive than that of his mother. The end of Coriolanus' education was to Volumnia's way of thinking not simply a question of honor, but one of fame as well. For Volumnia honor is useless unless "renown" stirs it, and it seems fair to assume that honor stirs renown as well. Thus honor and fame are interlinked, and Volumnia's ideal portrait of her son incorporates the idea of "reputation." This emphasis on renown is symptomatic of her pride, to be sure; on the other hand, to a degree it humanizes her. For Volumnia, the honor of the consulship and the fame it will bring are worth a soft word or two to the plebs:

Vol You are too absolute; Though therein you can never be too noble, But when extremities speak I have heard you
say Honour and policy, like unsever'd friends, I' th' war do grow together. Grant that, and tell me
In peace what each of them by th' other lose That they combine not there.
Cor Tush, tush!
(III.ii.39-45)

But if Volumnia can admit "fame" into the complex of her values, Caius Marcius cannot; or at least he will not acknowledge such an admission. *As* we noticed earlier, he is incapable of accepting the praises of Cominius even when according to his own standards he deserves them; he even receives the laudatory title "Coriolanus" with the greatest reluctance. To Coriolanus, acknowledgment of a desire for fame would be in one sense the acknowledgment of a human weakness; in another it would be an admission of dependence on the rest of the world. These are both admissions Coriolanus simply cannot make.

To the degree, then, that Coriolanus claims for himself an integrity which cannot be touched by popular acclaim, he, as Volumnia says, makes his pride his own. Conversely, to the degree that Coriolanus' sense of honor is bound up with Volumnia's attempt to make her son the living image of honor, she remains the hereditary source of this pride. It is ironically appropriate, therefore, that she should be present during each of the critical moments of the play's action: when Coriolanus rebels against donning the robe of humility, when he refuses to speak the plebs fair in order to retain the consulship, and when he is about to march against Rome with the V olscian army.

Considering the importance of Volumnia's influence upon her son, it is also appropriate that she should deliver to the audience in language the commanding image of Coriolanus, the one, unstated by him, that directs his actions. She does so with the vigor and intensity we have grown to expect of her:

Death, that dark spirit, in 's nervy ann doth lie, Which, being advanc'd, declines, and then men die.
(II.i.177-178)

It is a powerful image, deeply admired by Volumnia, but for the audience it is not entirely ingratiating. Nevertheless, one thing is clear- no matter how the image is interpreted, Coriolanus always fulfills it. Even when he *is,* in O. J. Campbell's word, "satirized," he maintains the image Volumnia has shaped for him. And in this image is reflected the perversion of relationship between mother and son which carries over to the hero's relationship with the populace. As Traversi puts it, for Coriolanus war is a "splendid and living ecstasy," and it might be added that equally for him, peace is destruction. Cominius also sets forth the image, but like Volumnia, without any awareness of its negative implications. He is speaking of Coriolanus' military heroism at the recent battle for Corioli:

His sword, death's stamp, Where it dId mark, It took; from face to foot He was a thing of blood, whose every
motion
Was tim'd with dying cries. Alone he ent'red The mortal gate of th' city, which he painted With shunless destiny; aidless came off,
And with a sudden reinforcement struck Corioli like a planet; now all his.
And to the battle came he, where he did Run reeking o'er the lives of men, as if 'Twere a perpetual spoil; and till we call'd Both field and city ours, he never stood

To ease his breast with panting.
(II.ii.111-126)

This is the image of Coriolanus most admired by plebs and patricians alike, and since in Coriolanus' case action speaks louder than words, it might be said that it is the image most admired by Coriolanus himself; for it is precisely this image he enacts during the carefully developed battle scenes. It *is,* furthermore, the picture he would present once again in living action at the climax of the play to the city he has spent his blood defending. Beneath the commendatory purposes of the speech, however, Cominius' purposes, lies a vision of destructiveness accentuated by the language Shakespeare puts into Cominius' mouth. This vision of destructiveness appears in such expressions as "death's stamp," "he was a thing of blood,"_ "every motion was tim'd with dying cries," "struck Corioli like a planet," and "he did run reeking o'er the lives of men." We have here the image of the lion truly running rampant, though Cominius might be inclined to create of it a heraldic device. The horror of the scene is reminiscent of the first description received of Macbeth, that from the bleeding captain:

For brave Macbeth- well he deserves that
name
Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish'd steel, Which smok'd with bloody execution,
I.ike Valour's minion carv'd out his passage Till he fac'd the slave;
Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell
to him,
Till he unseam'd him from the nave to th'
chaps,
And fix'd his head upon our battlements.
(I.ii.16- 23)

But the description of Coriolanus *is,* at least for sheer quantity of destruction, even more impressive than that of Macbeth. Moreover, the destructive element in Coriolanus is unqualified by Duncan's gracious presence, a presence which leads the audience to believe the political and moral state of affairs at the beginning of *Macbeth is* unreservedly good and worth practically evety conceivable form of defense. Considering the niggardliness of the patricians where the distribution of com is concerned and the vacillating conduct of the plebs, it is hard to make the same statement about Coriolanus' Rome. The great soldier's impulse to destruction should be read, therefore, as a reflection of the discord in the state rather than as symbolic of the power of goodness. Indeed, Coriolanus in his very heroism seems to represent sheer power itself- an amoral force; and as things turn out he is willing to consider the use of that power not only against his enemies, but against his friends as well.

Finally, the *issue* of Coriolanus' "constancy" forces us to return to his language momentarily. Even the scurrility he directs against the populace is derived from his center of destruction. This scurrility does not reverse the image of the destroyer; it supports it. Aggressive, passionate and repellent, his words are meant to "annihilate" the people:

All the contagion of the south light on
you,
You shames of Rome! you herd of-Boils
and plagues Plaster you o'er, that you may be abhorr'd Further than seen, and one infect another
Against the wind a mile! You souls of geese, That bear the shapes of men, how have you
run
From slaves that apes would beat! Pluto and
hell! All hult behind! Backs red, and faces pale With flight and agued fear! Mend and charge
home, Or, by the fires of heaven, I'll leave the foe And make my wars on you.
(I.iv.30-40)

Although this speech should be examined in its proper context (the plebs, cowed by the Volscian forces, have begun to retreat), and admittedly Coriolanus has some justification for his disgust and rage, the extremity of his language casts some doubts on his qualifications as a military leader and reveals how far his hatred for the plebs goes. It is not every general who threatens to "leave the foe" and make war on his own men. Furthermore, the statement acts as a prediction here, for by the end of the play, he decides to make war on all of Rome for the sake of the plebs.

Coriolanus, therefore, in spite of his ultimate betrayals, remains "constant" to the very end. But our interpretation of this constancy is somewhat different from Ius own. To our eyes his constancy lies in this: he is always the potential killer whether defending his country or planning to destroy it. Nor does he ever probe the ambiguity in his impressive self-conception. This lack of recognition holds true in spite of his acquiescence to Volumnia's pleas for Rome at the climax of the play. If there he makes any discovery of his essential humanity, that discovery is never consciously projected outward toward the rest of mankind. Unlike the situation in *King Lear,* the hero makes no connection between the diseased and scabrous state of the world and the condition of his own soul.

But this question of recognition is important in reference to the entire state of Rome as well. What both Coriolanus and the community as a whole fail to see is that the dynamic image delineated in statements such as those by Volumnia and Cominius contains a threat to themselves as well as to their enemies. Neither the patricians nor the plebs understand how the cultivation of pure physical might, even in an outwardly acceptable military guise, in a sense prepares the soul for any violence. They do not comprehend that the strong man whose strength is his only asset lives through violence purely, though that violence be restricted to the formal patterns of war. Finally, they seem unaware that at its heart such violence is irrational and may turn, even in its being cultivated for the defense of a country, against those who enshrine it in any form.

The result of Coriolanus' behavior during the affair of the robe is, of course, chaos- but not only because he fails at flattery or because in his "naked honesty" he will not conform to the customs of Rome. For, as we have seen, the custom of donning the robe is not to be taken as a mere matter of form. Beneath this "vulgar display," a display

which demonstrates the plebs' limitations, is something which demonstrates Coriolanus' limitations as well. Although the plebs may exhibit their "vulgar wisdoms" in demanding the ceremony without one jot abated, Coriolanus once again reveals his incapacity for accepting another class of human beings on their own terms ill order to knit the state into the unity of diverse human beings it actually is. The concession to be made may be one of policy, and in his reluctance to employ policy Coriolanus may be admirable; but it is important to remember that Coriolanus' attitude toward the plebs makes the great metaphor of the body politic unworkable. There can be no true state with a man like Coriolanus at the head of government. Hence Coriolanus' behavior results in anarchy because he is incapable of recognizing that the plebs, though they may at times act like beasts, are human beings; because he is incapable of recognizing that he, though a great warrior, is a human being; and because he is incapable of recognizing that the plebs as well as the patricians are part of the state. Coriolanus' limitation turns out to be not simply a native integrity which prevents him from acting the hypocrite. It is a tremendously deep distortion of nature which can be detected in his position regarding his mother, the plebs, the state, and the world at large.

As to the plebs- they are, to be sure, not without blame. They are vacillating and hydra-headed; they do allow themselves to be used by the tribunes. On the other hand, they are intrinsically generous and give Coriolanus every chance to prove himself interested in the state and their welfare. The price for the consulship is but "to ask it kindly"_ and when Caius Marcius does not ask it kindly, they confer the title upon him anyway. During the scene in which Coriolanus begs their voices, they reveal a nature simple and ingratiating; however this nature is their downfall. The entire election becomes confused with the issue of "gratitude" and their mistake turns out to be the same the patricians make. During the election both parties fail to remember that Coriolanus' true function in the state is that of warrior and that his greatest potentialities do not lie in the realms of peace. Because of the plebs' generosity, and because, as Third Citizen puts it, "ingratitude is monstrous," the people choose to forget that Coriolanus hates them. Yet were the plebs thinking coherently, they would perhaps see that "gratitude" for deeds done in the quest of honor alone (whatever the benefits to the state) may not be the best credentials for public office, especially from a man clearly hostile to them.

Ironically, it is the proud and self-seeking tribunes who remind the plebs of Coriolanus' hostility. The tribunes are rabble-rousers, real "Machiavellian" foxes, and more than satisfied to see Coriolanus demonstrate his ill-will toward the plebs during the ceremonial begging for voices. His conduct provides them with a new pretext for self-aggrandizement, and they waste no time in stirring up the plebs to repudiate the election. After Sicinius and Brutus have shown the populace how Coriolanus has used them, Sicinius says to his cohort:

To th' Capitol, come.
We will be there before the stream 0' th'
people; And this shall seem, as partly 'tis, their own, Which we have goaded onward.
(II.iii.268-271)

They are even willing to take upon their own shoulders the blame for the plebs' rejection of Coriolanus, or so they tell the people; but this willingness is no reflection of a true sense of responsibility on their part. They are looking for power any way they can get it. If there is a breach between the patricians and the people, they can use Coriolanus as a wedge to broaden the gap and slip themselves into power.

Nevertheless, the tribunes, whose motives remain anything but pure, are right, righter than anyone else, in their estimation of the danger in Coriolanus. Brutus says to the plebs:

Did you perceive
He did solicit you in free contempt
When he did need your loves, and do you
think
That his contempt shall not be bruising to
you
When he hath power to crush?
(II.iii.207-211)

This Brutus, a very different sort of republican than his namesake *inJulius Caesar,* has enough basis in Coriolanus' past conduct to substantiate his judgment. Perhaps it is because the tribunes are so involved in their own selfinterest that they are capable of seeing through Coriolanus. For it is they who say directly to him:

You speak 0' th' people
As if you were a god to punish, not
A man of their infirmity.
(III.i.80-82)

However, their perspicacity does not excuse their own dissentiousness. In their hunger for power they prove to be as much a threat to the state as the man they seek to have thrown from the Tarpeian Rock.

To be brief, all parties are responsible for the disunity in the city of Rome, but Coriolanus remains that disunity's commanding symbol (this, perversely enough, *because* of his "constancy"). At the same time, it is he who reveals, in an off-hand way, a recognition of his true function in the state. We have dealt with this quotation before, but for a different purpose. Coriolanus has just returned to Rome in triumph from the war with Corioli and is on his way to the capitol. His mother says:

I have liv'd
To see inherited my very wishes
And the buildings of my fancy; only
There's one thing wanting, which I doubt
not but
Our Rome will cast upon thee. [the consulship.]
To which Coriolanus replies:

Know good mother, I had rather be the11' servant in my way Than sway with them in theirs.
(II.i.214-220)

But this momentary recognition, if indeed it can be called such, is scarcely assimilated by Volumnia and not really understood by Coriolanus. I.ike the patricians themselves, he forgets that his value as a servant rests in his military prowess. When the patricians try to convince him to speak the crowd fair and prevent his being attached as a "traitorous innovator," they disregard the fact that Coriolanus is first and foremost a man of war whose calling is not political to begin with. Indeed, this truth is not recognized by the patricians from the outset of the play. They become as much confused by the issue of "gratitude" as do the plebs. Thus, if in electing Coriolanus consul the people fail to remember that his potentialities lie in war and that in alienating him those potentialities might well be turned against them, the senators make the same mistake. The issue of Coriolanus' repudiation, like the altercation over the gown of humility, becomes confused with "flattery" and "gratitude," and the patricians, blinded by Coriolanus' heroic image, without understanding the full significance of that image, continue to support Coriolanus in the face of popular disapproval. It is not, unfortunately, until the belated moment of Coriolanus' banishment that the senators acquiesce, the result of which is Coriolanus' total disaffection from the state. As to Coriolanus himself- in spite of his statement that he "had rather be their servant" as a soldier than as consul, his treatment by the plebs reduces all to a question of "honor" for him. He sees his wounds bleeding for Rome (although he was unwilling to reveal those wounds to the Romans), and the plebs' banishment of him, plus the patricians' acquiescence to the plebs, impel his decision to avenge himself on the city as a whole.

The question of "honor" nevertheless remains a central paradox in the play. For in one sense Coriolanus is correct when he states he cannot flatter the people, that by doing this he would not be true to himself. He would lose his integrity first of all because he hates the common people, and second because he would be violating his true function in the community- the destroyer of Rome's enemies (this, given that perversely enough the people and even the patricians become Rome's enemies in their dissentiousness over the com issue and over the public role Coriolanus is to play in the country). It is this very truth to himself that gives Coriolanus his heroic status. I.ike the case of Brutus in *Julius Caesar,* who is an honorable man, the honor Coriolanus seeks dishonors him. That for which under other circumstances the audience might admire him, causes the audience to condemn him. His honor so separates him from the ideal of the peaceful city that there is literally no place for him in it.

Conversely, if Coriolanus proves true to himself, it can be seen that, unlike the case of Brutus, there is never any moral conflict in him at all. He may rebel at using policy to attain his ends, but he never feels he should not hate the common people, nor does he feel that the limitation revealed by the one kind of service he can perform- that of killing- reflects a lack in himself. Thus if Coriolanus is true to his image, he is never true to what lies below that image- his own human nature. Feeling is perverted at such a deep level that all the judgments he makes against the populace, even those which are valid, rum

against him and expose him as traitor to the people, traitor to Rome, traitor to Corioli, traitor to himself, and traitor to the human cause.

But he is true to his mother:
O mother, mother!
What have you done? Behold, the heavens do
ope,
The gods look down, and this unnatural
scene
They laugh at. O my mother, mother' O! You have won a happy VIctOry to Rome; But, for your son,- believe it, O believe It-, Most dangerously you have with him
prevail'd,
If not most mortal to him.
(V.iii.182-189)

This, excluding the invective he uses at other points in the play, is some of Coriolanus' most passionate language. With it he determines to leave Rome unharmed and chooses the death Aufidius makes for him. The statement, however, opens out beyond the immediate situation. For Volunmia has most dangerously prevailed with her son throughout his life; his values, his conception of himself, so much derived from her, have led to his predicament. Coriolanus, who would not give the plebs their grain and "politically"_ (in both senses of the word) feed the state, has had his human nature all but digested by Volumnia. Whatever love he most fully acknowledges is directed toward her, so that his human qualities have become isolated in her from the rest of the community. In a way they have been sacrificed for the aura of "divinity" which surrounds and unites the two. Only she, not even his wife, can make him merciful. In the close interdependency of Coriolanus and his mother are seen a kind of political and spiritual incest that reveals a distortion even in the one crucial relationship Coriolanus can demonstrably "feel" with great depth. Here Coriolanus' hidden and isolated humanity acts the part of Nemesis and mortally betrays him to the enemies he has chosen for friends- Aufidius and his army. The triplex image of Coriolanus which represents Ius relationship to the community, his relationship to war, and his relationship to his mother can be seen at this point, the point at which he is *most* human, to be one image, powerful and annihilating, the source of his own destruction.

But if this image, sword like, points inward toward what is left of the feeling center of the hero's perverted humanity, it points outward too, through Rome, to Corioli. In this enemy city waits, so to speak, the same passionate mob which set Coriolanus up as consul, only to banish him. When he arrives it will welcome him with the acclaim customary for heroes and gods. But just as the tribunes had little difficulty convincing the Roman populace of Coriolanus' enmity, Aufidius, as power-seeking and envious as the tribunes, will have even less difficulty provoking the Volscian mob. Indeed, just as Coriolanus helped the tribunes in their cause, he will help Aufidius in his. The Volscian general's public accusations of "traitor" and "boy of tears" (which contain, it will be admitted, more than a suspicion of validity,) impel Caius Marcius to expose himself as he has never exposed himself before. Surely now he is "most dangerously" less than modest:

"Boy!" False hound'
If you have writ your annals true, 'tis there That, like an eagle in a dove-cote, I [Flutter'd] your Volscians in Corioli:
Alone I did it. "BoY!"
(V.vi.113-117)

The climactic indiscretion of his words defines him clearly to the V olscian crowd as their great enemy; for they, like the Roman plebs, had apparently forgotten how Coriolanus once fought against them, although in theIr case the fight was military and not political. Their response is tragically appropriate in view of their memories of slaughter and carnage:

All the peaple. Tear him to pieces! Do it presently!-He kill'd my son!-my daughter.-He kill'd my cousin Marcus!-He kill'd my father!
(V.vi.121-123)

Aside from their capacity to create a sense of horror, these lines function in another important way. By focusing our attention upon the slaughtered members of the various Volscian families, they emphasize the major thematic issue in the play. For "families" and the distorted relationships in them have been implicit thematically throughout- from the perverted relationship of Coriolanus and his mother to the political hostilities in the state of Rome to the betrayal by Coriolanus of his own land. The personal sense of pain and anger now felt by the V olscian populace paradoxically stretches this thematic issue one step further to the universal perversion in the universal human bond: the destruction of Man by Man. And at this point we recognize that the scene as a whole has suitably drawn all participants into the primary image of destruction which characterizes the play. Both Corioli and Coriolanus are responsible for this scene of death. And behind them stand all the Romans who have made their contribu tion. . .. Thus in *Coriolanus,* . . . it can be seen that the enemy, the potential killer, is Man; and nobody, not the plebs, nor the patricians, nor the tribunes, nor the V olscian crowd, nor individuals like Aufidius or Volumnia or Menenius, is to escape blame for the Volscian conspirators' blood-curdling cry as they overwhelm Coriolanus in what appears an epitome of the entire play's action:

Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill him!
(V.vi.132)

Only one character may perhaps be justifiably excluded from this scene of savage death and the condemnation that goes with it. The words on the body politic might be taken from Menenius' loquacious mouth and placed in that of Caius Marcius' "gracious silence"- Virgilia, the one truly "private" character in the play, and the only character who, paradoxically, fulfills a public role in a really meaningful way. Not only is it she who can still recognize the last impulse of humanity, faint though it may be, in her husband; but it is also she who most clearly represents in her tears and silence (which are her language) the natural, quiet, inborn humanity that transcends personality- of which she appropriately has so little- and is the essential root which grows through family, through class, into the flowering state.

Critical Essay #5

Coppelia Kahn has examined the juxtaposition of masculine and feminine in the play's combined imagery of nursing and war. According to Kahn's view, the ending of *Coriolanus* takes on an ironic tone as one realizes that Volumnia's maternal power results in the contradictions of Coriolanus's manhood and makes him an enemy of Rome, thereby bringing about his destruction. G. Wilson Knight has also focused on the relationship between the Roman matron and her son. Knight proposed that the hero's failure to recognize the value of love is the source of his tragedy and that his relationship with his mother is based on shared pride rather than affection. Moreover, Knight noted, this pride ultimately causes the two characters to oppose each other. Significantly, the critic interpreted Coriolanus's yielding to Volumnia in Act V, scene iii as the triumph of love over pride.

Harold C. Goddard has scrutinized Volumnia's pan in her son's ruin, focusing especially on the effects of Coriolanus's martial upbringing. Goddard argued that the hero was a "rare and sensitive" child who was molded by his warlike mother into a cruel soldier and whose gentler feelings, as well as his sense of outrage at this treatment, were transmuted into excessive pride, courage, and arrogance. Goddard also downplayed the effect of Volumnia's pleading on Coriolanus's decision to spare his native city, instead attributing this act of mercy to the presence of the hero's wife and son, who awaken in him the "innocent memories" of a *time* before he was "utterly crushed" by his mother's training. Along similar lines, Charles K. Hofling has provided a psychiatric diagnosis of Coriolanus, describing him as a "phallic-narcissistic personality." He presumed that the hero's principal traits- his aggressiveness, courage, and irrational temper- developed as a result of Volumnia's traumatic influence, under which he learned to seek approval only through violent behavior.

Rufus Putney has also characterized Coriolanus's warlike aggression as the result of repressed anger toward his mother that has been refocused on the citizens of Rome. Rufus finds that this dilemma comes to a climax as Coriolanus must choose between the possibility of his mother's death or of his own in her place. I.ikewise, Madelon Sprengnether has discerned in *Coriolanus* a complementary self-destructive pattern in which the hero unconsciously both desires and fears losing his identity to the omnipotent Volumnia. As a result, he pursues an "eroticized violence" in battle that both defines his masculinity and pleases his mother.

Source: "Coriolanus and His Mother," in *Psychoanalytic Quarterly,* Vol. 31, No.3, July, 1962, pp. 36481.

[Putney takes a psychoanalytic view of Coriolanus, *emphasiz ing the mental drama of Coriolanus's relationship with his mother. The critic examines Coriolanus's raw- which he sees as cbsplaced onto the citizens if Rome even though its true Source is Volumnia . Coriolanus's inability to control this rage, Putney asserts, leads to his destruction. Coriolanus's psychological di lemma, then, is whether he should be true to his nature or instead subject himself to the imprisoning ideals if fame and glory imposed upon him by*

his mother. Volumnia's threats of suicide drive this conflict as Coriolanus feels that ultimately he must choose between hIS own death or hers. Shackled by hIS rigidity of thought and this nearly impassible decision, Coriolanus, in Putney's opinion, selects the option of his own death by capitulating to Volumnia's demand that he not lead the V olscian army agatr1st Rom'.]

All critics, save those who think the play Coriolanus is an aristocratic manifesto or a political debate, find the relationship between Caius Marcius Coriolanus and Volumnia, his mother, the very center of Shakespeare's drama. There is relatively little difference between the comments of conventional critics like [Andrew] Bradley and [Harley] Granville-Barker and the psychoanalytically informed studies of Uackson E.] Towne, [Harold G.] McCurdy, and [Charles K.] Hofling. In his excel lent essay, Dr. Hofling fully elucidates the redipal theme and enriches our understanding of the characters, with an insight gained from clinical experience. None of these critics has observed, however, the importance of Coriolanus's struggle to choose between his own or his mother's death, which determines the outcome of the play; nor the degree to which Coriolanus's implacable superego explains puzzling features of his behavior and reactions.

The drama opens with the rioting plebeians calling for the death of Caius Marcius, whom they rightly regard as their chief enemy. Menenius, a jolly old patrician, tries to cajole them into peace, but Marcius appears and showers vituperation on the people and their leaders. He deplores the weakness of the Senate in granting them tribunes and advocates a massacre as the most efficient way of restoring order. A messenger interrupts with news that the V olscians are in arms against Rome, and Marcius sets off with Cominius, the consul, and Lartius. He performs incredible feats of heroism, including entering alone the gates of Corioli. Not only does he refuse any reward, save the honorific epithet of Coriolanus, but he will not even accept the plaudits of the generals and soldiers.

On his triumphant return to Rome, the Senate chooses him consul, but before he can be confirmed in office he must win the assent of the plebeians. Most unwillingly he dons the traditional 'vesture of humility', but instead of begging the support of the people he gibes and jeers at them and refuses to display his scars as custom demanded. The plebeians, nevertheless, feel they cannot deny their votes to so great a hero, and their tribunes, Brutus and Sicinius, inform Coriolanus that he has fulfilled the conditions. At the instigation of the tribunes, the plebeians retract their assent, and Brutus and Sicinius intercept Coriolanus as he is going to the capitol to assume the consulship. After a furious quarrel, they seek to seize and hurl him from the Tarpeian Rock. He and his patrician supporters drive away the people and their officers. When he has gone home, Menenius and Cominius try to avert civil war by conciliating the tribunes, who agree that if Coriolanus will submit himself to their judgment, he may be pardoned. At first he refuses, but his mother at length prevails, and he returns to the forum where Brutus and Sicinius wait, determined to provoke him to new wrath. He bursts forth in rage when Sicinius calls him a traitor and is sentenced to perpetual exile.

Leaving the city, Coriolanus defects to his old enemy, Aufidius, and begs to serve in the Volscian army raised to attack Rome. After overrunning the outlying districts, he brings

the army to the gates of the city. There he threatens to bum Rome and to exterminate the Romans. He rejects the pleas of the Senate and of Menenius, his dearest friend, but once again his mother reduces him to submission even though he knows it will cost his life. Peace is made, and he returns to Corioli, where Aufidius and his henchmen assassinate him while he is conferring with the V olscian lords.

Coriolanus is a man whose inability to control his rage destroys him. Ostensibly his anger is directed against the plebeians and the foes of Rome, but evidence in the play supports the conclusion that his rage is displaced from its real object, his mother. In order to understand these matters, one must examine Shakespeare's development of the character of Volumnia.

In Plutarch's I.ife of Caius Marcius Coriolanus, the source of Shakespeare's play, Volumnia rarely appears until the climax of the story. Plutarch's only observation was to the effect that Marcius had not suffered the usual consequences of growing up without a father: 'But Marcius thinking all due to his mother, that had been also due his father had he lived, did not only content himself to rejoice and honor her, but at her desire took a wife also, by whom he had two children, and yet never left his mother's house therefore'. Shakespeare completely revised this representation of Volumnia. In contrast to Hamlet's mother who, though wanton and erring, is gracious, affectionate, repentant, and protecting, Volumnia is, as Coriolanus's mother should be, domineering, angry, proud, cruel, and harsh. She is the real tragedy of Coriolanus.

In the first act of the play Shakespeare provides the retrospective glimpse that depicts the bleak and loveless atmosphere that surrounded Coriolanus's infancy and youth. In a remarkable conversation between Volumnia and Virgilia, Coriolanus's gentle, loving wife who is grieving for her husband's absence and fearful for his safety, Volumnia says

I pray you, daughter, sing; or express yourself in a more comfortable sort. If my son were my husband, I should freelier rejoice in that absence wherein he won honour than in the embracement of his bed where he would show most love. When yet he was tender-bodied and the only son of my womb, when youth with comeliness pluck'd all gaze his way, when for a day of king's entreaties a mother would not sell him an hour from her beholding, I, considering how honour would become such a person, that it was no better than picture-like to hang by th' wall, if renown made It not stir, was pleas'd to let him seek danger where he was like to find fame. To a cruel war I sent him; from whence he return'd his bows bound with oak. I tell thee, daughter, I sprang not more in joy at first hearing he was a man-child than now in first seeing he had proved himself a man (I, iii).

In reply to Virgilia's question: 'But had he died in the business, madam, how then?', Volumnia says

Then his good report should have been my son; I therein would have found issue. Hear me profess sincerely: had I a dozen sons, each in my love alike and none less dear than thine and mine good Marcius, I had rather had eleven die nobly for their country than one voluptuously surfeit out of action (I, iii).

Surely this is not love but hostility masquerading in the garb of affection. Volumnia's ferocity is barbaric. She imagines her son in battle killing V olscians, his brow covered with blood. When Virgilia protests, 'His bloody brow! O Jupiter, no blood!', Volumnia blasts her with scorn.

Away you fool! it more becomes a man
Than gilt his trophy. The breasts of Hecuba,
When she did suckle Hector, look'd not
lovelier
Than Hector's forehead when it spit forth
blood
At Grecian sword, contemning
(I, iii.).

When she hears her son has again been wounded, she cries, '0, he is wounded; I thank the gods for't' (II, i). Coriolanus has adopted her standards, but can a son love a mother who has condemned him to hardship, pain, and probable death? His resentment is implied in his words: 'My mother, you wot well / My hazards still have been your solace' (IV, i).

Volumnia's reputation as the noblest Roman matron of them all is apparently the product of outmoded idealization of motherhood. Holling, undoubtedly the best informed of the recent commentators, writes: 'Volumnia thus is seen to be an extremely unfeminine, nonmaterial person, one who sought to mold her son to fit a preconceived image gratifying her own masculine (actually pseudomasculine) strivings. Her method, we learn from the above and other speeches, was to withhold praise and the scant affection she had to give from any achieve ments except aggressive and exhibitionistic ones. . . .

Volumnia does much lip service to "honor", but this attitude proves to be in part hypocritical. During the political crisis in Acts II and III, she urges her son to adopt craft and dissembling until he has won power. In other words, this woman is much more concerned about appearances than about honor or truth as things in themselves.'

There is no reason to quarrel, unless over the last sentence, with this analysis of Volumnia's character or with Holling's classification of Coriolanus as approximating 'the phallic-narcissistic type, as originally delineated by Reich.' Uncritical dependence on Goddard's dubious theory that Coriolanus gave up his plan for vengeance against Rome because of his love for his wife probably prevented Hofling from perceiving other more important aspects of the hero's motivations.

On the surface the relations between Volumnia and Coriolanus are marked by mutual admiration and respect, but as the play progresses he becomes rebellious and defiant. The first of the two conflicts of will between mother and son occurs after he has involved Rome in civil strife by attacking the tribunes and the plebeians. Act III, Scene ii opens with Coriolanus expressing bewilderment that his mother does not approve his violence; instead, she reprimands him for his rashness. Joined by Menenius and Cominius, who

combine with her in urging that he prevent civil war by submitting to the tribunes and dissemble his way into the consulship, Coriolanus resolutely spurns all pleas until Volumnia says

At thy choice, then:
To beg of thee, it is my more dishonour Than thou of them. Come all to ruin; let Thy mother rather feel thy pride than fear
Thy dangerous stoutness, for I mock at death With as big heart as thou. Do as thou list.
Thy valiantness was mine, thou suck'dst it
from me,
But owe thy pride thyself
(III, ii).

Coriolanus immediately yields. Substantially Volumnia has said, 'Very well, make your choice. What you are doing will result in my death, but your pride will have it so, and my courage is no less than yours.' Her threat he cannot face, although at' this point his mother's statement is not necessarily true. It does not inevitably follow that civil war between the patricians and plebeians will result in her death. The threat of her destruction is his command. He submits because he cannot tolerate acknowledgment of his latent destructive hostility toward her.

Although Coriolanus stands out far more staunchly in Act V, when Volumnia again threatens him with her death as she appeals to him to spare Rome, ultimately he cannot withstand her repeated pressure\ At the first appearance of his wife, son, and mother anxiety strikes him, but he resolves

I'll never
Be such a gosling to obey instinct, but stand As if a man were author of himself
And knew no other kin
(I, iii)

After affectionate family greetings, Coriolanus asserts his resolution to make no peace with Rome\ Volumnia, at the outset of her first long plea, seeks to arouse guilt in him by playing on his love and compassion for his family. This time she resorts to the threat of suicide\

For either thou
Must as a foreIgn recreant be led
With manacles through our streets, or else Triumphantly tread upon thy country's ruin
And bear the palm for having bravely shed Thy wife and children's blood\ For myself, son,
I purpose not to wait on fortune till
These wars determine\ If I cannot persuade thee Rather to show a noble grace to both parts
Than seek the end of one, thou shalt no sooner March to assault thy country than to treadTrust to't, thou shalt not- on thy mother's
womb

That brought thee to this world
(1, iii)

This time he does not immediately recoil from the possibility that he will cause his mother's death, though the danger that she will kill herself has much more directness than her earlier prophecy of doom\ Does he resist now because unconsciously he senses the implied hostility in his mother's purpose and because he knows that it is a choice between his life and hers? Despite his wife's assertion that she will follow Volumnia's example, he says only

Not of a woman's tenderness to be,
Requires nor child nor woman's face to see
I have sat too long
(1, iii)

With that he rises to depart\ He permits his mother to detain him with a second long plea\

Some psychoanalytic criticism of Shakespeare is impaired by the exclusive attention it pays to plot rather than to close reading of the dialogue\ Since Shakespeare customanly chose his dramas from existing narratives, he did not have an entirely free hand in selecting the incidents he dramatized\ In this instance, a man in Coriolanus's position would surely have detained, by force if necessary, his wife, his child, and his mother\ But Shakespeare's audience would not have tolerated a change in the outcome of so well-known a legend as that of Coriolanus, even if the poet had desired to make the change \ He could, however, and often did subtly alter the psychological motivations for the actions of his borrowed characters \ He did so here\ Volumnia first menaces Coriolanus with the ignominious reputation he will suffer if he destroys his native city\ She pauses for a reply, and when none comes, she prods him futilely with, 'Speak to me, son'\ Because he remains silent, she appeals to his sense of honor; that failing, she asks sharply, 'Why dost not speak?'\ The next section of her speech, for which Shakespeare found no suggestion in Plutarch, affords a singular display of aggressive, domineering motherhood\

There's no man in the world
More bound to's mother; yet here he lets me
prate
LIke one l' th' stocks\- Thou hast never in
thy Me Show'd thy dear mother any courtesy, When she, poor hen, fond of no second brood,
Has cluck'd thee to the wars and safely home Loaden WIth honour\ Say my request's unjust, And spurn me back; but if it be not so Thou art not honest; and the gods will plague thee
That thou restrain'st from me the duty which To a mother's part belongs\-He turns away
(1, iii).

Why does he turn away\ The conflict in Coriolanus must be extreme\ He has always regarded himself as a patriot; yet in attacking his native city he believes in the justice of his revenge on the plebeians who sought to destroy him, and on the patricians whom he feels betrayed him\ He has been a devoted, obedient, and reverent son; yet his mother is maligning him with the monstrously ridiculous charge of filial ingratitude \ He turns away in anger, for how can he respond otherwise than with anger to the injustice and bitter hostility of her words?

In real life a Coriolanus would have had other choices than the one here provided of sacrificing his own life to satisfy his mother's demands \ But Shakespeare, fol lowing Plutarch, could only exercise his great skill in providing satisfying motivations for the actions his source imposed upon him\ The psychological and dramatic values imp-licit in this conflict between mother and son must have determined his decision to develop the characters in Plutarch's biography, and everything he put into the play prepares for this moment\ Volumnia's motivation is complex\ Rome's salvation must be uppermost\ Almost as important is her concern for her son's future fame, especially as his reputation in volves her own. To subdue him she once again employs her last weapon.

This is the last. So, we will home to Rome,
And die among our neighbours. Nay, behold
'sl
This boy, that cannot ten what he would
have
But kneels and holds up hands for fellow
ship, Does reason our petition with more strength Than thou hast power to deny it.
Come, let
us go:
This fellow had a Volscian to his mother,
His wife is in Corioli and his child
like him by chance. Yet give us our dispatch:
I am hush'd until our city be afire,
And then I'll speak a little
(I, iii).

Coriolanus yields again not so much to her scornful words as to the repeated threat of suicide. Responsibility for that is more than he can withstand, particularly when it is joined to the challenge to order her to her death that is implied in her words, 'Yet give us our dispatch'.

The stage direction reads, 'He holds her by the hand, silent'. The speech in which he submits moves him to tears, and the tears are shed for himself. 'This unnatural scene', as he calls it, at which the gods laugh, is the spectacle of a mother condemning her son to danger and probable death. After silently holding her hand, he breaks out

O mother, mother!
What have you done? Behold, the heavens do
ope,

The gods look down, and this unnatUral
scene
They laugh at. O my mother, mother! 01 You have won a happy victory to Rome; But for your son- believe it, O believe utmost dangerously you have with him
prevail'd,
If not most mortal to him. But let it come
(1, iii).

In his British Academy Lecture in 1912, Bradley said, '. . . she answers nothing. And her silence is sublime.' The sublimity is currently less apparent. She has reasserted her supremacy, and there is nothing more to say. That Coriolanus can face death at her command is not surprising; that he has been doing since his youth.

Paced with the choice of destroying his mother or losing his own life, he can only, though reluctantly, choose death.

Coriolanus's inexorable maternal superego decrees that he sacrifice himself. At the same time, to the force and rigidity of his superego is added the danger of acting out his matricidal impulses. His conscience is the product of absolute identification with or introjection of Volumnia, and it is fascinating to observe how well Shakespeare understood both the process of superego formation and the sadistic, self-destructive nature of such a conscience. Its genesis is most clearly revealed in an earlier passage as he is taking leave of his mother to go into exile.

Nay, mother,
Where is your ancient courage? You were us'd To say extremity was the trier of spirits;
'That common chances common men could
bear,
That when the sea was calm all boats alike Show'd mastership in floating; fortune's blows
When most struck home, being gentle,
wounded, craves
A noble cunning. You were us'd to load me WIth precepts that would make invincible
The heart that conn'd them
(IV, i).

These precepts and his mother's example have turned him into the rigid personality Menenius describes after Coriolanus has brought Rome to the verge of civil war upon being denied the consulship.

His nature is too noble for the world.
He would not flatter Neptune for Ius trident, Or Jove for's power to thunder. His heart's His mouth
What !us breast forges, that his tongue must
vent; And being angry, does forget that ever He heard the name of death
(III, i).

Menenius speaks truly although his admiration is uncritical. A little later in the play, Volumnia says, 'Anger's my meat; I sup upon myself, / And so shall starve with feeding' (IV, ii). Coriolanus, of course, has accepted his mother's violence as an appropriate mode of behavior. For him vehement plain-speaking is a compulsion of conscience that cannot be put aside.

Most interesting psychologically is the conflict between mother and son in Act III, Scene ii, when Volumnia urges him to bow to necessity and submit himself to the judgment of the tribunes. It is founded on Shakespeare's surprising understanding of the phenomenon of the child who holds to parental principles with an inflexibility that in no wise binds the parent from whom he has received them. Volumnia is opportunistic and can accommodate herself to the demands of the occasion. Coriolanus cannot, despite the urging of his mother and his friends. No character in Shakespeare's plays adheres so unwaveringly to Polonius's high-sounding but dubious maxim. 'This above all: to thine own self be true, / And it must follow as the night the day / Thou canst not then be false to any man' (Hamlet, I, iii). Volunmia has imposed upon her son a concept of himself, an ideal, that imprisons him within an iron mold that he can crack but cannot break. Throughout the scene he struggles between his desire to obey his mother and the demand of his conscience that he be true to his own nature.

Coriolanus is confused, as any child must be, at discovering the discrepancy between his mother's standards and her practice. The scene opens with Coriolanus's declaration that, no matter what the consequences, he will persist in the defiance of the plebeians that has brought Rome to the brink of civil war. The rash patrician to whom he speaks replies, 'You do the nobler'. What baffles Coriolanus is his mother's censure of ills conduct. He confesses his confusion to his friend. Midway through his speech, he becomes aware that his mother has entered and he addresses her.

I muse my mother Does not approve me further, who was wont To call them [the plebeians] woollen vassals,
things created
To buy and sell with groats, to show bare
heads
When one but of my ordinance stood up
To speak of peace or war- I talk of you.
Why did you wish me milder? Would you
have me
False to my nature? Rather say I play
The man I am
(III, 11).

Impatient as one must be with his self-destructive obstinacy, one cannot but feel compassion for this bewildered man.

The argument that follows between mother and son about his returning to humble himself and placate the tribunes is wholly engrossing. During the early part of the scene, Volumnia's exhortations arouse only such laconic responses as 'Tush, tush', or 'Why

force you this?'. In the face of the combined urgings of Menenius, Cominius, and his mother, he weakens and seems to accept the idea that he must do for others what he would not himself do. Understanding himself better than they do he says, 'You have put me now to such a part which never / I shall discharge to the life'. His mother presses him to yield.

I prithee now, sweet son, as thou hast said My praises made thee first a soldier, so,
To have my praise for this, perform a part Thou hast not done before
(III, ii).
In the first ten lines of his reply to his mother, Coriolanus bitterly expresses his sense of betrayal of himself; the degradation of himself she requires him to perpetrate.
Well, I must do't.
Away my disposition, and possess me
Some harlot's spirit. My throat of war be
turn'd,
Which choir'd with my drum, into a pipe
Small as a eunuch's, or the virgin voice
That babies lull asleep! The smiles of knaves
Tent in my cheeks, and schoolboys' tears take up
The glasses of my sight! A beggar's tongue
Make motion through my lips, and myarm'd
knees,
Who bow'd but in the stirrup, bend like his
That hath receiv'd an a1ms!- I will not do't,
Lest I surcease to honour mine own truth
And by my body's action teach my mind
A most inherent baseness
(III, ii).

To bend this steel conscience to her will, Volumnia at once accuses him of preferring her death to the sacri fice of his pride. Pride she calls it, and some there may be, but here as elsewhere he is following the only course of conduct his superego will permit. As horror of his repressed matricide exceeds his revulsion at the humiliation he must undergo, he submits and undertakes to force himself to act against his desires.

We are now prepared to understand one of the most perplexing minor problems of the play: why Coriolanus cannot accept the praise of his admirers but must habitually disparage his feats of heroism, and stubbornly conceal his wounds and scars. When Cominius, his general, starts to proclaim to the Senate Coriolanus's heroic exploits, he refuses 'To stay to hear my nothings monstered' (II, ii). He shuns all praise, especially in the scene in the first act following his victory over the Volscians. As Lartius begins to narrate to Cominius his valorous deeds, Coriolanus interrupts.

Pray now, no more. My mother Who has a charter to extol her blood,
When she does praise me grieves me. 1 have
done
As *you* have done, that's what 1 can; induc'd As *you* have been, that's for my country.

He that has but effected his good will
Hath overta'en my act
(I, ix).

In another man this generous statement that the risk and the effort make all equal might be called modesty. Although Coriolanus is no braggart, one can hardly attribute modesty to this fierce, arrogant, scornful, vituperative, aggressive, lofty patrician.

The true explanation of this interesting facet of Coriolanus's personality affords another insight into Shakespeare's psychological subtlety. Volumnia provides the basis for understanding in a speech imagining her son in battle against the V olscians.

Methinks 1 hear hither *your* husband's drum;
See him pluck Aufidius down by the hair;
As children from a bear, the V olsces shunning him.
Methinks 1 see him stamp thus, and call
thus: 'Come on *you* cowards! You were got in fear, Though *you* were born in Rome.' His bloody
brow
With his mail'd hand then wiping, forth he
goes I.ike to a harvest-man that's task'd to mow Or all *or* lose his hire
(I, iii).

The final simile contains the secret. I.ike the reaper who must mow the whole field *or* get no pay, Coriolanus must achieve the absolute *or* deserve neither reward nor praise. He is aware of his extraordinary exploits, but even they do not satisfy the exorbitant demands his conscience makes upon him. He is a truly pitiable figure. He can be contemptuous of cowardice and weakness in others, but because he can never do enough, he cannot win the gratification of self-approval. Since self approval is lacking, he hears the praise others, even or especially his mother, heap upon him with pain rather than pleasure.

I have tried in this paper to make plain some previously unheeded aspects of the relationship between this mother and son. Specifically, there is her determination to maintain her dominance over him, even at the cost of his life. To achieve her supremacy on the two occasions when his rebellion threatens her role of Roman mother, as she conceives it, she resorts to the charge of matricide. Second, the exorbitance and inflexibility of Coriolanus's conscience force him into pain and danger without the reward of self-approval. His superego compels him to act politically in a provocative and self-defeating manner, bewilders him when he finds his mother can abandon the principles he has learned from her, and, in the end, makes him choose his own death rather than hers. Volumnia is most truly Coriolanus's tragedy; defeat is the inevitable end for the arrogant, angry, rigid man she has created.

Shakespeare clearly approached the oedipal situation in Coriolanus with a directness and bitterness impossible when he wrote Hamlet. No longer must the hero be a young 'sweet prince', 'the glass of fashion and the mold of form', a courtier, soldier, scholar. Nor is Volumnia like Gertrude, gracious, warm, affectionate, charming, penitent,

devoted, who lies and makes excuses for Hamlet and whose last words are spoken to save his life. Shakespeare made Volumnia a most repulsive mother, who created a son we can admire and pity but cannot like. Shakespeare allowed her no word after she forced Coriolanus's submission. In Rome all classes hail her as the patroness and savior of the city, but in Corioli, alone among his ancient enemies, her son pays the price for her victory with the death to which she unlamentingly dispatched him. A V olscian lord orders his funeral.

Bear hence his body,
And mourn you for him. Let him be
regarded As the most noble corse that ever herald Did follow to his urn
(V, vi).

With the same cold, griefless admiration, the audience takes leave of Caius Marcius Coriolanus, Rome's mightiest warrior, the haughtiest and most irascible of her patricians. We respect him for his valor and honesty, but his uncontrolled ferocity and arrogance make him the least lovable and least loved of Shakespeare's tragic heroes. He is the masculine counterpart and product of his mother, her victim in life and death.

With another writer there might be no more to say. But I have oversimplified Shakespeare's judgment. Coriolanus, like many other characters, is the beneficiary of Shakespeare's dramatic impartiality. And therein lies a most attractive insight into the poet's own personality. The finest spirit of modem psychotherapy is given expression by the words of the Duke in *Measure far Measure:* 'Love talks with better knowledge, and knowledge with dearer love' (III, ii). One finds characters in many of the plays speaking and acting in that spirit. One of the most extended and subtle of these instances occurs in that famous speech of Hamlet's:

So, oft it chances in particular men,
That, for some vicious mole of nature in
them,
As, ill their birth- wherein they are not
guilty,
Since nature cannot choose his origin
By their o'ergroWth of some complexion
Oft breaking down the pales and forts of
reason,
Or by some habit that too much o'erleavens The form of plausive manners, that these men, Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect, Being nature's livery, or fortune's star,Their virtues else- be they as pure as grace, As infinite as man may undergo Shall in the general censure take corruption From that particular fault. . .
(I, iv).

It is odd that most critics have failed to recognize that Hamlet, and so presumably Shakespeare, would never join 'in the general censure', in those popular condemnations that spring from conventional morality and consequent failure of understanding. Another character Shakespeare drew who exhibits this insight and love is Lepidus in Antony and

Cleopatra. Replying to Octavius Caesar's violent attack on Antony's passion for Cleopatra, he says:

I must not think there are Evils enow to darken all his goodness.
His faults, in him, seem as the spots of
heaven,
More fiery by night's blackness; hereditary, Rather than purchas'd; what he cannot change, Than what he chooses
(I, iv).

His genius, probably furthered by reading St. Paul, that great apostolic psychologist, brought Shakespeare this psychological tolerance. The quality finds expression in a pair of interesting comments on Coriolanus in the first scene of the play.

First Citizen: I say unto you, what he hath done famously, he did It to that end. Though soft-conscienc'd men can be content to say it was for his country, he did it to please his mother, and to be partly proud; which he is even to the altitude of his virtue.
Second Citizen: What he cannot help in his nature, you account a vice in him
(I, i).

Here as elsewhere Shakespeare leaves us with the blissful uncertainty of suspended judgment. He seems to have felt, like Joseph Conrad, that one must speculate about, but can never fully explain, something so complicated as a human being. Just before the climax of this play, Aufidius, Coriolanus's inveterate enemy, ponders the mystery of his ally and adversary.

I think he'll be to Rome
As is the osprey to the fish, who takes it By sovereignty of nature. First he was
A noble servant to them; but he could not Carry his honours even: whether 'twas pride,
Which out of daily fortune ever taints
The happy man; whether defect of judgement, To fail in the disposing of those chances
Which he was lord of; or whether nature, Not to be other than one thing, not moving
From th' casque to th' cushion, but commanding peace
Even with the same austerity and garb
As he controll'd the war; but one of these, *As* he hath spices of them all- not all,For I dare so far free him,- made him fear'd; So, hated; and so, banish'd; but he has a merit
To choke it in the utterance
(IV, vii).

The realization reflected in these passages that man is not captain of his soul, that he is subject to intrapsychic forces beyond his conscious control, is surely the ultimate source of Shakespeare's large, liberal, humane representation of mankind.

The uncertain chronology of Shakespeare's plays makes it dangerous to yield to the temptation to connect the writing of Coriolanus with the death of Shakespeare's mother in September 1609. But this bleak treatment of the mother-son relationship most

certainly brought to an end the extended self-catharsis that emerged during the eight or nine years of his great tragic period, which included Hamlet, King Lear, Othello, and Macbeth. The necessity for identifying with his heroes in order to express their passions and anguish required that the artist have access to his most strongly repressed unconscious feelings.

Critical Essay #6

Source: "Coriolanus: The Anxious Bridegroom," originally published in *American Imago* Vol. 25, 1968. Reprinted in *'Coriolanus': Critical Essays,* edited by David Wheeler, Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995, pp. 93-110.

[In the following essay (originally published in 1968), *Wilson offers a psychoanalytic approach to* Coriolanus, *evaluating language and imagery that suggests Freudian conflicts within the play. The critic begins by analyzing the unique bodily imagery of* Coriolanus, *through which sexuality am war are thematically linked. Wilson also notes the psychological resonance of aggression in the play's family relationships. Oedipal, or incestuous, motif appear as do Coriolanus's anxieties* conc *erning his symbolic castration by his domineering and mascu line-- or "phallic" - mother, Volumnia. Wilson further explores Coriolanus's hostility toward his mother and his rebellion against her. This revolt, in turn, is characterized by the homoerotic overtones of Coriolanus's relationship with Aufidius- who also becomes a surrogate for Coriolanus's absent father- as the too men Join forces to attack Rome* i. *e. Volumnia.]*

In *Coriolanus,* Shakespeare adapted a plot from North's translation of *Plutarch's I.ives* into an intensive exploration of a pathological mother-son relationship. It is the story of a son who attempts to rebel against his mother, to whom he has been inordinately attached. The son is ultimately destroyed when he renounces his rebellion and submits to his mother. In this paper, I wish to examine certain aspects of the play for the unconscious fantasies which may have determined the handling of the narrative material from which Shakespeare worked. In particular, I suggest that an examination of the wedding night references in the play is essential for an understanding of the work on a psychoanalytical level.

The play has sometimes been cited as peculiar among Shakespeare's works. Critics discern a "slackness" in Shakespeare's dramatic power. This slackness is supposed to be reflected in the way in which Shakespeare handled his source material. If we compare Shakespeare's adaptation with the original in North's translation, we find at several points an almost slavish closeness to the source. This dependence on North is so extensive that at first reading, the p lay seems little more than a simple dramatization O the plot from North. Editors have been able to make emendations and fill textual lacunae in the play by referring to North, so faithfully has Shakespeare followed his source. The later acts of the play, especially, show a marked increase in borrowing, and tend to rely almost exclusively on North. Shakespeare might, of course, have been under some merely temporal pressure to complete the play, but this marked change in the processing of the material could also have been due to the conflictual nature of the subject matter. At any rate, Shakespeare seems to have adhered doggedly to his source in order to finish his task.

Yet, the earlier acts and the characters introduced there involve a good deal of revision and reworking of the material. Shakespeare has developed certain characters and added others, and has elaborated on the relationship of Coriolanus to the various

individuals who are significant to him. Further, Shakespeare's particular choices of expression in the play are striking. The language has been called harsh. The poetry seems at times to disguise only slightly some rather grotesque ideas. As an example of the grossness of thought, consider Coriolanus' rebuke to the tribunes for their failure to control the mob: "You being their mouths, why rulee you not their teeth?" These additions by Shakespeare to his source material are important for a psychological understanding of the play.

Imagery

The peculiar imagery Shakespeare has chosen tends to support the view that the theme of the play was one to which the playwright was psychologically sensitive. The images tend to fall within a narrow range. Caroline Spurgeon found these to be concerned largely with bodily functions, sickness, and loss of diseased bodily parts. Blood, and things made bloody, are constantly mentioned. Stoller calls attention to the numerous staves, pikes, rakes, swords, and other phallic equivalents. There are many references to wounds and to parts of the body, or simply to parts. Coriolanus shouts angrily to the mob, "Go get you home, you fragments!" (1.1.211).

Combat and sexuality are often linked. Battles are described in sexual images, or talk of battle provides the opportunity for a reference to sexual activity. Cominius, the Roman commander-in-chief, proudly describes some teenage battle exploit of Coriolanus as occurring at an age when he might have acted "the woman in the scene" (2.2.92). Peace is a "great maker of cuckolds" (4.5.225). Coriolanus threatens to beat the Volscians "to their wives" (1.4.41). Volumnia, his mothers, says of Coriolanus' impetuous attitude toward the mob,

. . . I know thou hadst rather
Follow thine enemy ill a fiery gulf
Than flatter him in a bower.
(3.2.90-92)

Curiously, while Coriolanus is in battle in Act I, Volumnia and her friend go to visit a lady lying in (1.3.72).

Another significant group of images is oral. In this play of a mother-child relationship, there are frequent illusions to food, nourishment, ingestion, hunger, biting, or devouring. To note one important instance: Some servingmen are speaking of the personal rivalry between Coriolanus and his Volscian opponent, Aufidius. They recall the battle of Corioli:

First Sera Before Corioli he [CoriolanusJ scotched him and notched him like a carbonado [meat cut up for cooking].
Second Sera And he had been cannibally given, he might have boiled and eaten him too.
(4.5.186-89)

In some images, aggressive impulses are characteristically directed towards the interior of the body. Coriolanus' attacks on Rome are said to be "pouring war / Into the bowels of ungrateful Rome" (4.5.129). When Volumnia entreats Coriolanus to cease warring on Rome, he is said to want to tread upon his mother's womb (5.3.124). He is charged with

Making the mother, wife and child, to see The son, the hus band and the father, tearing His country's bowels out.
(5.3.101-03)

This juxtaposition of aggression with the family relationships is striking, and provides unambiguous evidence of the symbolic character of the attack on Rome as an attack on those objects whom previously Coriolanus had loved. The repetition of this sott of imagery is impressive, and indicates the extent and strength of certain unconscious fantasies: the fear of being eaten, and the rage against the mother's engulfing body.

The Wadding Night

In the midst of these grotesque images of blood, aggression, and bodily destruction, there is a scene in which Coriolanus rises to intense lyric expression. In the battle at Corioli, he expresses the joy of victory, and greets his general, Cominius with

0, let me clip ye In arms as sound as when I wooed; III heart As merry as when our nuptial day was done, And tapers burned to bedward!
(1.6.29-32)

Here, we find an obvious reference to a specific sexual event, and an unconscious reference in the phallic burning tapers. The significance of the image is further heightened by one other reference to a wedding night. When Coriolanus joins Aufidius as an ally against Rome, Aufidius expresses *his* joy by referring to his bride on her first crossing the threshold, and he declares that he is even more rapt by Coriolanus than he was by his bride:

Know thou first, I loved the maid I married: never man
Sighed truer breath; but that I see thee here, Thou noble thing, more dances my rapt heart Than when I first my wedded mistress saw Bestride my threshold.
(4.5.112-17)

Commentators have noted these two references to the wedding night. Perhaps the most insightful is Rank's brief discussion. However, the meaning of these two passages in *Coriolanus* has not been sufficiently explored. Further examination of these passages is important, for the wedding night images condense several major themes of the play.

To understand Coriolanus' reference to his wedding night, we need to examine the scene in which the reference occurs. Preceding Coriolanus' lyric recall of this event, there is a series of scenes of the battle before Corioli, in which Coriolanus is especially in danger of being deserted by his men and closed up within the gates of the enemy town. Coriolanus exhorts his soldiers to charge the V olscians when the battle first begins at the gates of Corioli. In particular, he threatens any stragglers with his "edge"

(1.4.29). This threat proves insufficient. As Coriolanus follows the V olscians to the gates of their city, he still needs to urge the Roman soldiers to enter the gates with him:

So, now the gates are ope. Now prove good
seconds.
'Tis for the followers fortune widens them,
Not for the fliers. Mark me, and do the like.
(1.4.43-45)
Yet precisely before the open gates, he is deserted. The
Roman response to his exhortation is:
First Sol.: Foolhardiness. Not I.
Second Sol.: Nor I.
First Sol.: See, they have shut hIm in.
(1.4.46-47)

In Plutarch, when Coriolanus stormed the gates, others were with him. The complete abandonment is stressed by the soldiers: "He is himself alone, / To answer all the city" (1.4.52-53). They immediately suppose that he is dead, that he is gone "to th' pot" (1.4.48). In view of the recurrent theme of being eaten, it is very likely that those commentators are correct who suppose that the pot here is a cooking pot, and that the line means that Coriolanus has been cut to pieces.

The battle is carried by the Romans as their commander, Cominius, arrives. Coriolanus reappears, covered with blood. He sees Cominius and asks, "Come I too late?" Cominius replies, "Ay, if you come not in the blood of others, / But mantled in your own" (1.6.2729). Coriolanus responds to the question whether he is wounded by saying that his arms are as sound as before he married, and then refers to his wedding night in an effusion of joy and enthusiasm_ Curiously, Coriolanus does not give a direct answer to Cominius' question until he boasts later to Aufidius: "'Tis not my blood / Wherein thou seest me masked" (1.8_9-10)

In these scenes at Corioli, we have a battle in which the important elements are the opening and penetration of the enemy's defenses with the resulting danger of destruction to the attacker_ Following the battle, there is a specific reference to the first sexual union between Coriolanus and his bride,. *As* if to underscore the allusion to defloration, Cominius immediately after the wedding night memory, addresses Coriolanus as "Flower of warriors" (1.6_32)_ There is, I suggest, a symbolic parallel between the battle at Corioli and unconscious fantasies concerning the experience of the wedding night_ The battle is, as it were, a symbolic re-enactment of the anxiety provoking sexual event, defloration_ The battle scene at Corioli expresses the unconscious equation of coitus with a violent, damaging assault, an equation which we noted earlier in the imagery of the play_ Castration anxieties aroused by coitus are heightened by the actual accompaniment of the sexual act by bleeding and a change in the female's bodily status_ In the unconscious, defloration is equated with the castration of the sexual partner, and there is an associated dread of a mutilating retaliation_ The feared punishment, castration, is symbolized in the battle by the danger of becoming entrapped within the gates, to be cut up and devoured_ In the memory of defloration

which follows the battle scenes, Coriolanus may well be attempting to deal with his terrifying. discovery that he had created a sexual difference in his bride, by making her into a woman, i_e_, a person who had been deprived of the phallus_ Ultimately, the punishment that is dreaded for this act is a revenge by his mother on her son for having entertained these notions of assault against her body and, of course, on a deeper level, the woman who is castrated in the sexual act would be the phallic mother, Volumnia_

If I am correct in this analysis of the battle at Corioli, then the award of the name, "Coriolanus," for exploits in that battle may also be of psyt:hological importance_ For this, however, we must turn to a passage ill North which has not been transferred to the play, but which may very well have influenced Shakespeare in his conception of the battle scenes_ In the play, the hero receives his *agnomen,* "Coriolanus," as an honorary "trophy" for the events of the battle_ The unconscious meaning of such a trophy is familiar to us as signifying the castration of the enemy and the sadistic wish to rob him of his penis_ But from North's translation of Plutarch's *I.ife if Coriolanus,* we learn that the name could also have been given to signify, and to compensate for, an injury which the bearer of the name had received_ In North, a lengthy discussion occurs on the Roman habit of according such names_ In this passage North states:

Sometimes also [the Romans] give surnames derived of some mark of misfortune of the body_ A5 Sylla, to say, "crooked-nose"; Niger, "black"; Rufus, "red"; Caecus, "blind"; Claudus, "lame." They did wisely in this thing to accustom men to think that neither the loss of sight nor other such misfortunes as may chance to men are any shame or disgrace unto them; but the manner was to answer boldly to such names, as if they were called by their proper names

In view of this comment from North on the secondary meaning of an *agnomen* as commemorative of mutilation, there is a significant parallel to be noted between the attempt to master the psyt:hological sequellae of mutilation by the award of a compensatory *agnomen* and the use Shakespeare makes of the scene before Corioli as a repetition in symbolic form of an experience involving an intense fear of bodily mutilation in retaliation for forbidden sexual wishes_ The same psychological mechanism would seem to be operative in the *agnomen* and in the repetition of the traumatic scene- the attempt to master a traumatic event by some compensatory maneuver after the fact. Coriolanus was wounded at Corioli, and when he stands for the consulship, Coriolanus must display the scars from the battle at Corioli, scars which mark him as having distinguished himself in the service of Rome just as much as his *agnomen* and other honors do_ When Coriolanus rejects the subservient position which he had maintained to Volumnia in the first half of the play, he vehemently rejects his *agnomen* at the same time, and wants to forge another in the "fire of burning Rome" (5_1.14)_ There are thus some indications of a reversal of the significance of the name received at Corioli to represent Coriolanus' continued subservience to Volumnia, and his acquiescence in the role that she demanded of him

The wound motif continues and further develops the fantasy which appears in the battle scenes at Corioli. The question of these wounds comes to dominate the scenes subsequent to the battle, and provides us with important information on the relationship

between Coriolanus and his mother. The phallic castrating mother rejoices in his wounds for the purpose of going before the people: "0, he is wounded: I thank the gods for't" (2.1.107) because "there will be large cicatrices to show the people when he shall stand for his place" (2.1.132). It was a traditional requirement that all aspirants to the consulship stand before the populace and display battle wounds. Coriolanus, however, finds this custom ignominious and objectionable. The mob has from the first been presented as a cannibalistic threat to Coriolanus (1.1), and it has been suggested that the mob stands for the aggressive and dangerous aspects of the mother. Coriolanus' reluctance to display his wounds to the mob is Shakespeare's modification of his source, for in Plutarch the problem does not arise at all. Moreover, standing for the consulship is Volumnia's idea, and Coriolanus can be prevailed upon to go to the people with his wounds only at his mother's insistent cajoling and threats. Volunmia's wish to see her son as a consul, and her role in forcing him to submit to the people, give evidence of the way in which Shakespeare has adapted the plot to strengthen the dominating influence which Volumnia has over her son. Just as she had rejoiced in his wounds, the mob is to see in these same wounds evidence that Coriolanus loves and will faithfully serve Rome. Volumnia thus forces Coriolanus into a position of pleasing and placating the aggressive aspects of herself which the mob symbolizes. Coriolanus can flatter the mob only if he shows his wounds, i.e., if he shows those symbols of castration which were needed to continue in his mother's favor. The sexual nature of the display of his body to the populace is suggested when V olunmia says that it is to "flatter [his enemy] in a bower" (3.2.92). Menenius excuses Coriolanus' insolence by "He loves your people, / But tie him not to be their bedfellow" (2.2.60-61). But it is clear that this is a sexual submission, not a conquest. At the moment of capitulation to Volumnia's urgings, Coriolanus launches a torrent of petulant language showing that his position is not only ignominious but also a threat to his masculinity. To submit will make his voice "Small as an eunuch. . ." (3.2.114). Finally he begins to speak as a little boy.

Mother, I am going to the market place: Chide me no more. . . Look, I am going. (3.2.131-2, 134)

Rebellion against the Phallte Mother

I have so far explored *Omolanus* in those sections which express the fantasies associated with the active phase of the Oedipus complex and the expected castration by the phallic mother for entertaining aggressive impulses toward her. I now turn to the episodes in which Coriolanus rebels against the phallic mother and seeks an alternative expression of his oedipal striving. Coriolanus abandons Rome and his mother, and turns traitor to the Romans, joining with their traditional enemies, the V olscians.

Rebellion is introduced in the opening scene, in which the Roman mob is about to turn against established authority. The mob is quieted, by means of a tale of another rebellion, that of the body's members against the belly (1.1). This theme of betrayal is sustained throughout the play. In certain passages, a sexual betrayal is clearly suggested. In the scene immediately preceding Coriolanus' suit to join Aufidius and betray the Romans, a Roman traitor and a Volscian spy meet to exchange infoffilation and the following comment is made:

I have heard it said the fittest time to corrupt a
man's wife is when she's fallen out with her husband
(4.3.26-28)

These frequent allusions to treachery and betrayal provide a background for the behavior of Coriolanus, who is at first falsely, and later with some justification, labelled a traitor. It is the false charge of treason that provokes Coriolanus and provides him with the excuse to become a traitor in fact by leading an attack on Rome at the head of the Volscian forces. When Coriolanus capitulates to his mother's entreaties in Act V and leaves off his attack on Rome, he is in the awkward position of betraying the V olscian cause which he had joined. Aufidius can justifiably charge him with treason and demand his death.

There are, in addition, some clear indications of Coriolanus' extreme ambivalence toward his libidinal objects. This ambivalence is expressed in a total repudiation and withdrawal when negative feelings have been aroused. In changing allegiance from Rome to the V olscians, Coriolanus plots the total destruction of Rome. When Coriolanus left Rome in Act IV, he was still friendly with his party in Rome, and was ready to acknowledge and express his affection for his mother and his family. In Act V, he rejects all overtures from these friends. In Plutarch, Coriolanus is milder and shrewder. He spares the goods and estates of the nobles in his war on Rome, thereby spreading party dissension in Rome. Revenge on Rome in the form of a humiliating surrender would have been satisfactory for Plutarch's Coriolanus. In Shakespeare, nothing short of the destruction and burning of Rome itself will do. Coriolanus rejects Menenius, his mother Volumnia, and his wife. At the moment that Volumnia's embassy arrives at the V olscian camp, Coriolanus resolves to "stand / As if a man were author of himself / And knew no other kin" (5.3.3537). He had made the same resolve to Menenius earlier: "Wife, mother, child, I know not. My affairs / Are servanted to others" (5.2.75-76). This insistence on a complete rejection is characteristic of Shakespeare's Coriolanus, who seems unable to tolerate any ambiguity in situations which involve his emotional commitment.

In addition, Coriolanus views any struggle for power with extreme anxiety. He resents the newly established office of tribune. Where, in North's version, Coriolanus' objection is restrained, in Shakespeare, Coriolanus objects to the Tribuneship because

It makes the consuls base! and my soul aches To know, when two authorities are up,
Neither supreme, how soon confusion
May enter 'twixt the gap of both and take The one by th'other.
(3.1.108-12)

.It is reasonable to suppose that the prototypes in the unconscious of these two warring authorities are to be found in the original family situation, with parental roles presumably confused and conflicting, providing the opportunity to exploit and intensify the difficulties between the parents, and to play one off against the other.

In his soliloquy just before he goes over to the V olscians as an enemy of Rome, Coriolanus also expresses the theme of ambivalence and his concern with the struggle for supremacy:

O world, thy slippery turns! Friends now fast
sworn,
Whose double bosoms seems to wear one
heart,
Whose hours, whose bed, whose meal and
exercise
Axe still together, who twin, as 'twere, in love Unseparable, shall within this hour,
On a dissension of a doit, break out
To bitterest enmity. So, fellest foes,
Whose passions and whose plots have broke
their sleep
To take the one the other, by some chance,
Some trick not worth an egg, shall grow dear
friends
And interjoin their issues. So with me:
My birthplace hate I, and my love's upon
This enemy town.
(4.4.12-24)

Here, Coriolanus anticipates the intensely homoerotic relationship into which he is about to move, when

Aufidius will want to "twine" his arms around him (4.5.105). Yet he also anticipates the outcome of the trust he is about to place in Aufidius, for a moment after this extended comment on the transiency of human relationships, we see Coriolanus embraced as a bosom friend, and welcomed with greater joy than the welcome accorded anew bride, by the man who will shortly bring about his death.

Quest far a Surrogate Father

I will now examine the aspects of the play which indicate Coriolanus' attempt to institute a satisfactory expression of the passive phase of the Oedipus complex, in which he aspires to be loved by a powerful father, displacing his mother as his father's primary object.

Coriolanus' biological father remains vague in both North and Shakespeare. Yet two figures in the play serve as psychological representatives of a father to Coriolanus. One of these is the old family friend, Menenius. The other is Aufidius, who becomes an idealized father after the rejection of V olurnnia.

Menenius is an apt psychological symbol for the weak and conquered father appropriate to Coriolanus' wishes in the active phase of the Oedipus complex in which V olurnnia is in the ascendancy as Coriolanus' object. Shakespeare developed the charming and

complex character of Menenius almost independently of North, who gives only a few hints concerning a gentle old man who was loved by the people, and was a good choice to carry the Senate's message to a rebellious populace. But Menenius remains a weak person, especially in comparison with the stalwart V olurnnia. He fawns over a letter which Coriolanus had written him, in a fashion virtually indistinguishable from the responses of the women who have also received letters (2.1). Perhaps the most masterly touch in the contrast of V olurnnia and Menenius is in their parting exchange after Coriolanus has been accompanied to the gates of Rome as he goes intO exile. Menenius' response to this day of emotional trials is to note that he is hungry and to arrange for dinner. Not so for Volurnnia:

Men: You'll sup with me?
Vol. Anger's my meat: I sup upon myself And so shall starve with feeding.
(4.2.49-51)

Many passages explicitly refer to Menenius as Coriolanus' father. In his embassy to save Rome, Menenius declares confidently to a guard who is preventing him from seeing Coriolanus, "You shall perceive that a Jack guardant cannot office me from my son Coriolanus" (5.2.59). It is also apparent that the relationship is erotically tinged. Menenius in his frustration shouts at the guard, "I tell thee, fellow, / Thy general is my lover" (5.2.13-14), and Coriolanus, after sending the disappointed old man away, says: "This man, Aufidius, / Was my beloved in Rome" (5.2.85-86). It would seem that Menenius adulated Coriolanus too much to be an ideal substitute for the missing father. Menenius boasts, for example, "I have been / The book of his good acts" (5.2.13-14). Also, Menenius often acts as Volurnnia's agent, i.e., as a person who can appeal to Coriolanus and affect his behavior only through Coriolanus' respect and awe for his mother. As Coriolanus' anger against the mob is beginning to get out of control, Menenius attempts to restrain Coriolanus with: "Is this the promise that you made to your mother?" (3.3.87) .

In opposition to the quasi- familial situation of the earlier scenes of the play in which a strong mother dominates both Coriolanus and his weak, defeated, and castrated father, there is later the alternative oedipal solution in which Coriolanus repudiates his mother, and all her symbolic representatives, to seek out the strong, masculine father. The awesome figure of Aufidius, a marked contrast to Menenius, provides the second father symbol in the play.

The turn to Aufidius involves an intense and passive homoerotic relationship, for which we have been pre pared. Even while Coriolanus and Aufidius are still enemies, Aufidius was admired. Coriolanus tells us in Act I:

I sin in envying his nobility;
And were I anything but what I am,
I would wish me only he.
(1.1.219-221)

Passive homosexual yearnings which Coriolanus had felt for a strong father now find eXp ression in the renunciation of V olunmia in favor O a loving relationship with the virile Aufidius. The second allusion to a wedding night occurs in Act IV, when Aufidius welcomes Coriolanus as an ally. This time, however, it is Aufidius who thinks of his wedding night. Coriolanus is clearly supplanting Aufidius' previous erotic attachment to a woman. This new and strong father is eager to accept Coriolanus, and he looks on Coriolanus as on a bride crossing the threshold, even preferring his present happiness with Coriolanus to his wedding night.

The sexual character of this turning from V olunmia to Aufidius is also shown in the banter with the servingmen in this scene:

Sera How, Sir! Do you meddle with my
master?
Cor. A y, *'tis* an honester service than to
meddle with thy mistress.
(4.5.45-46)

A servingman later says that Aufidius now loves Coriolanus as a woman: "Our general himself makes a mistress of him . . ." (4.5.194).

Earlier, Coriolanus was able to express his memory of defloration anxieties as he embraced Cominius, that is, when he is protected in a homoerotic embrace he can recall the threatening heterosexual experience. Another such embrace occurs between Aufidius and Coriolanus. In both scenes containing the wedding night allusions, the same word is used for this embrace, *'liz.,* "clip." Coriolanus had tumed to Cominius with the words: "0, let me clip ye / In arms as sound as when I wooed. . ." (1.6.29-30). In his welcome to Coriolanus, Aufidius uses this word also:

Auf. Here I clip
The anvil of my sword, and do contest
As hotly and as nobly with thy love
As ever in ambitious strength I did
Contend against thy valor. Know thou first,
I loved the maid I married. . . .
(4.5.108-113)

In Elizabethan English, "clip" would have meant both "to embrace" and "to cut off." In this repeated word, we thus have an unconscious continuation of the theme of castration which links the two wedding night allu sions .

The embrace with Aufidius involves, on the unconscious level, the necessity for undergoing castration as a precondition of the father's love. To gain the love of Aufidius, Coriolanus must reject his city, his family, his mother, he must hate his birthplace, and turn his love onto the man who had previously been his rival. It is precisely the question of what further price must be paid to be loved by Aufidius that leads to difficulties in the new role as Aufidius' minion. Earlier, we saw that Coriolanus had feared castration as a

retaliation for what he had wished to do to his mother. Now he expects that he must give up his masculinity in order to be loved by the strong and virile father.

Coriolanus attempts to meet this condition, on a symbolic level. In his soliloquy he had anticipated an eventual rivalry and falling out with Aufidius (4.4.12). Passages in the play indicate Coriolanus' self-destructive tendencies which will cause his own downfall. The tribunes had recognized this self-destructive trait and used it to their advantage. Brutus hoped to make Coriolanus angry because then he speaks

What's in his heart; and that is there which
looks
With us to break his neck.
(3.3.28-30)

Aufidius' jealousy is aroused when Coriolanus becomes haughty by the honors bestowed on him by the Volscians. When Volunmia's pleas prevail and the attack against Rome is called off, Coriolanus has in effect given Aufidius sufficient reason for anger. Coriolanus *sees* his own downfall, although he feels helpless to control or modify the events:

O my mother, mother! O!
You have won a happy victory to Rome;
But, for your son, believe it, 0, believe it,
Most dangerously you have with him prevailed,
If not most mortal to him. But let it come. Aufidius. . . .
(5.3.185-90)

He has betrayed the Volscians, and it is with this that Aufidius charges him, and justifies killing him.

The relationship with Aufidius is incomplete until he has made an attack on Coriolanus' body. On a deeper level, Coriolanus' death at the hands of Aufidius is also a love-union with Aufidius, which has been achieved by giving up his masculinity. By the equation of death and castration, Coriolanus has obtained the longed-for union with his father. At the moment of this attack, Coriolanus is denied his *agnomen* and condescendingly called "boy" instead. Almost the last breath Coriolanus takes is ex pended in his anger at this name of "boy." He boasts of his exploits at Corioli:

'tis there
That, like an eagle in a dovecote, I
Fluttered your V olscians in Corioli
Alone I did it. "Boy!"
(5.6.114-17)

In his anger, Coriolanus recalls his role at Corioli, an episode which symbolized a mutilating attack on the mother's body. This memory occurs precisely at the moment when he is to succumb to a mutilating attack by the strong father to whom he had offered himself as a love object. His identification with his mother is now complete, for

he is about to be attacked and loved by his father in her stead, just as he had once desired to love her.

In summary: We may regard the earlier portions of *Coriolanus* as an articulation of the conflict found in those family constellations in which the father abdicates his function as a masculine figure for the son to identify with and to form an ego ideal. Menenius fulfilled this role symbolically in the initial situation. There is a splitting of the unconscious elements, with the defeat and castration of the father pushed into the past as an historical death, while certain aspects of the father are displaced on to Menenius in the present. In the place of a strong father, there is the ineffectual Menenius, whom Coriolanus may disregard as a feared rival for his mother.

However, Coriolanus' incestuous strivings are constantly stimulated and intensified by Volumnia in her erotization of the relationship. Coriolanus fears being engulfed by Volumnia in her ambitious designs to use him for her own goals. He is to function as her penile projection, by winning victories which will make her proud and give her opportunity to extol her blood. She would prefer military exploits to any show of tenderness:

If my son were my husband, I should freelier rejoice in that absence wherein he won honor than in the embracements of his bed where he would show most love. (1.3.2-4)

The ego boundaries between mother and son are vague and indistinct. Coriolanus feels undifferentiated from his mother who is inimical to his development as an individual distinct from her. Coriolanus' view of his male role is thus markedly disturbed.

The sexualized attachment to Volumnia is uncomfortable because of the awareness of his hostility toward her, and of his aggressive impulses directed toward her body. Coriolanus has to deal not only with his own aggression and hatred, but also with the tendency to project this aggression on to its object in the form of anticipated retaliation for these angry and hostile feelings. Coriolanus is operating on the phallic dichotomy of "having a penis" vs. "being castrated." These were precisely the themes involved in the wedding night reference in Act I, *viz.,* the belief that in intercourse violence is done to the woman's body, and the expectation of castrating punishment for this violence. The symbolic representation of this engulfment and destruction takes place in the battle when Coriolanus is closed off within the enemy gates and supposed dead.

Along with the fears of being castrated by the phallic mother, Coriolanus has feminine, passive wishes to submit to a strong father, even if the price is castration as a precondition for the father's love. The later portions of the play articulate this intense wish for a virile, loving father. Coriolanus joins with Aufidius to war against the mother's body, pouring war into her bowels, and treading upon her womb. Aggression towards Volumnia, which had in the earlier sections of the play been symbolically channeled on to the mob as representative of the mother, is now expressed by the massive rejection of Rome, birthplace, and mother. Aufidius and Coriolanus unite in love for one another and in mutual hatred for Rome and mother. Yet this solution is not completely successful

until Aufidius is provoked to attack Coriolanus' own body, and Coriolanus achieves a love-death at the hands of the father for whom he had so ardently yearned.

Critical Essay #7

Very few critical evaluations of *Coriolanus* have been able to set aside the significance of its complex, paradoxical protagonist. Michael Goldman, in assessing Shakespeare's method of characterization in the play, has summarized the problematic nature of Coriolanus: he possesses a conflicting blend of heroic and ironic qualities that serve the warrior well on the battlefield, but have disastrous effects within society. Gail Kern Paster shares the consensus view that Coriolanus is presented through contrasts with other characters in the play- primarily Volumnia and Aufidius- though she notes that these individuals also have many of the aristocratic qualities he possesses in the extreme.

Elmer Edgar Stoll has judged Coriolanus differently than most Shakespearean tragic heroes. He explained that typically the Shakespearean protagonist is forced by fate, circumstances, or a villain into acts that conflict with his own beliefs and thus lead to catastrophe. According to Stoll, these forces do not operate in *Coriolanus,* since in this work the hero brings disaster upon himself. Derek Traversi has also cited conflicts within Coriolanus as the source of his tragedy. The critic has suggested that these internal struggles are meant to reflect the larger problems destroying the entire "social organism" of Rome. Emphasizing the opposing images of "vitality" and "insentience" in the tragedy's poetry, Traversi maintained that these image patterns shape the readers' perceptions of both the hero and his society. In the critic's view, Coriolanus's downfall, and by extension Rome's, derives from an irreconcilable opposition that parallels this tension in the play's language: the "continual clash" between the hero's sensibilities and his "iron rigidity."

Sailendra Kumar Sen has surveyed the variety of critical interpretations of Coriolanus's character, stating that the lack of agreement among commentators reflects one central question: whether, like Shakespearean tragic heroes, the protagonist of this play exhibits an inner conflict. Sen contended that Coriolanus indeed displays such inner turmoil, and he located specific moments in the tragedy where it is apparent. He noted, however, that the proud patrician is a man who quickly resolves such problems and never reconsiders his decisions, and thus his uncertainty repeatedly appears and disappears.

Source: "Characterizing Coriolanus," in *Shakespeare Survey,* Vol. 34, 1981, pp. 73-84.

[In the essay that follows, Goldman analyzes the character of Coriolanus and, similarly, the nature of Shakespeare's method if characterization an the play. Goldman observes that through out Coriolanus various characters discuss and Interpret the protagonist's character; Aufidius, for example, lists Coriolanus's flam if pride and defective judgment. The critic notes that the assessments made by Aufidius and other figures an the play share a common theme an overall sense if bewilderment concerning Coriolanus's problematic character. Many characters remark on the relative ease with which Coriolanus is manipulated, and while Goldman observes this fact he also highlights the hero's isolation his nobility, and his attempt to define his arm character- what Goldman

calls his "self authorship." With this last element of Coriolanus's character, the critic argues, Shakespeare presents a highly complex and paradoxical figure who exemplifies the motif expressed by Aufidius an the play that "character lies in the Interpretation if time. "]

I

The trouble with characterization is that we think we know what character is, or rather we think we know where it is and what kind of discourse best describes it. We think, or at least we generally speak as if we think, that it is to be found inside people, and we answer questions about character with summaries of inner qualities. This is a reasonable procedure and, it should be stressed, not a recent one. Nevertheless, it is true that in the past 15O years or so the description has tended more and more to stress the problematical and the psychological; character is seen as elusive, a subject for puzzle and argument, depending on the difficult and never entirely satisfactory attempt to chart the way someone's mind works. And debate about dramatic character is likely to turn on whether it is reasonable to expect this kind of novelistic presentation of character from plays, especially plays written before the nineteenth century.

It is at this point that the discussion of character in drama becomes dangerously tangled, through the operation of hidden assumptions. For the implication in the typical debate I have described is that the psychological discourse of novels and novelizing psychology is the most accurate form for describing character in what we helplessly refer to as real life. But does our experience of other people correspond more to the helpful summaries of a novel or to the un-narratized encounters of a play?

I do not mean to argue for any presumed metaphysical superiority of drama to the novel; what I wish to bring out 15 the potential for error in assuming that the original, as it were, of character is discursive and that drama must thus constitute a translation of that original into more foreign terms. It should be noted that my distinction applies not only to nineteenth-century novels and modem psychology, but to all dIscursive accounts of character, including Aristotle, Burton, or whom you will. By comparison with any mode of discursive analysis, it can at least be argued that our experience as members of a theatre audience comes closer to the way in which we apprehend character in our daily encounters. Surely our efforts to characterize our friends and enemies- even the effort to characterize them *as* friends and enemies- follows, and always to a degree haltingly, after our experience of them, experience which, in the first instance, we approach through what Francis Fergusson calls the histrionic sensibility, the art, as it were, of finding the mind's construction in the face.

The notion of characterization as description may well have had a significant influence on the study of character in drama. I think it explains why, beginning with Aristotle, critics frequently maintain that character is somehow of secondary importance in drama, the implication clearly being that it is more important elsewhere, presumably in real life. With the conception of character, as with so much else, the hidden assumptions behind our normal critical vocabulary tend to make drama parasitic on narrative, and thus to distort our understanding of the effects and methods of the dramatist from the start.

I bring up these matters because they bear very interestingly on the play I have chosen to discuss. *Coriolanus* submits the whole question of character to a remarkable analysis. To begin with a point to which I would like to devote some extended attention, it exhibits a concern unique in the Shakespearian canon with dis cursive characterization of the kind we recognize as distinctly modem and familiar- the nice and argumentative discrimination of psychological qualities. It contains many passages in which Coriolanus is discussed in this manner by other characters, and the effect of these characterizations is to strike the audience as increasingly inadequate to its own unfolding dramatic experience of the man.

In no other Shakespearian play do people analyse another character in the fashion they repeatedly employ in *Coriolanus.* I have in mind not disagreement or uncertainty over motivation, as in *Hamlet,* but perplexity over what we would call a character's psychological makeup. In Shakespeare we often feel the presence of such complexity, but his characters almost never comment on it. The type of question Othello raises about Iago at the end of his play- what makes him do such things?- is almost never explicitly addressed, and of course in *Othello* no answer is even hazarded, except the suggestion, immediately rejected, that Iago is a devil ago's own motive-hunting is just that, statements of particular reasons for enmity, rather than analysis of his mental constitution.

Hanmlet is the play that seems most concerned with the subject, but even there one finds no clear-cut example. When Hamlet asserts that he has that within which passes show, he is referring to an inarticulable depth of feeling rather than some hidden aspect of his character. There is much concern with ambiguous givings out in the play, and it may well point to inner ambiguity, but no character explores the question explicitly. When Claudius says, 'There's something in his soul / O'er which his melancholy sits on brood' (3.1.164-165), his language may suggest the elusiveness to description of a complex personality, but the explicit content is either that something is bothering Hamlet or that he is up to something which, like love or ambition, is capable of simple definition and explicable as the product of an external situation, for example his father's death and his mother's hasty marriage. Perhaps more could be made out of 'I have something in me dangerous' (5.1.256), or 'Pluck out the heart of my mystery' (3.2.356), but again these are marters, at most, of resonance and implication, not explicit statement. And the examples I have just cited are the closest we ever come in Shakespeare to the discussion of character as a complex and problematic psychological essence, with the exception of *Coriolanus.*

There the discussion begins with the opening scene. I.ike many of Shakespeare's tragedies, *Coriolanus* opens with the eruption of a dangerous force. The mob that rushes on stage carrying staves and clubs is meant to be felt as a threat; these 'mutinous' *citizens* are on the verge of extreme violence. Yet suddenly, even before Menenius appears, the rebellion loses momentum. Within moments of their first appearance, the rebels pause to discuss Coriolanus's character.

This is the issue the second citizen has on his mind at line 12, 'One word, good *citizens.'* He is answered in a well-known speech by a comrade who first says of Marcius that he is proud and, after an interruption, continues:

Though soft-conscienc'd men can be content to say it was for his country, he did it to please his mother and to be partly proud. . .

The phrase has an air of simplicity and of caricature as well, caricature both of the subject and the speaker, but it is also very much a qualification of the speaker's original confident analysis. And the uneasiness of the formulation, 'to be partly proud', which has provoked emendation and extensive commentary, suggests a difficulty in characterizing Coriolanus, even by an angry enemy who is none too scrupulous about his speech.

This kind of difficulty recurs at many moments in the play. Again, I am not talking about simple disagreement over Marcius's character, but about passages which have this habit of qualification, of instability, of attempts to specify a complex essence. The most striking example occurs in Aufidius's soliloquy at the end of act 4:

First he was
A noble servant to them, but he could not
Carry his honors even. Whether 'twas pride,
Which out of daily fortune ever taints
The happy man; whether defect of judgement,
To fail in the disposing of those chances
Which he was lord of; or whether nature,
Not to be other than one thing, not moving
From th' casque to th' cushion, but commanding peace
Even with the same austerity and garb
As he controll'd the war; but one of these
As he hath spices of them all- not all,
For I dare so far free him-made him fear'd,
So hated, and so banish'd. But he has a
merit
To choke it in the utt'rance.

Aufidius first poses three reasons for Coriolanus's failure to 'carry his honors even'. This latter formula, with its obscure suggestion of a difficult balancing act, initiates a meditation that keeps sliding away from fixity and clarity of analysis. Aufidius presents his three explanations as if they were mutually exclusive, but they are not. 'Pride' is the old accusation of the Tribunes, 'defect of judgement' means perhaps political miscalculation or a deeper-seated inability to calculate shrewdly, and 'nature', of course, can include the first two. But Aufidius quickly limits the application of nature to a specific failing:

or whether nature,
Not to be other than one thing, not moving
From th' casque to th' cushion, but com

manding peace
Even with the same austerity and garb
As he controll'd the war . . .

Then, as if he felt that none of his reasons was quite sufficient, Aufidius goes on to complete his thought in a tangle of qualifications:

but one of these
As he hath *spices* of them all- not all,
For I dare so far free him- made him fear'd,
So hated, and so banish'd.

It is the passage's sole point of certainty that most gives it a feeling of bewilderment. Why is Aufidius so sure that but one of these causes is responsible, 'not all, / For I dare so far free him'? There can be no logical reason; Aufidius simply feels that it would be too much to accuse Coriolanus of all three failings. Why? A sense of his character, of course, which underlies the entire speech and which Aufidius has been unable to articulate. And a further sense of it seems to rise at this very point, to comment on the difficulties Aufidius is finding:

But he has a merit
To choke it in the utt'rance.

This is another line that gives editors problems. The primary meaning, I think, is that Coriolanus's merit breaks in and chokes back the account of his faults, but the 'it' is ambiguous; there is a clouding suggestion that his merits choke themselves. And of course Aufidius's own emotions seem to be registered in the verse. Coriolanus and his merits are certainly a bone in his throat. The main effect is that the attempt to characterize becomes tangled and chokes on itself.

What has been evoked here, too, is the complexity and elusiveness of the very notion of character itself. The speech delicately catches the way innate predisposition, training, feeling, and choice come together and respond to external circumstance, the shifting changes of politics, and the feelings and actions of the public world- and also how, being a public as well as a private quality, one's character is modified, in a sense created, by the responses of other people, as Marcius's is by Aufidius. Coriolanus's character has something to do with the way other people choke on it. It exists somewhere between Coriolanus and his audience.

The paradoxical impact of Coriolanus on his society is felt strikingly in Aufidius's final speech:

My rage is gone,
And I am struck with sorrow. Take him up.
Though in this city he
Hath widowed and unchilded many a one, Which to this hour bewail the injury,
Yet he shall have a noble memory.
(5.6.147-8, 151-4)

Yet is the important word. Though Marcius has done hateful things, nevertheless he will be loved. We have with Aufidius the sensation we have with so many of Shakespeare's tragic characters- but never with Coriolanus- that it is difficult to tell where play- acting leaves off and authentic feeling begins. Is Aufidius shifting gears for political reasons here? Or is he suddenly abashed? Is he asserting that Coriolanus manages, perplexingly, to be nobly remembered, or that he will see to it that Coriolanus is so remembered, in spite of his desert? All these notes mingle in the very believable compound of envy and awe that characterizes Aufidius whenever he contemplates his great rival.

This is not the only point in the play where the notion of noble memory is associated with perplexity about characterizing Coriolanus. Many less elaborate passages have helped develop the idea. When the servingmen at Antium try to explain the mysterious quality they claim to have detected in the disguised Marcius, their language goes comically to pieces:

Second Servingman Nay, I knew by his face that there was something in him; he had, *sir,* a kind of face, methought- I cannot tell how to term *it.*
First Servingman He had so, looking as *it* wereWould I were hang'd, but I thought there was more in him than I could think.
(4.5.154-7)

Of course this is a joke, whose point is that the servingmen had noticed nothing, but this only refines the question of how a noble character is constitUted. The language of the servingmen calls attention to the 'something' in Coriolanus over which his friends and enemies quarrel. Even the play's repeated use of 'thing' to describe Coriolanus suggests not only his inhumanity, as is commonly argued, but the resistance of his nature to characterization.

In the last act, Aufidius, on the verge of denouncing Coriolanus to the lords of Antium, offers to his fellow conspirators- apparently in all frankness- a further interpretation of his character, which only adds to our sense of elusiveness:

I rais'd him, and I pawn'd
Mine honour for his truth; who being so
heighten'd,
He watered his new plants with dews of
flattery,
Seducing so my friends; and to *this* end
He bow'd his nature, never known before But to be rough, unswayable, and free.
(5.6.21-6)

Aufidius describes Coriolanus as having changed and become politically manipulative. He has no reason to deceive his listeners at this point, but his account does not square with the Coriolanus we have seen, though we understand how Aufidius may have arrived at it.

There is, moreover, a tendency in the play to keep before us the whole issue of how we characterize people- whether it be by internal attributes or external ones, by simple epithets or puzzled formulas. The three scenes of act 2, for example, have a very distinct parallel structure. This is the act in which Coriolanus, newly named, returns to Rome; and each scene begins with a prelude in which his character is debated by the people who await him. In act 2, scene 1, conversation about Marcius between Menenius and the tribunes becomes a war of rather Overburyan character descriptions, Menenius topping the tribunes by offering tWo 'characters', as he calls them, first of himself and then of his opponents. In the second scene of the act, the officers argue as to whether or not Coriolanus is proud and disdainful. Finally, the third scene begins with the citizens arguing over whether Coriolanus should have their voices; this prelude ends with words which sum up the aim of so much of the play's dialogue, 'Mark his behavior'. Heightening the parallelism, each scene ends with a conversation between Brutus and Sicinius in which they decide how to make political capital out of Coriolanus's impact on the people.

II

What does this interesting emphasis on character mean? Surely it suggests that the character of Coriolanus is meant to be seen as problematic, and beyond this it raises the possibility that the idea of character itself may be under scrutiny- that the play may force us to confront the question of what character is and how it is perceived. Here we must pause to examine further the peculiar relation of character and drama. Let me say a few words about how we perceive character in performance. First of all, the fictitious person we watch on stage, Hamlet, or Hal, or Othello, is not an object, but a process. He is something we watch an actor making, not the result of making but the making itself. Hamlet, in performance, is not a tenth-century or sixteenth-century prince, not even a twentieth-century one; he is in no way physically separable from the actor who plays him. Yet we perceive him as a self, a character, rather than a series of physical actions. Where is that self? It is there, on the stage; it, too, is inseparable from the actor we are watching. Yet it is not the actor's everyday self, his biographical personality. It is something he is accomplishing by acting. A character, in a play, is something an actor does.

We are all too likely to think of an actor's characterization as an object, a presented mask, something produced and built up by the actor's preparation, as makeup or a dossier on the character might be. Such a product might well be described by a discursive summary. But a dramatic character is an action that goes on throughout the play.

I have shifted to another meaning of the word character- that of imagined person in a drama. But the two conceptions are linked. What is the character of a dramatic character? dearly it, too, must spring from what the actor does. And what an actor does, first of all and ceaselessly, is perform. Performance is inseparable from dramatic character. It is true that sometimes in our discussion of a play we separate the performance from the character- as for example when we object that the actor has spoken more than is set down for him. But in that case we are simply imagining a better

performance, for all the words he should speak- all the words Shakespeare has written- are meant as performed words. Thus, our view of dramatic character will gain by a consideration of the performance qualities built into the role, the necessary creative action of the actor called for by the script in order to project the part.

In the case of Coriolanus, certain problems of character have always been recognized, and I think they are illuminated by attention to some of the problems of performance. That is why the play, in proper performance, gives us an impression of its hero rather different from that conveyed by a bare recital of his deeds or a bare account of his language and behaviour. We should start with the observation, particularly striking because of the great amount of discussion the character of Coriolanus receives in the play, that of all the mature tragedies this is the one whose hero seems simplest in inner constitution, a relatively narrow or immature self. Indeed, by virtue of the apparent ease with which he can be manipulated, he runs the risk of being interpreted as comic. Furthermore, many critics feel that the play's rhetoric is chill, and that this corresponds to something uninviting about both the play's ambience and its hero- a lack of warmth or generosity.

Now, though I do not think these comments give a complete picture of the response a fully imagined performance of *Coriolanus* provides, there is a degree of truth in them, and they help define a major acting problem of the role. This might be described as finding what Coriolanus means when he refers to his own 'truth' as something he is afraid of ceasing to 'honour'. Is there more to this truth than doing what his mother wants, or fighting fearlessly, or hating compliments? That is, does the role suggest a freedom and depth of personality to which the audience can sympathetically respond? To keep Coriolanus from being simply comic means finding the passion hidden in the chill rhetoric, the richness of spirit beneath the many signs of poverty.

To indicate one or two ways in which the play addresses this problem, I would like to draw attention to some qualities of performance that are required by the language of the role. Much of Coriolanus's language requires of the actor a kind of grip, a domination over complexity which is exactly the opposite of comic predictability. This grip depends on an emotional and intellectual penetration by means of which the actor maintains focus on a goal that is delayed and hidden by the movement of his speech. The histrionic action is rather like that of Coriolanus the warrior penetrating to the centre of *Corioles,* thrusting ahead in battle, except that it cannot be rendered as a blind pushing forward; it is not like Macbeth's 'Before my body I throw my warlike shield.' It constitutes an important part of the action which is the character of Coriolanus.

The quality of performance I am describing is largely determined by syntax. A good example may be found in act 3:

I say again,
In soothing them we nourish 'gainst our
Senate The cockle of rebellion, insolence, sedition, Which we ourselves have ploughed for,
sow'd, and scatter'd

By mingling them with us, the honor'd
number, Who lack not virtue, no, nor power, but that Which they have given to beggars.
(3.1.68-74)

If this sentence were diagrammed, one would see that it is the final pair of subordinate clauses- syntactically very subordinate indeed- which define its energy and direction. Coriolanus is primarily agitated by the idea that the patricians have given their power and virtue to beggars, and it is this which governs the notion of soothing them and is developed as sowing the seeds of rebellion. The actor must be gripped by this idea and render its presence in the speech articulate, even as he must suspend stating it till the very end. Thus the felt movement of the speech is not simply accumulative this thing, that thing, and another- but a pursuit toward a syntactically buried point.

I think I can make this clearer by comparing another passage from act 3 with a speech from *Othello.* This is Coriolanus's climactic outburst that goes from 'You common cry of curs' to 'I banish you' (3.3.122-5). It is a swift and frightening forecast of revenge, but how different in its movement from Othello's:

Like to the Pontic sea,
Whose icy current and compulsive course
Ne'er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on To the Propontic and the Hellespont;
Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent
pace,
Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love, Till that a capable and wide revenge
Swallow them up.
(3.3.457-64)

The Othello actor must start out his passage with a desire for revenge large enough to be measured against the scope and flow of the Pontic sea. But the movement of sweep and obstruction is grandly simple. The Coriolanus actor, by contrast, must struggle forward toward the instigating idea, *Yau corrupt my air,* which informs the three preceding lines of imagery and comparison, and which prepares the springboard for 'I banish you':

You common cry of curs, whose breath I
hate
as reek 0' th' rotten fens, whose loves I
prize as the dead carcasses of unburied men That do corrupt my air- I banish you.
The intricacy here can be expressed yet another way. The opening lines of the passage appear to set up a neat symmetry: 'whose breath I hate / As reek 0' th' rotten fens, whose loves I *prize* / as the dead carcasses of unburied men', but the following phrase, 'That do corrupt my air', unbalances this symmetry and, thus, to keep the passage alive there has to be an emotional thrust through the *symmetries,* which allows the crucial half-line to refer back to the earlier, 'You common cry of curs'. This problem occurs repeatedly in the role. A lot of the apparent coldness O Coriolanus's rhetoric resides in the balance and opposition he is constantly striking, but very often these balances get disturbed as the speech moves on, demanding a grip that keeps the balances clear and

yet enlivens them by something not at all cool or settled.

A variation on this structure occurs when an apparently concluding phrase kicks off new images, requiring a supplementary charge of energy at a position normally felt to be subordinate or merely, as it were, passive:

What would you have, you curs,
That like nor peace nor war? The one
affrights you,
The other makes you proud.
(1.1.166-8)

Here, the subordinate 'that like nor peace nor war' cannot be thrown away. The actor must pursue it with an articulation which makes coherent the balanced opposition of 'The one. . . the other'. And if we were to extend the analysis to his whole great concerto-like first appearance, in which Marcius enters at full tilt with what is in effect a long speech over and against the interjections of the First Citizen and Menenius, we would see how the larger structure echoes the tendency of the smaller and in so doing prevents our first impression of the hero from being comic. After all, what is it that keeps Marcius, with his repeated 'Hang 'em's and 'What's the matter's, from playing as a young Colonel Blimp? It is the presence of a source of emotion which governs the entire speech, pursued by Marcius through all kinds of syntactical complications and shiftingly balanced reflections on the Roman populace, and which does not surface till the very end of the sequence, when we learn that the people have been given five tribunes, which Marcius correctly sees as a source of future insurrection.

So, repeatedly, we have this construction, in which the delayed phrase may be modifier or object or even a piece of information. But the effect is regularly that what is delayed is a central source of energy and we feel it radiating through earlier phrases. Or, to put it more accurately, if even more impressionistically, we feel its radiance being pursued by the speaker down branching corridors which blaze and echo with its force. The pursuit helps establish for us a great quality of the hero- the quality of attacker. In the speeches I have described, the sense of attack comes from the pursuit of the delayed idea, the buried trigger. If it were not buried, the pursuit would not feel like attack, or at least not that magnificence of attack we associate with Coriolanus.

In the great final outburst before he is murdered, the trigger is the word 'Boy':

Cut me to pieces, Volsces; men and lads,
Stain all your edges on me. 'Boy'! False
hound!
If you have writ your annals true, 'tis there
That, like an eagle in a dove-cote, I
Flutter'd your Volscians in Corioli.
Alone I did it. 'Boy'!
(5.6.112-17)

The method I have been attempting to describe explains why that speech does not play simply as a confirmation of the Tribunes' and Aufidius's theory that Coriolanus is a manipulable figure: call him certain names and you've got him. Nor does it allow us to accept the explanation the play itself seems at times to put forward-that Coriolanus is, in fact, a boy of tears. The stimulus does not set off a mere raving reaction, but a pursuit, a kind of branching plunge, in which the whole being of the performer attacks the insult. Every phrase, 'Men and lads', 'Cut me to pieces', 'Alone I did it', 'Like an eagle', responds, separately, to 'Boy!' Each bears *toward* the word, presses in on it, ranges pieces of a multiple attack that bursts into the clear only as the offending word is finally snapped in place.

Awareness of this technique will help us with at least one crucial passage which has often been misinterpreted:

Though I go alone,
Like to a lonely dragon, that his fen
Makes fear'd and talk'd of more than seen. . .
(4.1.29-31)

Most readings focus on the dragon but the fen is the point. What makes Coriolanus most like a dragon is his isolation; indeed it is not even simply the fen that is at the centre of the speech, but the power of fen-dwelling to make someone feared and talked of and hence lonely. It is not, then, a definition of his inhumanity Coriolanus gives us here, but of his felt distance from others. The dragonish qualities seem most to derive from being feared and talked of. They are, at least in part, an aspect of how society characterizes Coriolanus.

'Alone' is of course an important word in the play. But it varies greatly in meaning as Coriolanus pronounces it, and these variations are histrionic- that is, they represent differences in the way the actor projects a character through his performance of the word. In the passage just cited, 'alone' suggests isolation, but it also is coloured here, as elsewhere, by loneliness. By contrast, when Coriolanus turns on his accusers in the last act, crying, 'Alone I did it', the word means 'unaided, singling oneself out'. This is mingled with an implied insult: 'The Volsces can be beaten by one man', and a provocation: 'I take full responsibility.' It is a challenging statement of personal strength.

Now, there is another moment when the word is used in a very different sense, which is of the greatest importance for the performance of the role. And it is very different both in syntax and mood from any of the examples we have been considering. This occurs when Marcius addresses Cominius's troops after the successful assault on Corioles and before the battle with Aufidius. He asks for volunteers to follow him, and *'They all shout and wave their swords, take him up in their arms, and cast up their caps.'* At which point, he cries:

0, me alone! Make you a sword of me?
(1.6.76)

This wonderful and startling line is not that of the isolated attacker, or the automaton, or the scorner of the crowd. It has a rush and a surprised pleasure we hear nowhere else from Coriolanus. It is his happiest moment in the play.

Significantly, it is presented by Shakespeare as one of a series of stage images which intricately comment upon each other. It reverses the group of images we have had a few minutes earlier, first of Coriolanus scorning the soldiers as they flee, then deserted by them, then scorning them again as they pause to loot; and it will be partially reversed, restated dissonantly, one might say, a few minutes later when he angrily denounces the same crowd as it cheers him again. Finally, it will be most emphatically reversed in the assassination scene, the only other moment in the play when Marcius allows a group of men to touch him. But now in act 1 he is elated, he accepts the praise and the physical contact of the crowd, and the word 'alone' here means singled out by others uniquely valued by people with whom he feels a bond. He is the sword of a courageous community- and the attacking hardness of the image of the sword is modified by the moment of joyous physical contact and celebration. This is the aloneness Coriolanus has felt himself bred up for, to be truly a limb of his country, a healthy limb of an heroic society; and for an instant his dream appears to come true.

III

We can appreciate some of the play's distance from Plutarch if we compare the variable implications Shakespeare gives to 'alone' with the idea of 'solitariness', which Plutarch, in North's translation, borrows from Plato to describe Coriolanus. In Plutarch, solitariness is simply a vice, an inability to deal with others, the opposite of 'affability'. Shakespeare's use of 'alone', as we have seen, suggests not only a different and far more interesting character, but a far more complex notion of how character is to be understood. In the concluding portion of this paper, I would like to focus on how the idea of aloneness in the play illuminates two closely related themes. The first is Coriolanus's own conception of character- that is, not only what kind of person he wishes to be, but also how he understands character to be created and possessed. The second is the critique of this conception of character that emerges in the course of the drama. Taken together, I think they help us understand more clearly the complex appeal of *Coriolanus* as a theatrical creation and perhaps something of Shakespeare's intention in writing the play.

Most of Shakespeare's tragic heroes entertain peculiar ideas about the relation of the self and its acts, ideas which poignantly reflect our own troubled sentiments on this bewildering subject. Coriolanus's version of this peculiarity is his notion that a man may be 'author of himself'. It is a phrase that evokes many of the same associations as his use of 'alone', and it stimulates us especially because, while it plainly reflects his gravest folly, at the same time it seems fairly to express the very authority that makes Coriolanus so much more interesting than a fool.

Perhaps no passage in the play has produced such troubled critical discussion of character as the scene in which he announces his decision to go over to the V olsces. His soliloquy seems in the most literal sense an attempt at self-authorship, at rewriting

his play in the face of facts well known to the audience. Critics have frequently noted that it is an odd speech for what it fails to say, but it is equally odd for what it says:

Friends now fast sworn,
. . . shall within this hour,
On a dissension of a doit, break out
To bitterest enmity; so fellest foes,
Whose passions and whose plots have broke
their sleep
To take the one the other, by some chance,
Some trick not worth an egg, shall grow dear
friends
And interjoin their issues. So with me:
My birthplace hate I, and my love's upon
This enemy town.
(4.4.12,16-24)

For Coriolanus to describe his banishment, the hatred of the Tribunes, and the accusation of treachery as 'a dissension of a doit' or 'some trick not worth an egg' is nearly incredible and suggests how far he has distanced himself from his feelings. The same may be felt in the overly neat conclusion, 'So with me', and the flat and unconvincing assertiveness of:

My birthplace hate I, and my love's upon This enemy town.

This distance from feeling is one of the perils of self authorship. And in *Coriolanus,* as in *Macbeth,* the relation between feeling, action, and full humanity becomes very important. Certainly the moment of silence with Volumnia in act 5 is reminiscent of Macduff's pause. It comes about because in act 4 Coriolanus has failed to feel his banishment as a man. He has attempted to violate the natural relation between feeling and action, and like other Shakespearian heroes he must pay for it. If it is true that the defining problem for the actor in this play is to suggest an inner action deeper than the reflexive manipulable response seen by his enemies, it is interesting that Coriolanus's crisis comes when he tries to manipulate himself. To assert that one can do anything one wants is as humanly insufficient as to assert that one is completely predictable. The creature who will acknowledge no obedience to instinct is as subhuman as the gosling.

But even more than in one's relation to one's feelings, the fallacy of self-authorship may be felt in one's relation to the outside world. I.ike many of Shakespeare's heroes, Coriolanus must be tutored in the connections between theatricality and life, between the private individual and the social theatre in which he plays his part and finds his audience. The lesson he learns, however, is unique to his play. If Hamlet must discover that a connection exists between play-acting and the heart of one's mystery, Coriolanus is forced to explore the relation between one's character and one's audience. We can feel this even at the very beginning of the play.

Most, if not all, Shakespearian heroes initially hold back from the opportunities for action that are first presented to them, and this is usually linked to a rejection of theatre, though it is not always so plain as Hamlet's 'I have that within which passes show', or so fearful as Macbeth's 'Why do you dress me in borrowed robes?' At first glance, Coriolanus appears not to conform to this pattern, plunging with his opening words into a denunciation of the crowd. But his opening line contains a refusal which precedes this eager engagement:

Menenius.
. . . Hail, noble Marcius!
Marcius.
Thanks. What's the matter, you dissentious
rogues...
(1.1.161-2)

What is Coriolanus holding back from? I would describe it as the authority, the authorship, of an audience. Menenius offers him a name, praise, a characterization: 'Noble'. It is a term Coriolanus values- in the last act, nobleness will be the quality he prays that the gods give his son. And the word 'noble' occurs more frequently in *Coriolanus* than in any other Shakespeare play. But while he may readily pray to the gods for nobility, he will not consent to be called noble, even by Menenius.

In the same way, Coriolanus seems regularly to reject our interest in him. And this contributes to our perception of his character as cold or unsympathetic. The problems of his act 4 transition to revenge, for example- the 'break' in characterization, the lack of transition, the flagrant inappropriateness of his remarks constitute a defiance O the theatre audience comparable to his regular defiance of his onstage audience. Nevertheless he retains his power over both audiences and it is clear that he needsthem. Just as we feel an invitation to the audience in the actor's mastery of those syntactically difficult passages, or in '0, me alone!', or the moment of silence, or the moment of assassination, or the physical release of battle- just as there are solicitations of sympathy here, enactments of aloneness which carry us along with the actor- so in his relation with the on-stage audience we see that the apparent defiance is far from complete. How else explain, for example, Coriolanus's repeated appeals to Aufidius to note how honourably he is behaving? As at Corioles, Coriolanus needs an audience to give him the name he has won. He cannot author himself alone.

This dependence of chamcter on audience is echoed in the story of the benefactor whose name Coriolanus forgets. The point is similar to the one Shakespeare makes in *Romeo and Juliet* about the way in which names, fate, and society are interwoven. The romantic attitude is that names do not matter; what one is counts. But our name reflects a real connection between our past, present, and future, between our selves, our acts, and our social being. Romeo is a Montague, and his name soon becomes that of the man who has murdered Tybalt. It matters quite as much as whether the name of the bird one hears is lark or nightingale. In the benefactor scene, Marcius has just become Coriolanus, a name which will permanently fix his relationship with Aufidius and lead to

his death, and his poor friend has become a non-person because Coriolanus cannot remember his name.

Now, the relation between one's character and the behaviour of audiences is of troublesome resonance to any great artist, and I imagine Shakespeare was aware of this. At any rate, he seems as he reaches the end of the great cycle of tragedies to become specially interested in the ironies of an artistic career. In *Antony and Cleopatra,* he tells the story of a man whose gifts have equipped him for the greatest success in the pmctical world and who instead casts his lot with a greatness that depends wholly on the imagination, on the splendours of gesture, passion, self-dramatization- an achievement as materially insubstantial as black vesper's pageants, and which the practical world will always associate with the arts of the gypsy and the whore. In *Coriolanus* he tells the story of another man whose ruling passion suggests the situation of the artist, a man who wishes to be the author of himself, an ambition, one would think, not only artist-like, but particularly theatrical- who but an actor can change his being every day? Certainly it is an ambition easily associated with the appeal of high creativity. Who more than a great poet can make a claim to spiritual independence? Yet the theatre is, of course, the most social of the arts. Indeed, it presents in its most unpalatable and least disguised form the fact that no artist is the author of himself, but a dependent part of an inconstant multitude, which is always in some sense interpreting him. Among playwright, actors, and audience, who is the belly, who the members?

There is, it should be noted, another side to the story of the poor benefactor with the forgotten name. For it also projects a version of Coriolanus's fantasy of unconditioned power which is similar to the artist's fantasy of self-authorship. Perhaps one thinks that by being best warrior (or poet) one will gain absolute power over names- that one can command people by giving names or destroy them by forgetting them, that one can be free of the common cry, can stand outside of society, banish the world at will, that moving others one can be oneself as stone. This is an illusion, as any poet discovers, and as Marcius discovers when he tries to forget his own name and that of friend, mother, wife, and child.

You will by now have grown tired of my saying, with Aufidius, 'And yet'. And yet I must say it again. For to end on the self-deluding aspect of Coriolanus's desire to stand alone would be to distort the play. The project of self-authorship, however mistaken, is bound up with the power and magnetism- indeed with the sympathetic appeal- of Coriolanus as a dramatic character. I think the issue here has to do with the nature of tragedy. In a sense all tragic heroes are authors of themselves. I am certain that the writer of a tragedy feels more intensely than in any other form the struggle between what he wants to make happen and what his chief character wants to do. It is true of course that any tragedy exhibits a severe sense of scriptedness, but the play would be flat and tame if we did not feel that its hero had an equally exigent sense of the script *he* wants to write, of his own authorial power. Faced with some terrible contingency, the tragic hero makes it his own necessity. I.ike a great actor, he makes the part he is given his own. And I think that when we argue over whether Coriolanus the character is cold and uninviting, when we ask whether his nature is fully expressed by the facts of his upbringing and the

reflexes of his temper, we are asking whether he has the authority, the inspiriting freedom, of a tragic figure.

That is why the play must end, and why I wish to conclude, with Aufidius's 'Yet he will have a noble memory: As with both Romeo and Juliet, and as with the self-authorizing ambitions of great poets, there is in Coriolanus something cherishable and indeed social about the lonely impulse which drives him. We return a last time to what I have called Coriolanus's truth. What did Shakespeare see in Plutarch's life of Coriolanus? He found there a great warrior firmly characterized as intemperately angry and hence given over to solitariness, and he accepted almost everything about him except the characterization, which is to say he accepted everything except what mattered most to his play. Shakespeare seems to have looked at Plutarch's story of the choleric superman and said, 'And yet'. Here was a man whose whole life seemed to have been devoted to a notion of character; he was, in Menenius's Overburyan sense, the very character of a Roman warrior. And yet he could decide to betray Rome. And yet, being able to betray Rome, he again could give in fatally- more than fatally, embarrassingly- to his mother's plea. Shakespeare added complexities which show Coriolanus to be determined and manipulable in the most psychologically credible way- all that family history and revealing imagery. But he also added all the details which make him less easily characterized- his moments of unexpected response, the exciting complexity of his speeches, the range of meanings he gives to the notion of aloneness, and, always, that chorus of friends and enemies inadequately, perplexedly explaining him.

To sum it up, Shakespeare insists on the problematics of characterization in *Cariolanus* because he is there peculiarly concerned with a paradox: that the distinctive quality of an individual is at once incommunicably private and unavoidably social. As such, it is situated neither entirely within our grasp or the grasp of our fellows but, fascinatingly, between us- rather like the meaning of a poem or a play- between us in our encounters on the stage of the world. Character lies in the interpretation of the time, as Aufidius puts it, and is thus susceptible to change and falsehood. And yet it is the most enduring thing about us. Perhaps this is what tragedy is about- that there is such a thing as human character. Perhaps it is only in tragedy that we feel that character as a personal possession really exists, in spite of the contradictions which surround it as a philosophical conception. At the end of *Coriolanus,* I feel that strange response which a less apologetic age would simply call tragic exaltation. And if I interpret the significance of that mood correctly, it means we feel, in spite of everything, that there is in the end something about Coriolanus which is truly his, that it characterizes him, and that for us to have shared his character, by participating in it through the process of the actor's performance, has been an experience of immense value to ourselves.

Critical Essay #8

Critical interest in the character of Volumnia has been second only to scholarly regard for Coriolanus himself. Naturally, much of the commentary focuses on their relationship, while modem interpretations have tended toward psychoanalytical accounts. Katherine Eisaman Maus has envisioned Volumnia's ferocity as socially constructed; her aggressiveness and zeal for warfare are considered unnatural in a Roman matron, and therefore must find expression elsewhere, in this case in her exaggerated masculinity and dominance over her son. William Farnham has also discussed the important role Volumnia plays in the tragedy, first, by pressing her son to do what he cannot do- that is, compromise his personal integrity- and second, by superseding his self-centered honor with the honor she possesses as his mother.

Christina Luckyj's assessment of Volumnia is indicative of a minority opinion that favors a broader conception of her role in the play. Arguing against the standard view, Luckyj has contended that Volumnia possess a full and tragic awareness of the consequences of her actions on Coriolanus, and that Shakespeare endowed her with a dynamic character that evolves throughout the course of the drama.

Source: "Volumnia's Silence," in *Studies in English I.iterature 1500-1900,* Vol. 31, No.2, Spring, 1991, pp. 327-42.

[Ludeyj remarks on the complexity of Volumnia's character, viewing her as a "dynamic, powerful" *figure. Responding to many past* critics *who haw offered simple or reductive interpre tations of Volumnia, Ludeyj asserts the character's indetermi nate nature. Initially, Volumnia is dramatized in polar appo sition to Virgilia; her coldness and masculinity are emphasized and contrasted with her daughter-in-laws femininity and con cen for Coriolanus. Later, Luckyj* argues, *Volumnia is presented less as an instrument of maternal dominance than as an evolving character with a tragic awareness of the effect her choices have had on Coriolanus's life. Ludeyj traces the development of Volumnia "from the formidable virago of the first act 1XJ the powerful advocate of the last act, through the near-comic hour geois matriarch of A ct II, the 'dissembler' of A ct III, am the angry, devastated mother of A ct IV."]*

Volumnia's last appearance in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* is a brief and silent one. She has just pleaded successfully with her son to spare his native city from intended destruction; her plea, we know, must result in his death at the hands of the Volscians, whose cause he has betrayed. She passes wordlessly over the stage in the company of Virgilia and Valeria as a Roman senator hails her as "our patroness, the life of Rome" (V.v.l). Academic critics take the senator's word for it; they usually *see* her as "the one triumphant figure that survives the play, the savior of Rome," and insist that she is not "given a moment of reflection or of recognition that [she has] caused Martius' death. . .. Coriolanus' new acknowledgement of the power of tenderness and family bonds does not change the grim world of the play; it does not even change Volumnia." While some directors do show us Volumnia's fierce delight at her son's capitulation (often- as in the 1978 and 199O RSC productions- departing from the text to present young Martius as

her next exalted victim), others have conceived of her quite differently. Following a venerable modem tradition (which includes, by my count, at least five major productions since 1954), Irene Worth rendered Volumnia's silence in the 1984 National Theatre production as mute devastation. Francis King records what he called "her finest moment": "Small, twitching smiles acknowledge the plaudits, but the eyes express a terrible desolation, since she already realises that he must die." This much-praised interpretation, integral to what was hailed as "the best Shakespeare production to emerge from the National in its 21 years," presented a "deeply thoughtful" Coriolanus who, in the supplication scene, "grows up as we watch, and becomes human, and so has to be killed." In this production, Volumnia's desolation seemed to measure her son's emotional achievement. Indeed, if Volumnia crumbles during the silent procession- as a reviewer of the 1972 RSC production put it, "her ravaged face showing no glimmer of joy, hardly of life" - we are forced to re-evaluate not only her character but her relation to Coriolanus and to the play as a whole.

Women's silences in Renaissance plays often contradict their stage interpreters. Accusing the silent Bianca of Cassio's murder, Iago claims that "guiltiness will speak, / Though tongues were out of use" *(Othello* V.i.l0910); we know that her silence conveys, not guilt, but grief. In Elizabeth Cary's *Mariam,* Pheroras remonstrates with his gentle lover Graphina, "Silence is a sign of discontent" (line 587); she tells him it shows her wonder. In Middleton and Rowley's *Changeling* DeFlores tells Beatrice-Joanna before he rapes her, "Silence is one of pleasure's best receipts" (III.iv.169); she is clearly terrified. The silence maintained initially by Cressida in the Greek camp (IV.v) may be the wanton solicitation Ulysses claims it is, or it may be desperate resistance. And the openness of women's silences in response to a proposal of marriage is notorious-from Marlowe's Zenocrate in 1 *Tamburlaine* to Isabella in *Measure for Measure* and Paulina at the end of *The Winter's Tale.* That Shakespeare knew and exploited the ambiguities of feminine silence should make critics wary of too hastily judging Volumnia's.

Critical concensus on Volumnia in the playas a whole is reflected in Harold Bloom's recent statement that "Volumnia hardly bears discussion, once we have seen that she would be at home wearing armor in *The Iliad."* Yet discussion there has been, particularly among feminist and psychoanalytic critics, who usually find in her the chief cause of both Coriolanus's masculine aggression and his eventual death at the hands of the V olcians. Because his mother failed to nurture him as a mother should, Coriolanus channeled his need for nourishment into phallic aggression. Because, again, it is Volumnia who makes the case for "great nature" in the supplication scene, this fleeting hope of redeeming, "female," values is contaminated at the source. As Janet Adelman puts it,

When Volumnia triumphs over his rigid maleness, there is a hint of restitution in the Roman celebration of her as "our patroness, the life of Rome" (5.5.1). But like nearly everything else at the end of tlus play, the promise of restitution is deeply ironic: for Volumnia herself has shown no touch of nature as she willingly sacrifices her son; and the cries of "welcome, ladies, welcome!" (5.5.6) suggest an acknowledgment of female values at the moment in which the appearance of these values not in Volumnia but in her son can only mean his death.

The paradox of simultaneous redemption and destruction by the mother is explained by pre oedipal theory: "the mother's body becomes the locus of fantasies of both union and separation, the mother herself the representative of born plenitude and loss." Preoedipal theory, however, relies on a mother "lacking subjectivity," who is a pure construction of the threatened, longing, infantile unconscious. Stage performance emphasizes subjective agency; a Volumnia built according to this model is no more dramatically interesting than the most hardened child-abuser. But what about a Volumnia who shows not only a "tOuch of nature" in the final scenes but an agonized awareness of the costs of her actions? Can we be sure that the preoedipal fantasy is Shakespeare's, and not the critic's or the director's?

In the theater, Volumnia and Coriolanus are the "tWo leading players," equally prominent and dramatically interdependent, so that it scarcely seems accurate to say, with Willard Farnham, that "the hero does not merely stand at the center of the tragedy; he is the tragedy. He brings no one down with him in his fall." Such an exclusive focus on Coriolanus alone ignores Volumnia's competing claim on our attention and suppresses vital aspects of her role. In his analysis of the 1959 Peter Hall production, Laurence Kitchin remarks that Volumnia, the stoical Roman matron, is too interesting a character to function merely as a symbol of antique vinue and yet not be defined as anything else. . .. If Paxinou undertook Volumnia she would no doubt find hypnotic splendour in the old harridan, but that could only be at the expense of the title part. The alternative is to give her straight, dignified playing, as [Dame Edith] Evans did at Stratford, and let the unsympathetic elements take effect, so that she doesn't encroach on the play's main theme.

The rather unimaginative approach to Volumnia taken by Evans was clearly designed to avoid upstaging Olivier's Coriolanus. The final scenes won sympathy for the hero as a "boy' under the Sway of his Roman mother." Yet to restrict the dramatic focus to Coriolanus is to ignore the play's presentation of a dynamic, powerful Volumnia. And to oversimplify Volumnia as either a castrating virago or "a symbol of antique virtue" is to miss the play's many hints at a fully developed figure with the capacity for psychic depth and change. A good deal of recent feminist criticism, by fore grounding Volumnia as mother-destroyer of her son, actually marginalizes her by denying her the full life afforded her by the text. This paper is an attempt to show that in *Coriolanus,* as Harriett Hawkins puts it, "the nature of woman would appear to be just as indeterminate, and as 'capable of transforming itself,' as the nature of man."

Volumnia's first appearance on the stage is both a shock and a relief. With a burst of tremendous energy, she ruptures the opening tableau of silent, dutiful women so idealized in Renaissance marriage manuals. as a "blood-lusting, teeth-baring" "she-wolf," she is clearly "a complete negation of Renaissance womanly virtue." But this is surely a case where in the theater, as Hawkins puts it, "moral vices may manifest themselves as dramatic virtues," and the psychological distortions of which Volumnia has so often been convicted fuel her ferocious vitality on the stage. Now this is not to return to the Romantic and Victorian Volumnia, to Anna Jameson's idealized "Roman marron, conceived in the true antique spirit." A good Volumnia for the stage is made, not of marble, but of fire- as an eyewitness account of Sarah Siddons's famous Volumnia

confirms: "She came alone, marching and beating time to the music; rolling. . . from side to side. . .. Such was the intoxication of joy which flashed from her eye and lit up her whole face that the effect was irresistible." as Michael Goldman said admiringly of Gloria Foster's Volumnia for the 198O New York production, "She gave us not the cold Roman matron, but a fierce Mediterranean matriarch, a woman who could be Lear." Indeed, after the discordant voices of the citizens and the slippetytones of Menenius, the tribunes and Aufidius, we can hear again the "tragic music" of Coriolanus in his mother's voice. It is a jangling music- the music of a military brass band- but it is also strong and rhythmic and thus brings relief. At the beginning of the play, Volumnia mirrors Coriolanus; only a critical double standard labels one a voracious matriarch, the other a proud and admirable hero.

Of course Volumnia's is not the only voice in the scene. Shakespeare begins by presenting two women who are utterly polarized- the gentle, "feminine" Virgilia and the powerful, "masculine" Volumnia. Yet the distinction soon blurs. Virgilia can also be strong and stubborn; Volumnia summons up powerful maternal feelings as support for their antithesis:

The breasts of Hecuba When she did suckle Hector, look'd not lovelier Than Hector's forehead when it spit forth
blood
At Grecian sword contenming.
(I.iii.40-43)

The speech is usually invoked to show "the source of [Coriolanus's] anger in the deprivation imposed by his mother." But Hector does to Hecuba what the Grecian sword does to Hector; the lactating breast is compared to a bleeding wound, the infant's mouth to a weapon. The metaphor, intended to show the wound as lovely as the breast, recoils to show the breast as vulnerable as the wound. The effect of this kind of mothering on Coriolanus has often been noted; what has been less commonly observed is the vulnerability underlying Volumnia's maternal self-denial. Here Shakespeare presents us with a character who, like Lear and like Coriolanus, is both enormous in will and profoundly self-ignorant. Unlike Lear's or Coriolanus's anger, which is more obviously a defense against their intolerable need for love, Volumnia's aggression explodes from some mysterious raw origin. She is certainly not a likeable character- neither is Lear nor Coriolanus in the early scenes- but Shakespeare carefully plants the seeds of natural affection even here. Her evocation and subsequent rejection of ordinary maternal feeling limit her emotional range and restrict our sympathy for her, while at the same time contributing to her extraordinary impact on the stage. In this early scene Volumnia reveals that, like other tragic heroes, she has sufficient strength to endure change and the dramatic stature to invite it. What is more, any deviation from this colossal single-minded energy will be registered with the minutest sensitivity.

Volumnia's subsequent appearances in the play are arranged schematically: she appears in variations on the triumphal procession and the supplication scene. By arranging Volumnia's appearances in repeated situations, Shakespeare is able to

suggest subtle changes in attitude that might otherwise be hidden from us by a character who, like her son, lacks introspection.

The first of Volumnia's appearances in a series of three "processions" comes early in the second act. Coriolanus is on his way back to Rome after defeating the V olscians in the battle which has earned him his name. The entire scene culminates in his triumphant welcome by Rome and his family, but its initial tone is casual and expansive, as Menenius pokes fun at the tribunes. The comic mood thus established is not interrupted but extended by the entrance of the three women. Menenius's exaggerated comparison of them with "the moon, were she earthly, no nobler" (II.i.97), draws attention by contrast to their undignified scrambling haste on the stage, implied by his descriptive question "whither do you follow your eyes so fast?" (II.i.98). Indeed, throughout the scene, Menenius's comic hyperbole guides our response to Volumnia, as she counts up everything fromCoriolanus's letters home to his wounds received in battle. Volumnia's language persistently distances her from the realities of war- "wounds" are transformed into "cicatrices" (II.i.147) or "hurts" (II.i.149) earned for "the oaken garland" (II.i.124) and his "place" in the senate (II.i.148). Her final interchange with Menenius is a comic escalating calculation of wounds whose arithmetic is deliberately confusing. The scene undercuts the force of Volumnia's final grand couplet- a verbal flourish which, along with the trumpets, ushers in Coriolanus Death, that dark spirit, in's nervy ann doth lie, Which, being advanc'd, declines, and then men dIe.

(II.i.159-60)

Despite the horrible encomium, Volumnia is less the terrible virago than, as a reviewer of the 1972 Royal Shakespeare Company production put it, "an exultantly bourgeois matriarch seen at her most typical when computing the number of the son's battle wounds as if they were cricket runs." The same comic tone crept into Maxine Audley's impression of the Volumnia she played in the 1979 Royal Shakespeare Company production as "a J ewish- American mother. . . like the one in *Partnoy's Complaint."* While the scene establishes Volumnia's overbearing attempt to control her son, it also humanizes her by suggesting that her *hubris* is potentially comic, a pathetic defense against life's realities.

Volumnia's illusions and defenses collapse with Coriolanus's banishment from Rome. At the beginning of the fourth act, she reappears in a scene that is an inverted echo of the earlier triumphal procession; the same group that welcomed Coriolanus's victorious return from battle now leads him into exile. Attitudes have changed with circumstances: the gloating "Jewish mother" of the previous scene now weeps with the rest of them. A confused Coriolanus enjoins his mother to "leave [her] tears" (IV.i.3), and reminds her of her "ancient courage":

You were us'd to load me
With precepts that would make invincible
The heart that conn'd them.
(IV.i.9-11)

He tries to re-evoke the mother for whom his hazards were her "solace" (V.i.128), but is contradicted by the distraught behavior of the woman on the stage before him; the formulaic "precepts" of stoic fortitude were untried by the blow of real human loss. Volumnia's responses, whose very brevity hints at some inner struggle, move from typical rage at "all trades in Rome" (IV.i.13) to ordinary maternal solicitude:

My first
son,
Whither wilt thou go? Take good Cominius With thee awhile; determine on some course More than a wild exposture to each chance That starts l' th' way before thee.
(IV.i.33-37)

The breathless rhythm of the speech shows a new awareness of life's harsh realities, as well as a new desire to soften them for her "first son." Here Volumnia and Virgilia are both "sad women" who "wail inevitable strokes" (IV.i.2S-26); their shared grief is later converted to shared anger. When Volumnia aggressively comers one tribune, Virgilia forces the other one to "stay too" (IV.ii.1S). When Volumnia threatens both tribunes, declaring,

I would my son
Were in Arabia, and thy tribe before him,
His good sword ill his hand,
(IV.ii.23-25)

Virgilia chimes in with, "He'd make an end of thy posterity" (IV.ii.26), and Volumnia completes her sentence: "Bastards and all" (IV.ii.27). Editorial redistribution of speeches in this scene- inspired by John Middleton Murry and followed by Brockbank's Arden edition- robs Virgilia of the angry interpolations that are clearly hers in the Folio, and creates a more violent Volumnia than Shakespeare intended. For Volumnia, the pride and anger that seemed out of place in the early scenes have become appropriate responses she shares with Virgilia to a new, harsh world of political opportunism and personal loss. When Sicinius accuses her of masculinity with his question, "Are you mankind?" (IV.ii.16) Volumnia defends the appropriateness of her behavior, replying, "Ay fool; is that a shame?

Note but this fool. / Was not a man my father?" (IV.ii.17-18). As woman was born of man, she has a natural right to his anger and aggression to express her loss. "Mankind" slips into its more modem meaning of "humankind" as Volumnia begins to reconcile two warring aspects of her nature- maternal feeling and "masculine" self-assertion.

Volumnia's third appearance in a procession is also her last appearance on the stage. A modem director's instinctive rendering of her silence as despair rather than triumph finds corroboration in a text which, most scholars claim, is close to Shakespeare's "foul papers." In the previous scene, a relieved and exultant Menenius joins with the tribunes in anticipating Volumnia's triumphant return; the joyful noises of the crowd are heard offstage. In the procession itself, however, there is no entry recorded for Menenius, the tribunes, or the boisterous mob; since most of the company is probably needed to fill out

the crowd in the next scene, the women are accompanied only by two senators and "other lords."_ One of the senators urges:

Call all your tribes together, praise the gods,
And make triumphant fires. Strew flowers
before them;
Unshout the noise that banish'd Martius;
Repeal him with the welcome of his mother:
Cry, "Welcome, ladies, welcome!"
(V.v.2-6)

But no noisy crowd carries out the senator's commands and guides our response; as its surrogate, we can only sit in uneasy silence. The quiet of the procession con trasts with other noisy processions in the play (notably with Coriolanus's in the following scene- V.vi.71) and with Plutarch's account of the "honorable curtesies the whole Senate, and people dyd bestowe on their ladyes." The effect is both ominous and deflationary. The 1981 Stratford, Ontario, production, directed by Brian Bedford, captured the mood of this oddly untriumphant "triumph" by using a frieze of citizens on the upper stage. As Ralph Berry tells it:

Bedford showed a cortege. Led by a grim, unsmiling Volumnia, the black-clad procession of the three women and young Martius moved rapidly across the stage. There were no words, no sounds of applause, only the electronic bells in Gabriel Charpentier's disturbing and moving soundscape. On the upper stage, a rectangle of harsh light picked out the citizens as in a film frame, the people ,soundlessly crying their applause for Rome's savior. The effect was ominous, tragic, heart-stopping.

If Shakespeare intended the scene to be staged less as a triumph than a dirge, a mournful Volumnia further reinforces the tension between word and image. Still wearing the dishevelled garb of the supplication scene, she casts- as a reviewer of the 1954 Old Vic production put it-"a mauve shadow on the optimism" of the senator's words, and stands in opposition to other members of her class. A terse silence shared by Volumnia and the theater audience knits them together in common resistance to any simple view of the supplication scene, confirming its complexity. And if the scene is played as a rejection of public acclaim, it brings the wheel full circle; the mother's silence recalls her son's: "No more of this; it does offend my heart" (II.i.167).

Perhaps the most striking instance of structural repetition- and one which is crucial to our understanding of Volumnia- involves the supplication scene. The scene early in the third act in which Volumnia tries to persuade Coriolanus to retract his harsh words to the plebeians is a "rehearsal" - not so much for Coriolanus's submission to the plebeians, which never in fact occurs- but for the final supplication scene. Here Volumnia tries out on her son the rhetorical strategies she will use later: emotional pleas, political arguments, and feigned rejection. She even rehearses her own future role as supplicant by showing him how to plead. Coriolanus in turn rehearses his possible responses of unyielding resistance- "I will not do't" (III.ii.120)- and utter subjection- "Mother, I am going to the marketplace" (III.ii.131). The scene is littered with references to acting, from

Coriolanus's insistence on fusing role and reality in "I play / The man I am" (III.ii.15-16), to Volumnia's separation of the two in her demonstration of the "part" (III.ii.105) she wants him to play. Any hint of genuine maternal concern, of a desire to save her son from certain death off the "rock Tarpeian" (III.i.211) is swallowed up in this metatheatrical language, which distances both characters from personal and political realities. For Volumnia makes the act of supplication into a parody of itself; her long speech, in which she acts the part of the supplicant that she would have him play (III.ii.72-86) reduces humility to theatrical posturing. Coriolanus responds appropriately to this alternative as leading only to "a most inherent baseness" (III.ii.123); after this his capitulation at the end of the scene can seem only like defeat, the ignoble surrender redicted in his own vision of "schoolboys' tears"

(III.ii.116). Yet Volumnia contaminates not only Coriolanus's options but her own. She pleads with her son presumably to save his life as well as to secure him the consulship, but she presents the act of pleading as pure hypocrisy and thus makes it impossible for him either to yield with dignity to her or to settle with the plebeians.

In the final supplication scene, the idiom of the theater reappears, but this time with a difference. Earlier, Coriolanus was t.o play the "part" of humble supplicant and hide the reality of his inner pride; here, his pride is the "part" which, "like a dull actor," Coriolanus "forgets" (V.iii.40-41) when he begins to yield to "Great nature" (V.iii.33). In this scene, Coriolanus himself admits that his heroic self-sufficiency is merely role-playing. Indeed, it is clear from the beginning that Coriolanus will yield to Volumnia's plea: early on he cries, "I melt, and am not / Of stronger earth than others" (V.iii.28-29). The focus of the scene then shifts from Coriolanus, whose change of heart we expect, to those who have come to secure it.

In the first supplication scene (III.ii)- which has no counterpart in Shakespeare's source- Volumnia enters alone and is joined by senators and nobles; the case she presents is political rather than personal. In the later scene, Volumnia is one member of a collective of "all living women" (V.iii.97)- a collective dominated by the gentle wife who "comes foremost" (V.iii.22). Coriolanus's startling lyrical transformation of the chatty busybody Valeria into a semi-icon, "chaste as the icicle / That's curdied by the frost from purest snow / And hangs on Dian's temple" (V.iii.65-67), evokes dramatic antecedents like the pleading of the virgins before Tamburlaine (1 *Tamburlaine* V.i), and distances the mother-son encounter. No longer a political strategist, Volumnia stands in opposition to the real political presence of Aufidius and his soldiers. And, in a play in which outward appearance is seen to reflect inner essence- in which, Brockbank points out, "all qualities of the spirit have a physical manifestation" - the women's change of "rai ment" (V.iii.94) for this scene is full of meaning. Volumnia's pleading rags look back to two earlier moments- to the gown of humility worn by Coriolanus when he sues for votes (II.iii), and to the beggar-like disguise he dons when he turns to Aufidius and the Volscians (IV.iv). The double analogue suggests Volumnia's ambiguity throughout the supplication scene- her tattered garments may be at odds with her inner arrogance, as in Coriolanus's appeal for votes, or they may recall Coriolanus's reversion to the enemy, when his mean attire was "a potent visual suggestion that something in the man himself, not just in his circumstances, ha[d] changed." The latter echo may suggest that here

Volumnia, like her son in Antium, bares herself to the enemy and finds herself in a situation for which her nature had never been prepared, requiring a compromise of absolute values which changes her fundamentally. The rags worn by mother and son in the last two acts connect their individual moments of crisis, when both make a choice to abandon pride and selfsufficiency and seek clemency in the bosom of the enemy- a choice of which both must later become victims.

As Volumnia begins to speak, Coriolanus anticipates and rejects the "colder reasons" (V.iii.86) he heard earlier; what he gets is not the approach that would divide heart from brain, but a verbal plea anchored in physical sensation. For, though the text of Volumnia's speech stays remarkably close to Plutarch's original, it is filled out by phrases which convey the physiological strain on the women, who "weep, and shake with fear and sorrow" (V.iii.100) at the bodily violence of Coriolanus, "tearing / His country's bowels out" (V.iii.102-103). Volumnia further identifies her own, mother's, body, with the "country" (V.iii.123) and sides with her "neighbours" (V.iii.173), in striking contrast to her earlier scorn for the people. Her equation of herself with Rome hints at penitence for personal as well as political injuries done Coriolanus when she asks, "Think'st thou it honourable for a noble man / Still to remember wrongs?" (V.iii.154-55). And some change in her perception is evident when the mother who sent her "tender-bodied" son to a cruel war desires "th' interpretation of full time" (V.iii.69) for her grandson. The bathos of Volumnia's presentation of herself as a "poor hen, fond of no second brood" (V.iii.162-63), in its absurd incongruity comes close to domestic comedy, but may also suggest her clumsy approach to new feeling. If Volumnia is a consummate rhetorician throughout the scene- thus leaving her open to suspicion- she not only echoes Plutarch's virtuous widow, but also anticipates Shakespeare's Hermione during her trial in *The Winter's Tale.* Much depends on an actress who can choose to deliver the speeches with anything from cynical manipulation to passionate conviction. But Shakespeare deliberately leaves the choice open, refusing to allow us to come to simple conclusions about Volumnia's motives. Does she still sincerely believe that peace is an alternative? It seems important that Coriolanus is finally convinced, not by the blatant emotional blackmail of the first part of Volumnia's speech, in which she outlines her dilemma and threatens suicide, but by the peace plan she sets out in the second part. Indeed, if Coriolanus senses that his yielding will prove "most mortal to him" (V.iii.189), he nonetheless goes on to implement her plan with calm self-assurance and some degree of success. Apolitically naive pacifist may hardly seem consistent with even a softened and changed Volumnia. But a fully cognizant Volumnia must leave us with a tangle of equally unresolved questions. Is she saving her own skin at her son's expense? Is she still the coldly patriotic virago of the first act, sacrificing Coriolanus for the sake of Rome? Or is her patriotic sacrifice made in conscious, agonized awareness of its costs for herself and her son? If so, it is afar cry from the one she gleefully imagines in Act 1. Is it a sacrifice made, not for Rome, but for the young wife and child with her on the stage? Or is she committed to saving Coriolanus from his own inhumanity, even at the cost of his life? Actresses may choose to compromise and show a woman tom between hope and despair, but it seems far from Shakespeare's intention to present Volumnia as simply a primeval mother-goddess whose promise of loving union includes inevitable death for her son.

If Shakespeare leaves Volumnia's motivation complex and open-ended, he uses two major dramatic strategies to deflect her guilt. First, throughout the supplication scene, Volumnia is the instrument of a greater theatrical good. She is perceived less as "a fantasy of maternal omnipotence in which the mother seeks the death of her son" than as a necessary and positive advocate for the natural bonds which Coriolanus has tried to ignore. Second, after the supplication scene, she is rapidly supplanted by Aufidius, the real agent of Coriolanus's destruction. Indeed, Coriolanus's yielding to his mother is a sufficient, but not a necessary pretext for Aufidius's revenge- in the previous act, Aufidius had cried, "When, Caius, Rome is thine, / Thou art poor'st of all: then shortly art thou mine" (IV.vii.56-57). In the 1984 National Theatre production, which reversed "the modem tendency toward non-political interpretations of *Coriolanus* on the British stage," Volumnia emerged as a tragic figure whose "public 'Roman' front. . . almost cracked under the strain of her knowledge that she had destroyed her son" and Aufidius appeared a political opportunist, proof that "those who compromise survive; tragic heroes do not." When Aufidius ceases to be Coriolanus's homoerotic twin and becomes his foil and destroyer, Volumnia is released from her position as Coriolanus's primeval enemy and can emerge as his equal. Politics, not his mother, kills Coriolanus.

Despite hints at her deep evolution and tragic recognition, Volumnia clearly remains the overbearing matriarch who threatens her son and Coriolanus is still the "overstrained child" who simply gives in. But critics who see *only* "a child holding his mother's hand," are left with a play that forfeits its status as tragedy as well as a good deal of its power in the theater. Such an interpretation wins pity for Coriolanus as his mother's victim, but fails to arouse any concomitant fear at a dreadful choice made in favor of natural bonds. Even those critics who are prepared to accept change and complexity in Coriolanus deny them to Volumnia. While *his* silence at the end of her plea is seen as "a breakingthrough into a new territory of value and of moral experience," *her* silence is an inability "to voice the sympathy, approval, or affection the moment naturally invites." Yet one wonders whether Volumnia could give a more eloquent reply than the lengthy silence which contrasts so pointedly with her previous wordy praises. And if Coriolanus here is "more of a man" and "less than ever Volumnia's son," it is a paradox that the theater cannot afford- the scene's strongest visual image is that of the bond between mother and son. On the stage Coriolanus acknowledges himself Volumnia's; if the moment has dignity as well as pathos, both characters must contribute to it. Yet whatever their differences about the complex of motives underlying Coriolanus's change of heart, most critics see Volumnia as a monumental figure incapable of change and insist that "the resolution to the conflict in Act V must be read in the light of the resolution to the conflict in Act III." Shakespeare may be using structural repetition, however, to suggest change as well as continuity in the relation between the two characters; this hypothesis is strengthened by the evidence of theatrical productions. A reviewer of the 1965 American Shakespeare Festival production remarked that "When she attempts to persuade her son that he must compromise, this Volumnia argues with a blazing temper but lets it be seen at once whence came his pride. When she leads the women to plead for mercy, she is a humble, piteous figure." A commentator on the 1979 Royal Shakespeare Company production noted that, after the first supplication scene (III.ii), "Volumnia moves back into silence until, like Lady Macbeth, she makes a powerful final appearance which is contrary to the previous movement." I believe that

the text allows us to trace an evolution in Volumnia, from the formidable virago of the first act to the powerful advocate of the last act, through the near-comic bourgeois matriarch of Act II, the "dissembler" of Act III, and the angry, devastated mother of Act IV. And, though the force of Act I lies behind the impact of Act V, it has been transmuted by the play. Volumnia begins by mirroring the hero and speaking his heroic tongue, then passes into a comic, anti-heroic phase in the second and third acts, only to return to her former strength in a different way. Maynard Mack identifies this tripartite journey with the Shakespearean tragic hero. Like most of Shakespeare's tragic heroes, Volumnia places heavy demands on our sympathy. If she succeeds in securing it, she also enriches our experience of the playas a whole.

Critical Essay #9

With only a relatively small presence in the play, Virginia has nonetheless attracted the attention of a few scholars who have seen her as thematically integral to *Coriolanus,* particularly in her role as foil to Volumnia. Catherine La Courreye Blecki has argued that Virgilia, while contrasting significantly with Volumnia, does not display meekness or passivity, as some have suggested. Rather, while she is often silent, she does contradict Volumnia when necessary. Additionally, Blecki sees Virgilia as playing a vital role in the debate over the heroic, warrior ideal with her mother-in-law.

Gail Kern Paster has seen Virgilia's silence as resistance to the aristocratic code of honor represented by the Coriolanus and Volumnia. This line of thought owes particular debt to John Middleton Murry, one of the first critics to comment significantly on Virgilia's character. In Murry's view, Virgilia's defining characteristic is her "gracious silence." She thus represents a powerful, nonverbal critique of the pride demonstrated by Coriolanus and Volumnia. Murry has also observed that Virgilia is perhaps the only feeling character in a play primarily concerned with heroic ideals and political abstraction.

Source: "A Neglected Heroine of Shakespeare," in *Countries of the Mind: Essays in Literary Criticism,* E. P. Dutton and Company, 1922, pp. 31-50.

[In this excerpt, Murry considers the frequently overlooked figure of Virgilia, observing that despite the fact that she speaks scarcely more than one hundred words in Coriolanus she figures prominently in representing the play's theme. Murry notes Virgilia's "gracious silence" and analyzes the few passages in which she does speak. He evaluates her relationship to Coriolanus, which enables the title character's only moments of heartfelt devotion. Murry also reflects on Virgilia's silent opposition to Volumnia. For M urry, Virgilia is the dramatic embodiment ofdomestic love Her character thus starkly contrasts with the proud Volumnia. Summarizing Virgilia's significance to the play, Murry writes, "in a few firm touches Shakespeare has given us a woman whose silence we can feel to be the unspoken judgment on the pride 0/ arms and the pride of race which are the theme of the play. "]

. . . Of all the characters in *Coriolanus* one alone can be said to be truly congenial; and she is the least substantial of them all. Virgilia, Coriolanus's wife, though she is present throughout the whole of four scenes, speaks barely a hundred words. But a sudden, direct light is cast upon her by a phrase which takes our breaths with beauty, when Coriolanus welcomes her on his triumphant return as 'My gracious silence!' Magical words!

They give a miraculous substance to our fleeting, fading glimpses of a lovely vision which seems to tremble away from the clash of arms and pride that reverberates through the play. Behind the disdainful warrior and his Amazonian mother, behind the vehement speech of this double Lucifer, the exquisite, timid spirit of Virgilia shrinks out of sight into the haven of her quiet home. One can almost hear the faint click of the door behind her as it shuts her from the noise of brawling tongues. Yet in her presence, and

in the memory of her presence, Coriolanus becomes another and a different being. It is true we may listen in vain for other words so tender as 'My gracious silence!' from his lips. A man who has one love alone finds only one such phrase in a lifetime. But in the heat of victorious battle, when Coriolanus would clasp Cominius in his arms for joy, he discovers in himself another splendid phrase to remember his happiness with Virgilia.

Oh! let me clip ye
In arms as sound as when I woo'd, in heart & merry, as when our nuptial day was done
And tapers bumed to bedward.
And even in the anguish of the final struggle between his honour and his heart, when his wife comes with his mother to intercede for Rome, it is in the very accents of passionate devotion that he cries to Virgilia,
Best of my flesh! Forgive my tyranny; but do not say
For that, "Forgive our Romans."_ Oh! a kiss
Long as my exile, sweet as my revenge!
Now, by the jealous queen of heaven, that kiss
I carried from thee, dear, and my true lip
Hath virgin'd it e'er since.

In the proud, unrelenting man of arms these sudden softenings are wonderful. They conjure up the picture of a more reticent and self-suppressed Othello, and we feel that, to strike to the heart through Coriolanus's coat of mail, it needed an unfamiliar beauty of soul, a woman whose delicate nature stood apart, untouched by the broils and furies of her lord's incessant battling with the Roman people and the enemies of Rome.

In the play Virgilia speaks barely a hundred words. But they are truly the speech of a 'gracious silence,' as precious and revealing as they are rare. She appears first (Act I., Sc. 3) in her own house, sitting silent at her sewing. Coriolanus has gone to the wars. Volumnia tries to kindle her with something of her own Amazonian ecstasy at the thought of men in bartle. 'I tell thee, daughter, I sprang not more in joy at first hearing he was a man child than now in first seeing he had proved himself a man.' Virgilia's reply, the first words she speaks in the play, touch to the quick of the reality of war and her own unquiet mind.

But had he died in the business, madam; how then?

The thoughts of her silence thus revealed, she says no more until chattering Valeria, for all the world like one of the fashionable ladies in Colonel Repington's diary, is announced. She has come to drag her out to pay calls. Virgilia tries to withdraw. Volumnia will not let her, and even while the maid is in the room waiting to know whether she may show Valeria in, she bursts into another ecstatic vision of her son in the midst of battle, 'his bloody brow with his mailed hand then wiping.' Again Virgilia reveals herself.

His bloody brow! O Jupiter, no blood!
Valeria enters on a wave of small talk. She has seen Virgilia's little boy playing. The very image of his father; 'such a confirmed countenance.' She had watched him chase a

butterfly, catching it and letting it go, again and again. 'He did so set Ius teeth and tear it; oh, I warrant how he mammocked it!'
Volum One on's father's moods.
Val Indeed, la, It is a noble child.
Virg. A crack, madam.
'*An imp,* madam!' The meaning leaps out of the halfcontemptuous word. Don't call him a noble child for his childish brutality. It pains, not rejoices Virgilia. Nor, for all the persuasions of Volumnia and Valeria, will she stir out of the house. She does not want society; she cannot visit 'the good lady that lies in.' She is as firm as she is gentle. 'Tis not to save labour, nor that I want love. Simply that she is anxious and preoccupied. She will not 'turn her solemness out of door'; she cannot. Coriolanus is at the wars. So, in two dozen words and a world of unspoken contrast Virgilia is given to us: her horror of brutality and bloodshed, her anxiety for her husband, her reticence, her firmness. She is not a bundle of nerves, but she is full of the aching fears of love. Truly, 'a gracious silence.'
She next appears when the news is come that Coriolanus has triumphed (Act II., Sc. 1). Volumnia and Valeria are talking with Menenius. She stands aside listening. He is sure to be wounded, says Menenius; he always is. She breaks out: 'Oh, no, no, no!' She retires into her silence again while Volumnia proudly tells the story of her son's twenty-five wounds. 'In troth, there's wondrous things spoken of him,' says chattering Valeria. Virgilia murmurs: 'The gods grant them true! "True! Pow-wow!' says Volumnia, in hateful scorn: one can see her sudden turn, hear her rasping voice. Virgilia is not one of the true breed of Roman wives and mothers. And indeed she is not. She is thinking of wounds, not as glorious marks of bravery, but as the mutilated body of the man she adores. Wounds, wounds! They talk of nothing but wounds. Virgilia suffers in silence. Coriolanus is wounded. That is a world wounded to her.
Coriolanus enters, swathed in bandages, unrecognisable. He kneels before his mother. Then he sees Virgilia, standing apart, weeping silently. These are the words of the Folio text. Only the spelling has been modernied; the punctuation has been left untouched.
Ceria My gracious silence, hail:
Would'st thou have laughed, had I come
coffin'd home
That weep'st to see me triumph? Ah my
dear,
Such eyes the widows in Corioli were And mothers that lack sons.
Mene. Now the Gods crown thee.
Com And live you yet? Oh my sweet Lady,
pardon.
Volum I know not where to turn.
Oh welcome home: and welcome General,
And yare welcome all.

The first two of these speeches and their speakers contain no difficulty. But, obviously, 'And live you yet? Oh, my sweet Lady, pardon,' does not belong to Cominius. On his lips it is nonsense. The editors have resolved the problem by giving the line to Coriolanus, and the following speech of Volumnia to Valeria. Coriolanus is supposed to say to

Menenius, 'And live you yet?' then, suddenly catching sight of Valeria, to beg her pardon for not having seen her before.

We have a free hand in disposing of the line. There is no objection to Volumnia's speech being given to Valeria, whose effusive manner it suits better. But to make Coriolanus surprised that Menenius is still alive is pointless; he had no reason to suppose that the armchair hero was dead. Moreover, to make him turn to Valeria, and say, 'Oh, my sweet Lady, pardon,' is to give the great warrior the manners of a carpet knight.

Now think of the relation between Virgilia and Coriolanus; remember how her imagination has been preoccupied by his wounds; see her in imagination weeping at the pitiful sight of her wounded husband and read the lines through without regard to the speakers. It will, I believe, occur to anyone with an instinct for psychology that 'And live you yet?' takes up Coriolanus's previous words. 'Ah, my dear,' he has said, 'it is the women who have no husbands who weep as you do.' Then, and not till then, Virgilia breaks silence. 'And live you *yet?'* And are you really my husband? Is this thing of bandages the lord of my heart? At her sudden, passionate words, Coriolanus understands her tears. He has a glimpse of the anguish of her love. He has been an unimaginative fool. 'Oh, my sweet Lady, pardon!' This, I suggest, is the way the passage should be read:

Ceria Ah my dear,
Such eyes the widows in Corioli wear And mothers that lack sons.
Men£. Now the gods crown thee!
Virg. And live you yet?
Corio. Oh, my sweet lady, pardon. . .
Vall know not where to turn.

And to my own mind it is an essential part of the beauty of the passage that these few lightning words of love should flash through the hubbub of Menenius's welcome and Valeria's effusive congratulations.

Virgilia appears again in the scene following Coriolanus's banishment (Act IV., Sc. 2). Here the alterations necessary are self-evident, and it is difficult to understand why they have not been made before. Again the test of reading through the short scene with an imaginative realisation of Virgilia must be applied. Again her exquisite timidity of speech must be contrasted, as Shakespeare deliberately contrasted it, with Volumnia's headstrong and contemptuous anger. It will then, I believe, be plain that of Volumnia's final words,

Anger's my meat; I sup upon my self And so shall starve with feeding. Come, let's go.
Leave this faint puling and lament as I do In anger, Juno-like. Come, come, come,

the last two lines are addressed to Virgilia alone. Besides Volumnia herself only the two tribunes, Brutus and Sicinius, are there. The lines cannot be spoken to them. Only Virgilia remains. She is not angry, but sad, at Coriolanus's banishment, just as in his

triumph she was sad, not joyful: and just as then, Volumnia scorns her for her weakness.

Now read again the Folio text, which is that of the modem editions, of lines 11-28. Volumnia meets the two tribunes who have been the prime movers in her son's banishment:

Volum Oh yare well met:
Th' hoarded plague a' th' gods requite your love.
Men£. Peace, peace, be not so loud.
Volum If that I could for weeping, you
should hear,
Nay, and you shall heare some. Will you be gone?
Virg. You shall stay too: I would I had the
power
To say so to my husband.
Sicin. Are you mankind?
Volum Aye, fool, is that a shame. Note but
this, fool,
Was not a man my father? Had'st thou
foxship
To banish him that struck more blows for Rome
Than thou hast spoken words.
Sicin Oh blessed Heavens!
Volum More noble blows than ever you wise
words.
And for Rome's good, I'll tell thee what: yet
go:
Nay, but thou shalt stay too: I would my
son
Were in Arabia, and thy tribe before him,
His good sword in his hand.
S *icin* What then?
Virg What then? He'd make an end of thy
posterity
Volum Bastards, and all.
Good man, the wounds that he does bear for
Rome!

It is obvious that the peremptory 'You shall stay too!' *(l.* 14) is not spoken by Virgilia. It is as completely discordant with her character, and with Volumnia's description of her behaviour during the scene ('this faint puling') as it is accordant with the character of Volumnia. Volumnia forces first one, then the other tribune to stay; we can see her clutch them by the sleeve, one in either of her nervous hands. At her words Virgilia interposes a sighing aside, 'Would I had the power to say so to my husband!'

It is equally clear that Virgilia cannot possibly have indulged in the brutal imagination of line 27. 'What then? He'll make an end of thy posterity.' There is no stop at the end of the line in the Folio; it runs on to the next half line; and the whole line and a half undoubtedly belong to Volumnia. A simple transposition of the rubrics is all that is needed.

Volum What then?
He'll make an end of thy posterity Bastards and all.
Virg Good man, the wounds that he does bear for Rome!'

It is another sighing aside and another indication that Virgilia is haunted by the memory of those wounds she could not bear to see. Unless these asides are restored to her, and the brutal words taken away, quite apart from the violation of her character, there is no point in Volumnia's sneer at her 'faint puling.'

Virgilia appears for the last time as the silent participant in Volumnia's embassy of intercession. For the first and only time a bodily vision of her beauty is given to us, when Coriolanus cries

What is thy curtsy worth or those dove's
eyes
Which can make gods forsworn? I melt and
am not
Of stronger earth than others.

She has no need of words to make her appeal; her eyes speak for her. She says simply

My lord and husband!
Coria These eyes are not the same I wore in
Rome. .
Ving. The sorrow that delivers us thus changed Makes you think so.
CoriaLike a dull actor now,
I have forgot my part, and I am out
Even to a full disgrace. Best of my flesh
Forgive my tyranny; but do not say
For that, "Forgive our Romans." Oh! a kiss
Long as my exile, sweet as my revenge!
Now, by the jealous queen of heaven, that kiss
I carried from thee, dear, and my true lip
Hath virgin'd it e'er since.

After this Virgilia speaks but a single sentence more. Volumnia ends her pleading with an impassioned adjuration to her son:

For myself, son,
I purpose not to wait on Fortune till
These wars determine: if I cannot persuade
thee

Rather to show a noble grace to both parts
Than seek the end of one, thou shalt no
sooner
March to assault thy country than to tread
Trust to't, thou shalt not- on thy mother's
womb
That brought thee to this world.
*Virg_* Ay, and mine
That brought you forth this boy, to keep
your name
Living to time.

Virgilia's words contain much in lirtle space. They, her last words in the play, are the first in which she shows herself at one with her husband's mother. Always be fore, Volumnia has been angry, contemptuous, spiteful, malevolent towards Virgilia; and Virgilia had held her peace without yielding an inch of ground to Volumnia's vehemence. We have felt throughout that they are the embodiments of two opposed spirits- of pride and love. Not that Volumnia's pride has changed to love; it is the same pride of race that moves her, the fear of disgrace to a noble name:

The end of war's uncertain; but this is certain, That, if thou conquer Rome, the benefit Which thou shalt thereby reap is such a name Whose repetition shall be dogged with curses, Whose chronicle thus writ: "The man was noble

But with his last attempt he wip'd it out, Destroy'd his country, and his name remains To the ensuing age abhorr'd."

But now these spirits of love and pride are reconciled; for once they make the same demand. Volumnia pleads that her son shall remember honour, Virgilia that her husband shall remember mercy. The double appeal is too strong. Coriolanus yields to it, and pays the penalty.

Not one of the readjustments suggested in this essay calls for the alteration of a single word in the text of the Folio. They consist solely in a redistribution of words among the speakers, and in the most complicated instance a redistribution of some kind has long since been seen to be necessary and long since been made. I venture to think that together they will help to disengage the true outline of one of Shakespeare's most delicate minor heroines. There was no place for a Desdemona in the story of Coriolanus; but in a few firm touches Shakespeare has given us a woman whose silence we can feel to be the unspoken judgment on the pride of arms and the pride of race which are the theme of the play.

For it is surely not against the democratic idea that Coriolanus is tried and found wanting. In spite of Signor Croce's assurance to the contrary, it is impossible to believe that the contempt for the city mob with which the play is penetrated was not shared by Shakespeare himself. The greatest writers strive to be impersonal, and on the whole they achieve impersonality; but, though they carve out an image that is unlike

themselves, they cannot work wholly against the grain of their own convictions. Prejudice will out. And the loathing of the city mob which is continually expressed in Shakespeare's work and comes to a head in *Coriolanus* was indubitably his own. It is indeed less plausible to deny this than it would be to argue that at a time when his genius was seizing on themes of a greater tragic scope it was his sympathy with the anti-plebeian colour of the Coriolanus story that led Shakespeare to choose it for his play.

This is not a question of Shakespeare's political views. We do not know what they were, and we have no means of finding out. Signor Croce is thus far right. But when he goes on to assure us that it is a wild goose chase to look to discover where Shakespeare's sympathies lay in the world in which he lived, we can point to the knowledge we actually have of every great writer. We do know their sympathies. It may be an illegitimate knowledge, but the laws it violates are laws of Signor Croce's own devising. It is his own logical fiat that holds the kingdoms of the esthetic and the practical asunder. In fact, there is no dividing line between them. A writer's predispositions in practical life do constantly colour his esthetic creation, and every great writer who has been conscious of his activity has either confessed the fact or gloried in it.

We know that Shakespeare detested the city mob. If we care to know why we have only to exercise a little imagination and picture to ourselves the finest creative spirit in the world acting in his own plays before a pitful of uncomprehending, base mechanicals.

Alas, 'tis true, I have gone here and there And made myself a motley to the view, Gored mine own thoughts, sold cheap what is most dear.

The man who used that terrible phrase, who 'gored his own thoughts' to wring shillings from the pockets of the greasy, grinning crowd in front of him, had no cause to love them; and Shakespeare did not. He was an aristocrat, not in the political sense, but as every man of fine nerves who shrinks from contact with the coarse-nerved is an aristocrat, as Anton Tchehov was an aristocrat when he wrote, 'Alas, I shall never be a Tolstoyan. In women I love beauty above all things, and in the history of mankind, culture expressed in carpets, spring carriages, and keenness of wit.'

Shakespeare could not therefore measure Coriolanus against the democratic idea in which he did not believe; nor could he pit the patriotic idea against him, for Coriolanus was immune from a weakness for his country. It is domestic love that pierces his armour and inflicts the mortal wound. And perhaps in Shakespeare's mind the power of that love was manifested less in the silver speech of the vehement and eloquent V olurnnia than in the golden silence of the more delicate woman to whom we have attempted to restore a few of her precious words.

Critical Essay #10

Critics have universally acknowledged Aufidius's secondary role in *Coriolanus,* and most define his character in relation to that of the protagonist. Charles Mitchell has noted that to a degree Coriolanus fashions Aufidius as an ideal, and that Aufidius's actual nobility and bravery therefore cannot live up to this unrealistic projection. Ruth Nevo has contended that Aufidius's manipulation of Coriolanus proves the source of his downfall- this is typical, according to Nevo, of the pattern of Shakespearean tragedy, despite the fact the other critics have argued that Coriolanus generates his own doom.

Harley Granville-Barker has seen Aufidius as an effective counterbalance to Coriolanus. Courageous and aristocratic in Granville-Barker's view, Aufidius cannot be described as basically evil, but instead resorts to treachery only after numerous honorable attempts to defeat Coriolanus on the battlefield have failed. As Stanley Wells has observed, Aufidius also offers valuable insights into the theme of the play. Aufidius remarks, "So our virtues / Lie in th' interpretation of the time,"_ commenting on the relativity of judgment that is one of the play's minor motifs. Wells has also noted that Aufidius provides a final comment on Coriolanus's character which insists that his fame and "noble memory" are deserved in spite of his degrading death.

Source: *"Coriolanus,"'* in *Preface to Shakespeare,* Vol. II, Princeton University Press, 1947, pp. 150-299.

[In the following excerpted preface to Coriolanus, Granville Barker explores the character of Aufidius, describing this "secondary hero." Granville-Barker acknowledges that Aufidius is for the most part effective as a counterpoint to Coriolanus. Aufidius is not made out to be a flat villain; he is brave and heroic, but plays a surprising role as a treacherous deceiver. Granvlle-Barker notes that Aufidius takes the "second.rate man's" approach by having Coriolanus put to death ignobly. Yet the critic also observes Aufidius's moments of wisdom and the final victory of common sense as the Volscian general cries, "My rage is gone / And I am struck with sorrow above Coriolanus's dead body.]

. . . It takes all Shakespeare's skill to make Aufidius fully effective within the space which the planning of the action allows him- and perhaps he does not wholly succeed. For a while it is not so difficult. He is admitted on all hands to be Marcius' rival and to come short of him by little. Marcius' first word of him is that

I sin in envying his nobility,
And were I anything but what I am,
I would wish me only he.

He is secondary hero. And when within a moment or so we see the man himself he is telling the Senators of Corioles:

If we and Caius Marcius chance to meet, 'Tis sworn betWeen us we shall ever strike Till one can do no more.

Volumnia, imagining glorious things, can see her Marcius

pluck Aufidius down by the hair. . .
In the battle the Cerioles taunt the Romans with
There is Aufidius: list, what work he makes
Amongst your cloven army.

while to Marcius, whether far off

There is the man of my soul's hate, Aufidius. . .

- or within reach

Set me against Aufldius and his Antiats. . . .

- he is an obsession. And when they do meet and fight, Aufidius, if bettered, is not beaten. To this point, then, however little we may see of him, he is brought to our minds in each succeeding scene, and is emphatically lodged there when he is so unconsentingly rescued in the duel with his famous enemy by "cenain Volsces" (anonymous: common soldiers presumably, therefore):

Officious, and not valiant, you have shamed me
In your condemned seconds.
And, since we shall not see him thereafter for some time, this note of shame, and of the crooked passion it can rouse in the man, is enlarged and given what will be memorable place in a scene coming but a little later.
Five times, Marcius,
I have fought with thee; so often hast thou
beat me,
And wouldst do so, I think, should we
encounter
As often as we eat.
Frank confession! But now
mine emulation
Hath not that honour in't it had; for where I thought to crush him in an equal force, True sword to sword, I'll patch at him some
way
Or wrath or craft may get him. . . .
Where I find him, were it
At home, upon my brother's guard, even
there, Against the hospitable canon, would I Wash my fierce hands in's heart.

We shall cenainly recall that- and be given good cause to- when, all amazingly, the event so falls out. The scheme of the action allows Aufidius very limited space; but we have thus far been kept conscious of him throughout. From now, even until he emerges

into it again, he does not go quite without mention, and we shall have lodged in mind what he may mean to it when he does. It is able stagecraft.

In a cruder play Aufidius and the V olsces might be made to serve as "villains of the piece." But Shakespeare is not painting in such ultta-patriotic black and white. We are on the Roman side, and they are "foreigners"; so their worse, not their better, aspect is naturally turned towards us. The victorious Romans give them a "good." peace, Titus Lartius being commanded to send back from their captured city to Rome

The best, WIth whom we may articulate,
For their own good and ours.
They, when their victorious turn comes, so we hear,
looked
For no less spoil than glory. . .

Shakespeare shades them somewhat. But the balance is not unfairly held.

Aufidius, then, re-enters the action at its most critical juncture, and to play for the moment a surprising part in it. Here, in this wine-flushed host to the nobles of Antium, is quite another man; and not only in the look of him but, yet more surprisingly- suspense resolvedin the deep-sworn enemy turned ecstatic comrade. From that

Nor sleep, nor sanctuary, Being naked, sick, nor fane nor Capitol, The prayers of priests, nor times of sacrifice, Embarquements all of fury, shall lift up Their rotten privilege and custom 'gainst My hate to Marcius.
we are at a glowing
Let me twine
Mine arms about that body, where against
My grained ash an hundred times hath broke
And scarred the moon with splinters: here I
clip
The anVll of my sword, and do contest
As hotly and as nobly with thy love
As ever in ambitious strength I did
Contend against thy valour.

It is a turning point indeed, and doubly so; the revolution in Marcius is barely set forth before it is matched with this. The two revolutions cliffer as the two men do; the one a plunging through defeat and misery from confident pride to obdurate bitterness; that in Aufidius a sudden emotional overthrow, sprung by this stattling proffer, this attack upon a weakness in him which he would never think to defend. Yet there is a hkeness between them too. And they are in keeping, both, with the rest of the play, its extremes of passion and their instabilities; the weathercock-swaying of the citizens, Volumnia's violence and arbitrary slufts. Marcius himself we shall see will be unable to abide by his treason to the end; and Aufidius, we shall very quickly guess, will not long sustain this unnatural change. Recurring ironies fitting into the scheme of tragic irony which informs the whole action.

This "strange alteration" - reflected too in the freakish comment of the servants- gives us a fresh, and, for the moment, an alert interest in Aufidius. From now to the end the stagecraft actuating him remains as able; and if here and there the figure *seems* to lack vitality, to be a little word-locked, why, livelier development of this new aspect of the man tnight well make more demands on the play's space than could be spared, or such a turn of inspiration as Shakespeare (even he!) has not unquestionably at command. But he does not dodge nor skip a step in the completing of the character. And, within a scene or so, to begin this, we see Aufidius again- quite disillusioned.

Thinking better of things is a dry business; and this ancillary scene, shared with an anonymous Lieutenant, will appropriately be none of the liveliest. But the matter of it is a strengthening rivet in the character scheme of the play. Aufidius' sobered reaction from his rhapsodies to the coldest common sense- hints dropped moreover of revengeful traps already laid for Marcius; Aufidius to be revenged on him for his own access of too generous folly, the hardest thing forgivable- this will redress any balance of sympathy lost between the two for the action's last ,phase. We have no violent swing back to the fanatically sportsmanlike hatred with which they started. On the contrary, to Aufidius is given in the scene's last speech the most measured and balanced of surnmarizings of his rival's qualities and failings. And for Marcius it is in this quiet reasonable accounting that his worst danger can be foreseen. Mastery in soldiership- who has ever denied him that? He has not even to exercise it now:

All places yield to him ere he sits down; And...
- despite his treason; because of it indeed
the nobility of Rome are his:
The Senators and Patricians love him too. . . .
I thmk he'll be to Rome
As is the asprey to the fish, who takes It
By sovereignty of nature. . . .
Aufidius, lacking just that sovereignty, could not look his own problem more fairly in the face. For, indeed, he had better know just where he has the worse of it, that being the second-rate man's due approach to getting the better of it after all. He may next encourage himself by hsting- though with every scmple and reserve- Marcius' failings too: pride, temper, intolerance and the rest, and by recognizing that in this discordant world men have the defects of their qualities and the qualities of their defects; and that at best, what is more,
our virtues
Lie in the interpretation of the time. . . .
- which may prove for us or against us; and whichever way
One fire drives out one fire; one nail, one
nail;
Rights by rights founder, strengths by
strengths do fail.
Fortune, with a little patient aid, is ever ready to turn her wheel:
When, Caius, Rome is thine
Thou art poor'st of all; then shortly art thou
mine.

Both speech and scene demand of their audience close attention, closer, perhaps, than such detached argument will currently command at this juncture in a play unless it be embodied in some central, radiating figure. It is the more notable that Shakespeare should here, so to speak, be forcing his meaning through the recalcitrant lines. But his aim, it would seem, is to give a rational substance to the figure, of such a sort as will keep us and Aufidius expressively if cryptically observant through succeeding scenes while we await the due restoring of the natural open entnity between the two.

It comes with relief.

How is it with our general' his fellow conspirators ask

Even so
As with a man by his own alms empoisoned, And with his charity slain.

But he is free now of his false position and on his own ground again, and the ills done him are glib upon his tongue. He must be cautiously in the right at all points:

And my pretext to strike at him admits
A good construction. I raised him, and I
pawned
Mine honour for his truth. . . .
More than so, he
took some pride
To do myself this wrong. . .

- he is fueling up with virtuous indignation, until, at the touch of a match, Coriolanus himself can be trusted to fire out in fury, no moral excuses needed. "Traitor . . . unholy braggart. . . boy of tears. . . boyl" - it is the last spark that sets all ablaze.

Aufidius' philosophic mind has not endured; nor does the one-time gallantry. "My valour's poisoned. . ."we are back at that. He is no coward, we know; has ever been ready to fight. It is only that, now or never, he must have the best of it, and he has made all sure. So, duly provoked

The Conspiratars drag and kill Caridanus, who falls. . . .
Upon which, though, he cannot resist it:
Aufidius stands on him

Shakespeare, in the maturity of his skill, knows how to give as much meaning to a significantly placed gesture as to a speech or more. There are two gestures here, the insolent treading of the slain man under foot, with the quick attempt in face of the shocked outcry to excuse it:

My noble masters, hear me speak.
Then the response to the reproach:
0, Tullus!
Thou hast done a deed whereat valour will weep.

Tread not upon him. Masters. . .
which can but be its shamed and embarrassed lifting, the more eloquent of Aufidius, this. The more fittingly unheroic, besides, the ending. The lords of the city have been honourable enemies.
Peace, hot no outrage: peace!
The man is noble and his fame folds in
This orb 0' the earth. His last offences to us
Shall have judicious hearing.
The sight of the outrage done him horrifies them. But
as Aufidius promptly argues,
My lords, when you shall know, as in this rage
Provoked by him, you cannot, the great danger
Which this man's life did owe you, you'll rejoice That he is thus cut off.
and, truly, as they'll in fairness soon admit:
His own impatience
Takes from Aufidius a great part of blame. . .
Common sense supervenes:
Let's make the best of it.
And Aufidius can say with truth, the man being safely dead:
My rage is gone,
And I am struck with sorrow. . . .

Adaptations

The Tragedy of Coriol. Time-Life Video, 1983.

BBC television production of the drama. Directed by Elijah Moshinsky. Distributed by Ambrose Video Publishing. 145 minutes.

Further Study

Literary Commentary

Barron, David B. *"Coriolanus:* Portrait of the Artist as Infant." *Kanringo* 19, No.2 (Summer 1962): 171-93.

A psychoanalytic essay that considers the subject of emotIOnal infantilism in *Cariolanus.* Barron argues that Coriolanus's excessive dependence upon his mother has manifest itself in an adult need for achievement, which nonetheless is hindered by his inability to escape her dominance.

Blecki, Catherine La Courreye. "'The Ladies Have Prevailed': Volurnnia, Virgilia, and Valeria in Shakespeare's *Cariolanus." San Jose Studies* xx, No.1 (Winter 1994): 6-17.

Considers the women of *Coriolanus*as a group which successfully opposes Coriolanus and the warrior ideal he represents. Blecki likewise explores the ways in which Volumnia, Virgilia, and Valena-a mother, a wife, and a widow- question women's roles in society.

Cantor, Paul A "Part One: *Coriolanus."* In *Shakespeare's Rome: Republic and Enpire,* pp. 55-124.Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1976.

In-depth study of what *Cariolanus* reveals concerning Shakespeare's understanding of Republican Rome. Among the various topics addressed are themes of selfknowledge and of the "fundamental incompatibility between political excellence and human excellence."

Charney, Maurice. *"Coriolanus."* In *All Shakespeare,* pp. 299308. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

Views *Coriolanus* as an abstract, ideological, and political play. Charney principally analyzes the imagery associated with Coriolanus, whom he describes as "a paradoxical hero, full of a harsh integrity and violendyantidemocratic."

Coote, Stephen. *Penguin Critical Studies: 'Coriolanus.'* London' Penguin Books, 1992, 98 p.

Study of *Coriolanus*that acknowledges the play's deficiencies in comparison to many of Shakespeare's other dramas, but considers instead Its powedul display of human struggle, and its strengths of dramatic tension and passion when pedormed on stage.

Gordon, D. J. "Name and Fame: Shakespeare's *Coriolanus."* In *Papers: Mainly Shakespearian,* edited by G. I. DuthIe, pp. 40-57. Edmburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1964.

Explains that *Coriolanus*is substantially concerned with a critique of honor. Considering Shakespeare's sources, and the changes he made in them, Gordon evaluates the effects of Coriolanus's pride when translated from the battlefield to the city of Rome.

Holstun, James. "Tragic Supedluity in *Caridanus." ELR* 50, No.3 (Fall 1983): 485-507.

Analyzes the metaphor of the body politic reflected in Menenius's fable of the belly, arguing that the fable should not be consIdered as the key to Shakespeare's perception of social order, but as patt of a larger satire of an anstocratic social theory.

Honigmann, E. A J. "The Clarity of *Coriolanus."* In *Shakespeare: The Dramatist's Mampulatron if Response,* pp. 170-91. London: Macmillan, 1976.

Discusses *Coriolanus*as Shakespeare's final tragedy. Honigmann analyzes the fable of the belly delivered by Menenius m Act I for the light It sheds on the complex social functions of the drama. The critic also probes the development and death of Coriolanus, as well as the method of his characterization, sunnising that Shakespeare constantly manipulated the perceptions of his audIence, and never took a definitive stance without offering a counter-argument.

Hutchings, W. "Beast or God: The *Coriolanus*Controversy." *Critical Quarterly* 24, No.2 (Summer.1982): 35-50.

Explores modern critical assessments of *Coriolanus*as a political play. Overall, HutchIngs views character and politics as "complementary rather than antithetical m the structure of *Coriolanus"* and finds the play's concern with the conjunction of language, truth, and society as fundamental.

Kahn, Coppelia. "Mother of Battles: Volumnia and Her Son in *Coriolanus."* In *Raman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds, and Women,* pp. 144-59. London: Routledge, 1997.

Studies the "interactIon between mothering and warmaking" in *Coriolanus.* Kahn analyzes the imagery and sources associated with this unIque juxtaposition of traditionally feminine and masculine roles, and examines *its ironic* results in the play.

Knight, G. WIlson. "The Royal Occupation: An Essay on *Coriolanus."* In *The Imperial Theme' Further Interpretations of Shakespeare's Tragedies Including the Raman Plays,* pp. 154-98. London: Oxford University Press, 1931.

Investigates the importance of *Coriolanus's* metal, weapon, and city imagery to an understanding of both its hero and the world In which he lives. Knight also considers the relationship between Coriolanus and his mother as based upon shared pride, which proves to be the source of the protagonist's tragedy.

Lowe, Lisa. "'Say I play the man I am': Gender and Politics In *Coriolanus." The Keny:;n Redew* VIII, No.4 (Fal11986): 86-95. Probes combined political and gender conflicts operating in *O:molanus.* Gting examples of language, metaphor, and rhetoric in the play- including the drama's psychologIcal focus on the relatIOnship of Coriolanus and

Volumnia, and the imagery of the body politic found in Menenius's fable of the belly-Lowe focuses on the inseparable nature of the work's concern with the dynamics of male-female and class relationships.

Maus, Katherine Eisaman. *"Coriolanus."* In *The Norton Shakespeare,* pp. 2785-92. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997.

Surveys changes Shakespeare made to Plutarch's original story *in* writing *Coriolanus,* political debates raised in the play, and the work's intense scrutiny of Roman society and its highly restrictive patterns of masculinIty and femininity.

Mitchell, Charles. "Coriolanus: Power as Honor." *Shakespeare Studies* I (1965): 199-226.

Discusses the dynamics of Coriolanus's unbending honor and his obsession for power. Mitchell examines Coriolanus's lack of feeling, his selflessness, his selflove, his rejection of praIse, and ultimately hIs ethical inversion of good and evIl.

Nevo, Ruth. *"Coriolanus."* In *Tragic Form In Shakespeare,* pp. 356-404. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972.

Maintains that *Coriolanus*fits the pattern of Shakespear ean tragedy in that the fatal error of its protagonist is brought about by the manipulation of others. Nevo sees the tribunes and, later, Aufidius as manipulators, and contends that motivation for action In the play does not originate with Coriolanus, but with these schemers.

Palmer, John. "Caius Marcius Coriolanus." In *Political Characters of Shakespeare,* pp. 250-310. London: Macmillan and Co., 1945.

Explication of Coriolanus's character in political contexts which envIsIons the tragIc climax of *Coriolanus* as "a conflict between personal pride and family affection rather than a conflict between the principles of aristocratic and popular government."

Parker, R B. "Introduction." In *The Tragedy of Coriolanus,* edited byR B. Parker, pp. 1-154. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.

Offers information on style, sources, contemporary history, stage productions, and varying modern interpreta tions of *Coriolanus.*

Paster, Gail Kern. "To Starve with Feeding: The City in *Coriolanus." Shakespeare Studies* XI (1978): 123-44.

Assesses Shakespeare's rendering of imagery associated with the city of Rome and the characters who inhabit it in *CnridamIS.* In addition to examining the principal characters in the play, Paster sees Coriolanus's death as a sacrifice to a greater process- "the endless tragicomic cycle of regeneration" - that allows the community as a whole to survive.

Poole, Adrian. *Hailster New Critical Introductions to Shakespeare: 'Coriolanus.'* New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988, 14O p.

Offers a close reading of *Coriolanus,* with special emphasis on its strengths in dramatic performance.

Proser, Matthew. "Coriolanus: The Constant Warrior and the State." *0Jllege EngJish* 24, No.7 (April1963): 507-12.

Comments on Coriolanus's unchanging character in relation to war, community, and his mother.

Rabkin, Norman. "The Polity." In *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding,* pp. 80-149. New York: The Free Press, 1967.

Describes Shakespeare's politics, as demonstrated in his plays, as tragic. Rabkin finds the dramatist's presentation of political action in *Coriolanus*to be problematic, and determines that the play offers a critique of "the ethical status of the body politic itself."

Sicherman, Carol M. *"Coriolanus:* The Failure of Words." *ELH* 39, No.2 *Gune* 1972): 189-207.

Studies the theme of language in *Coriolanus,* specifically Coriolanus's fear and mistrust of words.

Spencer, T. J. B. *"Coriolanus."* In *S_espeare: The Roman Plays,* pp. 38-48. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1963.

Survey of *Coriolanus*that lauds the splendid writing of the play, but views Coriolanus as unsympathetic- a defect which causes the drama as a whole to suffer.

Stockholder, Katherine. "The Other Coriolanus." *PMLA* 85, No.2 (March 1970): 228-36.

Contends that "the tragic focus in *Coriolanus*. . . is blurred by the protagonist's confusion of honour with a limited conception of manliness." Stockholder's interpretation highlights the ironic qualities that Coriolanus embodies, particularly the military ideals of the Roman Empire, and the destructiveness that accompanies these ideals.

Thomas, Vivian. "Sounds, Words, Gestures and Deeds in *Coriolanus."* In *Shakespeare's Rorrnn Worlds,* pp. 154-219. London: Routledge, 1989.

Investigates the social universe of *Coriolanus* as it is expressed through words, actions, and images, and characterized through conflict. Thomas contends that the central issue of the play is the question of values, and that while others are suited to adapt to changes in social values, Coriolanus- the" quintessential Roman" is not

Van Dyke, Joyce. "Making a Scene: Language and Gesture in *'Coriolanus'."* *Shakespeare SImE)/3O* (1977): 135-46. Evaluates the ways in which Coriolanus

expresses himself through action and gesture, and his inability to act the parts that others believe he ought to play.

Wells, Stanley. "Tragedies of Ancient Egypt and Rome." In *Shakespeare: A Life in Drama,* pp. 300-27. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1995.

Enumerates multiple conflicts in *Coriolanus,* including the war between the Romans and V olscians, the struggle of the Roman people against the patricians, and Conolanus's internal strife.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Shakespeare for Students (SfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Shakespeare for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Shakespeare for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Shakespeare for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Shakespeare for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Shakespeare for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Shakespeare for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Shakespeare for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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