

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Coriolanus 1605-8

Shakespeare

Overview.

History. Shakespeare's inexhaustible Renaissance historical mind drove him to reflect, in drama, on many aspects of his nation's historical roots, and in particular on earlier English history, to which he devoted eleven full dramas; he was also drawn to widely diverse aspects of the Roman foundations of western culture, to which he devoted a half dozen plays, counting in the long narrative poem, *The Rape of Lucrece*. To the creation of these historical plays he brought spot-on imagination, some basic understanding of Classical literature and culture, picked up in grammar school, a voracious and fast-absorbing reading in English literary sources, and the ability to enframe telling episodes from the larger fabric of history as Shakespeare's culture created it.

Classics. Four of Shakespeare's Roman works—*Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, and the verse narrative of *The Rape of Lucrece*—are among his finest studies of the individual temper, acting and thinking under great pressure (Caesar, Cleopatra, Coriolanus, Tarquin), and each of those works is set at a time of telling decision in Roman history, particularly at a time when immense political transition is at stake, either from monarchy to republic or from republic to what promises to be a revolutionary period of new Empire. Of the powerful characters generated by these transitions, Shakespeare seems most starkly to have understood Coriolanus, a unique figure of power, pride, contempt for the values of the man on the street, and determination to stand to the end on his own two feet. When we get to Coriolanus we will get to parallels; you would do well to think of Theodore Roosevelt, Douglas MacArthur, even Napoleon. The trick, though, will be to find a parallel who rivals Coriolanus in guts and determination, but then refuses to accept honors either from the commoners, who have no credentials to honor anybody, or the Senate, who are cowardly do nothings, as unqualified as the commoners to claim triumphal honors.

Characters

Romans

Caius Marcius; later named Coriolanus
Menenius Agrippa; Senator
Cominius; consul and army commander in chief
Titus Lartius; Roman general
Volumnia; Mother of Coriolanus
Virgilia; Wife of Coriolanus
Young Marcius; Son of Coriolanus
Valeria; chaste Roman lady; friend of Coriolanus' family
Sicinius Velutus; Tribune
Junius Brutus; Tribune

Volscians

Tullius Aufidius; Volscian General
Aufidius' Lieutenant
Aufidius; Servingmen
Conspirators with Aufidius
Adrian; Volscian spy
Nicanor; Roman traitor
Volscian lords
Volscian Citizens

Story

Assaulted. The story before us opens shortly after the expulsion of the monarchy of the Tarquins from Rome, that is around 500 B.C. (Note how meticulously Shakespeare, in *The Rape of Lucrece*, 1593, had analyzed the criminal mindset of the last of the Tarquins, whose raping of Lucrece essentially destroyed the Tarquin dynasty.) We are at a period of bare survival for the new Republic—poor harvests, surging prices for grain, and unscrupulous manipulators of the market—and the new government is neither able to protect itself from outlaw societies, nor to shape its own society. A neighboring tribe, the Volscians, are among several outlier groups hungrily viewing the weak new Republic of Rome, and on the verge of overthrowing it. Rioters are in the streets of Rome and the enemy is at the gates, and a powerful leader is the only way forward for the Romans.

Leadership. The present play concerns the complex and fascinating leader who emerges from the Roman crisis. Marcius, later called Coriolanus, is a patrician, powerful military man, and chief administrator in Rome; he is proud of his courageous service to his people—he has been seriously wounded on their behalf, and has many times turned the enemy away at the gates—and has nothing but contempt for the current protestors, who are demanding a corn dole and fair wages. Coriolanus' position, toward this populace in crisis, is that they are basically rabble, who have done nothing to deserve better of their city. The formula emerging here counterposes a military hero, recently returned from a stunning victory over the Volscians and their leader Aufidius, a leader with contempt for a do-nothing citizenry, but who at the same time refuses to accept the honor of becoming a Roman consul, thus incorporating himself into the power structure of the New Republic—where senators like Brutus await the opportunity to welcome the military hero into the ranks of the Republican aristocracy. In other words: Coriolanus is proud of his military achievements, does not want incorporation into the political aristocratic-republican establishment of Rome, and is equally contemptuous of the man on the street. It is not clear what Coriolanus wants or is: his power, pride, contempt, and military prowess put him in a unique position.

Brutus. The Roman Senate, viewing itself as the repository of true republican ideas, thus of the values of the new post-monarchical society, is insistent that Coriolanus accept their official triumphal acclaim, and the exalted position within the Senate. It is their way of controlling him, especially important because the Senate deeply distrusts Coriolanus' autocratic tendencies, anathema to the Senate. When Coriolanus refuses the Senate's demand, to accept their acclaim, a crisis involving the values of the new state swallows the society, and the Senate decides to banish Coriolanus, which is alright with him, for it accords with his fury against his whole society. However, the tale again takes another move counter to expectation, and indicates how little the Romans had been able to anticipate the personality of Coriolanus.

Aufidius. We have seen that Coriolanus' great triumph had been over the Volscian army, led by Coriolanus' peer, general Aufidius. Furious with his own people, twisted by a nature which was both proud and obdurate, and caring nothing for settled-society honors, Coriolanus made his way to the military station of Aufidius himself, and offered to fight with him against the Romans, an offer Aufidius gladly (and with astonishment) accepted. The military attack against Rome begins quickly, evoking terror among the Romans, a wide spread anger against Coriolanus, who is quickly viewed as a traitor, and clamorous efforts to talk Coriolanus into rethinking his position. Knowing Coriolanus as we now do, we understand that he is unlikely to relent on behalf of his native city, but we can guess that the only argument that might convince him would come from his wife and especially mother, who can cut into him below the level of pride. So in fact it turns out, mother Volumnia turning the tide, the attack on Rome quenched. But one major issue remains. The new Roman state will not forgive Coriolanus for his present treachery, or for his previous rejection of the honors offered to him by the Senate. Aufidius will not forgive Coriolanus for his reneging on the war against Rome. Aufidius is the one to put the fatal dagger into Coriolanus' breast.

Themes

Pride. Pride is the driving force behind Coriolanus' power and behind his refusal to bend to the norms of his own society. He is the classical victim of a pride which will lead its victim to the brink of self-destruction. 'Pride goeth before a fall, and a haughty spirit before defeat.'

Refusal Coriolanus' pride leads him to refuse the efforts of the Roman Senate, to reward him for his extraordinary military valor. In accepting their offer, Coriolanus would need to ask the approval of the Roman people, as well as of the Senators, and though he would seem likely to be approved, he is too proud to ask for approval, from men who have no battle scars to show their valor.

Contempt Coriolanus feels contempt for the protestors, in the streets of Rome, who are demanding grain equity and fair prices. For Coriolanus these citizens, who have neither sweated nor fought for their country, have no right to make demands on that country.

Revenge. Coriolanus is furious when the citizens and senate of Rome decide to banish him, and he quite naturally turns to revenge against them, as soon as he can. He makes his way to the headquarters of his arch enemy, Aufidius, and offers his services in a joint war against Rome.

Vulnerability. We learn, at the end of the play, that Coriolanus is ultimately vulnerable to his Mother's pleas, as she reminds him of his noble background, and of the blood, sweat and tears she has put in on his life.

Coriolanus

Character. The main character, and one of Shakespeare's most powerful creations, is Coriolanus. He is the ultimate in a proud, isolated, all-risking, and stubborn leader. He has little interest in others, no interest in honors, and total scorn for the little guy. Whereas Shakespeare devotes intricate attention to the traits of some of his tragic characters—Othello, Hamlet, Macbeth—he presents Coriolanus as a relatively stark example of a kind of fierce fighter, whose only real weakness is Mom.

Parallels. In ancient Greek literature there are proud and unyielding characters like Ajax, Achilles, Neoptolemus, Diomedes—all from Homer's work—who resemble Coriolanus. With the possible exception of Achilles—whose depth range is unequalled, whose capacity for both love and hate are exceptional—none of these characters is complexly rich, but all are stark and formidable. They know their minds, they can act fast, and they are not given to second thoughts. Earlier, we mentioned some modern military heroes who might bear comparison with Coriolanus. For sheer stiff necked mutual opposition, Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson might be worth consideration!

Illustrative moments

'you dissentious rogues
That, rubbing the poor itch of your opinion,
Make yourself scabs...'

Coriolanus lashes out at the mob.

'Go, get you home, you fragments...' Choice language by which Coriolanus whips the Roman crowd.

'I sin, in envying his nobility.' Coriolanus admits his admiration for the fierce Volscian, Aufidius.

'All the contagions of the South light on you,
You slaves of Rome!'

Coriolanus excoriates the Roman man on the street.

'The blood I drop is rather physical
Than dangerous to me.'

Nothing physical about Coriolanus! He is

All spirit and fury. The fact is, as he tells the Roman people, that he is covered with wounds earned in the struggle to preserve the people's freedom. His wounds are themselves symbols.

Discussion questions

In *The Sacred Wood* T. S. Eliot expresses a great admiration for Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, which he thinks one of the author's finest achievements. Other critics, like F. H. Bradley, refuse to accord this play a position among Shakespeare's 'top four tragedies.' To evaluate this play it is worth giving some thought to what gives the play its distinctive power: the unique force with which Coriolanus is driven back into his community, after having expressed his recusance, his stubborn pride- driven petulance. The answer of course will be the pleas of his mother, on behalf of his entire family. Coriolanus is not ultimately able to withstand those primal calls on what he is, even though this yielding leads directly to his death at the hands of Aufidius. Do you think that Coriolanus gains in tragic stature, in his claims on our respect, by yielding to the tug of maternal love? Or is he diminished as a tragic figure, by his yielding?

Shakespeare constructs some of his most renowned tragic characters around the richness of their interior lives and dialogues with themselves. (Hamlet soliloquizes richly, asking himself in many ways what he should do in regard to his father's death; Lear does the same, trying to come to grips with the meanings of the uncertainties of his daughters' love for him.) Coriolanus, however, does not reflect on his own situation, although he vituperates most bitterly and harshly against the Roman citizenry. He makes it abundantly clear what he thinks of others, but does not dwell on what he thinks of himself, or enact himself as a 'full character,' with a multiple potential of unpredictable action in him. Are you thereby fascinated by Coriolanus, as most of us are by Shakespeare's greatest tragic figures? Or does he seem to you one dimensional?

Shakespeare was from the beginning a master of on the street dialogue, the everyday chatting of the common man or woman (usually man.) How does he use this common speech as a way of familiarizing us with the character of Coriolanus, and the state of political affairs, throughout the course of this play about early Republican Rome?