

THE MODERNITY OF
SHAKESPEARE'S *CORIOLANUS*

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"To thine own self be true; thou canst not then be false to any man"

Is it possible, in this world, to be absolutely true to oneself — to be innocent of all compromise, hypocrisy, deceit, double-talk, intrigue, manipulation? Is pure nobility — unswerving adherence to a code of honour — consistent with survival in a complex society that is not only an ethnic nation but also a political state? Shakespeare's answer lies in the depiction of a double ruin. The uncompromising integrity of a soldier disqualifies him as a public figure when he enters the political world; but when the public figure then stoops to compromise, he is destroyed as a man. *Coriolanus* has been variously called Shakespeare's most gloomy, most monotonous, most difficult play: it seems to be the least read, and the least admired, of his tragedies. But of one thing there can be no doubt. It is an acute presentation of the eternal tragic conflict between the possible and the necessary, between ideals and realities, between ethics and politics. I hope to show, furthermore, that this conflict is presented in a key that is peculiarly familiar to twentieth-century audiences.

Rome has just emerged from one of those routine wars in which you regularly attack your neighbours to provide excitement and employment, to steal wealth and keep the population down, and to divert public attention from failures of domestic policy. When victory is announced and peace returns, it is plain that Rome is in a state of crisis. The traditional authority of the nobility is being threatened by the power of the people, who have recently been allowed to elect five representatives to the government. In fact, government itself — the formulation and execution of policies for the enduring good of the nation — is growing weaker, while party-political, sectional voices are

becoming louder. Thus is dramatised the gulf between the people, who are weak, poor and hungry, and the authorities, who are powerful, wealthy and well-fed. In particular, the people are protesting against the unfair distribution of food. The patricians' spokesman replies that it is not the government, but the gods, that are responsible for Rome's economic problems. The state steers or guides the nation, but it cannot be blamed for natural disasters.

I tell you, friends, most charitable care
Have the patricians of you. For your wants,
Your suffering in this dearth, you may as well
Strike at the heaven with your staves as lift them
Against the Roman state...

(I.i. 67—70)

For the dearth
The gods, not the patricians, make it, and
Your knees to them, not arms, must help. Alack,
You are transported by calamity
Thither where more attends you; and you slander
The helms of the state, who care for you like fathers,
When you curse them as enemies.

(I.i. 73—79)

When Rome's general and flower of the nobility Caius Marcius returns from a victory over the neighbouring Volscians, he faces a scene that is doubly alien to him. In the first place, as a military man, he is ill at ease in civilian clothes, with the trivialities and low temperature of the street corner and market place. Secondly, as an army commander, he is dismayed to find a new political order in which those born to exercise authority now have to share their power with representatives of the simple ignorant people.

They'll sit by the fire, and presume to know
What's done in the Capitol: who's like to rise,
Who thrives and who declines...

(I.i. 192—194)

He foresees trouble: the rabble will

in time

Win upon power and throw forth greater themes
For insurrection's arguing.

(I.i. 220—222)

The army, after all, is not the best place to acquire an understanding of democracy. However, Coriolanus — as Caius Marcius is resoundingly named after his victory at Corioli — suffers from more than a purely professional handicap when his suitability for high civilian rank is considered. He is known to be a man of exceptionally strong principles, powered by a spiritual purity

that marks him off from other men: an aristocrat of honour, indeed, who feels and shows frank contempt for the great majority of the people around him.

When he is proposed as a candidate for the consulship, the tribunes have little difficulty in reminding the people that Coriolanus is their class enemy, and that if given power he would quickly remove their newly-won privileges. However valiant he is in war, people do not want to be led in peace by a man who is too proud to ask them to vote for him, too superior to go through the time-honoured ritual of showing them his wounds and recounting his military exploits, aloof and contemptuous. The tribune Brutus rebukes him:

You speak of the people
As if you were a god, to punish, not
A man of their infirmity.

(III.i. 80—82)

When the tribunes insist — supported reluctantly by the nobles — Coriolanus, always easy to rouse to anger, responds with a long, violent attack on the new experiment with democracy, accusing the government of needless capitulation. He challenges the senators:

If he have power,
Then veil your ignorance; if none, awake
Your dangerous lenity...
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 the other.

(III.i. 97—112)

Let deeds express
What's like to be their words: "We did request it;
We are the greater poll, and in true fear
They gave us our demands." Thus we debase
The nature of our seats, and make the rabble
Call our cares fears; which will in time
Break ope the locks of the Senate and bring in
The crows to peck the eagles.

(III.i. 132—139)

The election of the tribunes was dictated by local necessity, not by the enduring laws of political prudence.

In a rebellion,
When what's not meet, but what must be, was law,
Then were they chosen; in a better hour
Let what is meet be said it must be meet,
And throw their power in the dust.

(III.i. 165—170)

His banishment from Rome, on the grounds of "treason", unleashes a violent renunciation of his native soil.

You common cry of curs, whose breath I hate
As reek as the rotten fens, whose loves I prize
As the dead carcasses of unburied men
That do corrupt the air, I banish you.
And here remain with your uncertainty!
.....
There is a world elsewhere.

(III.iii. 119–135)

Coriolanus is not, however, the kind of man to suffer in lonely exile. He is a military man, best in battle; moreover, his outraged sense of justice tempts him into revenge. He therefore commits real treason: he offers his services to Aufidius, the commander of the Volscians whom he has recently defeated, but who is preparing to attack Rome once more. He accepts Coriolanus' offer, and indeed makes him his first-in-command. But Aufidius knows the difference between a true friend and a man who offers his alliance out of a desire for revenge, and he knows that Coriolanus — the enemy of all mutability — cannot change sides with a clear conscience. In the meantime, Coriolanus confidently settles into his new power, culminating in an entirely unauthorised peace treaty with Rome, made in response to the pleas of his mother. Now Aufidius can attack, and Coriolanus, a man of simple integrity who has yet twice committed treason, must be destroyed.

That is enough, as a bare sketch of "what happens". I should like now to examine how Shakespeare turns a factual record into an absorbing study of tragic inevitability; offering in the process a profound study of an incomplete man, whom psychological, ethical and political forces all combine to destroy: not a "forked thing" but a more complex man inhabiting a world of many dimensions, a modern world. I propose first to treat these aspects of Coriolanus' experience — the psychological, the ethical and the political — separately. Finally I will seek to show how they interpenetrate each other in this play, and make of the hero a tragic figure of a peculiarly modern kind.

"The theme of 'Coriolanus' is a psychological one that seems to belong more to our post-Freudian world than to Shakespeare's. The protagonist is unique among the tragic heroes of the Jacobean era in that his creator endows him with a childhood and a mother more than adequate to create the neurosis from which he suffers."
(Auchinloss 1970: 75)

To examine Coriolanus' psychological weaknesses is to see the dangers of all indoctrination. He was brought up by one person: his autoeratic mother Volumnia. She represents a conservative governing class, jealous of its inherited power. She has had exclusive control over her son's emotional development; she has trained him from his earliest boyhood to be a paragon

of masculinity. A friend recalls his childhood:

I saw him run after a gilded butterfly: and when he caught it, he let it go again; and after it again; and over and over, he comes, and up again; and caught it again; or whether his fall enraged him, or how 'twas, he did so set his teeth, and tear it...
(I.iii. 63–69)

His only toys were war toys, his sports were martial, his ideal was that of the invincible warrior, physically and spiritually hardened by every kind of challenge. Only intellectual challenges were absent. Not surprisingly, he joined the army as soon as he was able, and soon became famed for his valour.

For most young people, growing up brings a recognition that parents are average human beings rather than infallible authorities; there are other adults with whom they may be compared; there are other social groups, with perhaps different values; and there is the other sex which constitutes an effective threat to parental dominance. Throughout his youth, however, Coriolanus is depicted as remaining absolutely devoted to his mother and the narrow class she represents. His very patriotism may be rooted in a desire to please his mother; this at least is the view of some of the common people:

...though soft-conscienced 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.

(I.i. 37–41)

He belongs to no alternative group from which he might see his upbringing in perspective; and his wife appears as hardly more than the legendary girl tearfully waiting for her man to "come home" — and the means by which he can produce a son in his own image.

Coriolanus is the opposite of the civilised or educated man: he is rather the "noble savage", ignorant of the everyday world with its rich spectrum of psychological types and ethical puzzles. He is schooled only for a limited, simplified, abstract domain: war. But we can go further even than this. A good military commander must know his men, enjoy their confidence; and he must be skilled in tactics and strategy, since the enemy is overcome by superior intelligence more often than by superior physical strength. Coriolanus, however, has not studied the art of war; for him, war is a grand physical duel, a simple contest between brave men, aristocrats of valour who, though formally "enemies", have more in common with each other than they have with their own soldiers.

I sin in envying his nobility;
And were I anything but what I am,
I would wish me only he.....
..... He is a lion
I am proud to hunt.

(I.i. 231–237)

He does not know his men, cannot understand that they are a cross-section of common humanity with common weaknesses, scooped up from the streets to act in a drama that means nothing to them. If Coriolanus succeeds in leading these people, it is only by the force of his terrifying example, not by any powers of persuasion. If they hesitate, he will offer them not encouragement but abuse. We have to suspend our disbelief that any general so ignorant of men and of strategy could ever win a battle. Certainly, in his professional world, he is admired by some, hated and envied by many, and loved by no-one.

"He is a thing complete, a rounded perfection. We can no more blame him for his ruthless valour than we can blame the spear for finding its mark. Yet Coriolanus has no mark; that is his tragedy... He is too perfect a unit, an isolated force. His wars are not for Rome: they are an end in themselves."

(Wilson Knight 1963: 160–161)

Wilson Knight does well to stress that mechanical quality which links purity and perfectionism to inhumanity. Outside the enclosed hierarchical world of artificial purity — this command-structure powered by the values of honour, nobility, valour, heroism, service — Coriolanus is lost. The integrity of the soldier destroys the integrity of the man. He has been protected from the need for introspection; and he has little experience of informal relations outside his immediate family (itself a very small unit). Despite all his individual virtues, he is not a person — i.e. a man who understands his place in the larger world. As the play unfolds, he is shown capable of sensitivity, groping towards the development of a personality. This is a scarcely visible movement, but — as Wilson Knight recognises at the end of his essay — it is enough to make of Coriolanus something more human, after all, than a simple machine of war.

His tragedy stems from his innocence. Its sharpest manifestation, as we shall see, is political: the fate of an innocent military man, for whom power is *earned*, who strays into a civilian world in which power has to be *won*. But there is an inner, emotional tragedy. Coriolanus does not know his mother. He does not know that all his carefully supervised education, all his military glory — to him, an end in itself — is for her an instrument of a precise ambition: to preserve the power of her class by getting her son elected as consul of Rome:

I 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.

Know, good mother,

I had rather be their servant in my way
Than sway with them in theirs.

(II.i. 204–209)

He discovers, to his dismay, that this revered figure, who has brought him up to be absolutely incorruptible and true to his principles, can recommend compromise and hypocrisy "in the political interest".

Why did you wish me milder — would you have me
False to my nature? Rather say I play
The man I am...
You might have been enough the man you are,
With striving less to be so...

(III.ii. 14–20)

But she does not know her son either. His spiritual purity, appropriate enough to the monastic existence of an army commander, turns out to be a very unwelcome by-product of her education and a poor qualification for statesmanship in the civilian world. In fact, as Auchinloss comments, "she has no conception of how sick a man he is, no idea of what she has done to him". (Auchinloss 1970:77). Because Volumnia has conditioned her son rather than educated him, she has stunted his intellectual growth and therefore his powers of self-adaptation; as a result, "he understands neither himself nor anyone else, so that both leadership and compromise are beyond him" (Dover Wilson) His mother chides him for reacting unintelligently and therefore without political prudence: coming from his sole educator, the reproach is an admission of failure.

I have a heart as little apt as yours,
But yet a brain that leads my use of anger
To better vantage.

(III.ii. 29–31)

Even the mother-son relationship, then, is a failure. It is held together not by love — with its attendant attitudes of tolerance and mercy and forgiveness and hope — but only by the abstractions of honour, valour, patriotism, nobility: qualities which glitter brightly in a mechanistic, pre-Christian cosmos, but which acquire the positive status of virtues only in conditions of crisis. Not surprisingly, when Coriolanus meets his mother in the changed conditions of peace, the gulf that separates them rapidly widens. Unfortunately, while he is increasingly paralysed by perplexity, he cannot shake off his mother's influence: when off the battlefield, after all, he has no other anchorage. It is she who persuades him to perform a new part, to seek the people's "voices" in that arena of anarchy, the market-place.

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. 107–110)

Coriolanus does not know himself. The product of stiff military conditioning, he has never stopped to wonder "why?". This does not mean that he is incapable of doubt and conflict; in this play, he faces at least two inescapable "to-be-or-not-to-be" choices. Unlike Hamlet, however, he is not an intellectual; his speech serves functions of direction and expression rather than of reflection. Whatever agonies there are in his consciousness, they are enacted between the lines of the play. This is not a tragedy of soliloquies, a dramatization of inner turmoil. When Coriolanus uses language, it is always public, transparent; he is eloquent in conveying his convictions, but cannot handle the codes of negotiation and interaction. He is the opposite of Richard II, the artist-ruler who weaves a world of words to populate his solitude (and has, of course, absolutely no understanding of the military life). Coriolanus prospers in solitude: he is one of Shakespeare's "marginal men" (like a Cassius shorn of his shrewdness), radicals contemptuous of the frivolities of their times, burning with spiritual zeal. Like them, he is laconic; his words serve his vices better than his virtues — caricaturing his self-confidence, but powerless to reflect his deeper insecurity.

The gulf steadily widens between the way other people see him and the way he sees himself. His own class — the patricians, his mother — heap flattery upon him as their defender against the rising power of the people. The tribunes spread absurdly false rumours about him in order to consolidate own power. All Coriolanus asks is to be accepted on his own merits, as a loyal servant of the Roman state. But Shakespeare shows that this is politically naive, since the state is no longer the monolithic thing of Coriolanus' imagination; and he clearly feels that he has been selflessly defending a society in which he can no longer believe absolutely. His attitude is psychologically naive also, since there are no islands of neutrality, no oases of transparent authenticity, in Shakespeare or in real life. People seem fated to misunderstand each other much of the time; we are all suffocated by the warring pressures of public expectation. Coriolanus cannot inhabit an empty space. Therefore, when he feels betrayed by his class and nation, he imagines that he can purchase a new freedom by serving the enemy. He knows that his decision may hasten his physical death — but the prospect of death, after all, is part of military life. He has a more specific intuition: a glimpse of his own imprisonment in a web spun by the gods and leading to his spiritual ruin. If he will be conquered, it will be by the slipperiness of the world.

O world, thy slippery turns! Friends now fast sworn,
Whose double bosoms seem to wear one heart,
Whose hours, whose bed, whose meal and exercise
Are 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 with me:

My birthplace hate I, and my love's upon
This enemy town. I'll enter. If he slay me,
He does fair justice; if he give me way,
I'll do his country service.

(IV.iv. 12—26)

Twice Coriolanus attempts to compromise with his conscience, in acts that politically and militarily can be called treasonable: once when he agrees to beg for the citizens' votes, and once when in the employ of the enemy he makes peace with Rome. On both occasions his immature dependence on his mother is responsible and twice, his armoured speech melts to reveal his ordinary human frailty. It is at these times that this proud, unsuperstitious man senses that he is being swept along by something bigger even than himself.

O mother, mother!

What have you done? Behold, the heavens do ope,
The gods look down, and this unnatural scene
They laugh at. O mother, mother! O!
You have won a happy victory for Rome;
But for your son — believe it, O, believe it! —
Most dangerously you have with him prevailed,
If not most mortal to him. But let it come...

(V.iii. 183—189)

These are rare moments of stillness in an otherwise uniformly violent movement — moments when the hero achieves verbal intimacy with his predicament. They are moments when the bankruptcy of his education and emotional development are publicly revealed; when his acquired devotion to abstractions comes into direct collision with the neglected urges of his common humanity. Aufidius, in whose mouth Shakespeare somewhat surprisingly puts the most penetrating observations about Coriolanus, well expresses the hero's dilemma and its likely consequences:

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—202)

This conflict cannot be resolved by such an unreflective, immature personality; and this explains why Coriolanus cannot bring anything to fulfilment. It explains the crucial significance of the insult "Boy!" hurled at him by his enemy just before the end. "Shakespeare portrays the tragedy of Coriolanus as lying in the belated recognition of the maternal influence that has made him what he is and what he is about to become... It is the word 'Boy' that

finally shocks him into a recognition of the facts of his life. "(Phillips 1970:13). It is this word that precipitates his death as he reaches for his sword one more reckless time, in what Auchinloss calls "the logical last step of his long suicide" (Auchinloss 1970:82). It explains why the death of this formerly famous man is private, and devoid of consequences.

What we are for ourselves — our character and personality — determines how we see other people, and how they see us. A person who is psychologically simple may stumble uncomprehendingly against all sorts of moral complexities. Coriolanus' absolute integrity, his perfect selflessness, his pure devotion to truth are desirable properties in the make-up of an individual. But no man is an island. The thicker medium of social existence diffracts these psychological simplicities onto an *ethical* continuum, in which they appear in more ambivalent everyday forms: as ambition and vanity, naivete and ignorance, frankness and discourtesy, self-confidence and obstinacy, bravery and rashness, incorruptibility and pride. Every adolescent must at least attempt to make such distinctions as these, which are forced upon mature personalities by the ethical continuum of the real world, in which our pristine individual psychological qualities are inevitably interpreted and appraised by other people. Thus, while we are interested in the forces that make Coriolanus what he is, the drama is made out of the effects that his qualities have upon others, and consequently upon himself.

There is one epithet continually applied to Coriolanus, one that is ethically of particular interest, and one with three distinct areas of meaning, reflecting the interests of those who use it. I refer, of course, to the concept of *pride*. If we agree provisionally to call this play a tragedy of pride, it is not for the trivial reason that "pride goes before a fall", but because it forces us into the domain of what theologians of all times have felt to be the "typically human perversion" or the "strongest and most beautiful of the vices".

In the eyes of the tribunes, plotting to get rid of Coriolanus, he is *proud* in the sense of being self-satisfied, boastful, arrogant, contemptuous of those weaker than himself. This disposition might best be designated by the Latin term *superbia*. For the politicians, plotting to have him elected consul, his pride is a legitimate, integral part of his nobility and valour (*virtus*). As for Coriolanus' evaluation of himself, he evinces pride of a third kind: an urge towards self-deification (*hubris*). For the tribunes, pride is bad. For the patri-cians, pride is good — or, at least, part of a complex of good qualities. For Coriolanus himself, pride transcends the bounds of ordinary ethios and becomes that *peculiar* property by which human beings, conscious of their perfectibility, may aspire to divinity. This is spiritual pride, sometimes called "sufficiency": stemming from the belief that a man can be entirely in charge of his own life and destiny.

Only Shakespeare's spectator can see the three faces of pride, and form a composite picture of Coriolanus, made up of the judgments of those who manipulate him from the right and from the left, together with his judgments of his own actions. We should bear in mind that each judgment — including Coriolanus' self-judgment — is incomplete. Shakespeare's skill lies in portraying the complexity, the unique ethical ambiguity, of those thoughts and words and acts that are commonly labelled "proud". Stauffer comments: "Shakespeare's even-handed justice, his sense of the almost infinite complexity of any specific moral decision — or his superb dramatic sensitivity, which is much the same thing..... It is characteristic of Shakespeare that the tragic flaw is not to be reduced to a single ruling passion, but is multiplied into several hypotheses" (Stauffer 1970:47, 49). This sense of complexity is well expressed in Aufidius' speech in Act IV, Scene vii.

Military life is perhaps the best context in which to examine pride in its crystalline form, because in war autocratic leadership is accepted and even indispensable. In moments of crisis, time does not permit of democratic consultation; at such moments, a man's charismatic authority is more important than his power to persuade. Moreover, social organisation in wartime is purely hierarchical, and human relations are defined by an enviably simple ethic of merit. To be *proud* is always to be *proud* of some achievement.

For the inhabitant of the civilian world, a man may be "proud to serve his country". This is the patriotism of the man who accepts the way his society is administered, so that his urge to live a life of moral integrity can be channelled into constructive social and political action. Coriolanus, however, returns from a successful war to find his native land divided by class warfare — a new sort of war, in which there is no room for his conception of pride. Lacking expression in the form of good works for his society, his idealism is turned back upon itself, back into the only universe where he feels at home: the battlefield, where pride follows legitimately from the achievement of something worth doing.

Coriolanus' ethic is meritocratic: for him, nobility is a universal human potential, transcending barriers of birth and race and wealth. His affinities are with other noble souls: if they are brave, self-sacrificing, loyal, truthful, then differences originating in social circumstance are of no importance. Nevertheless, nobility of mind tends to be the privilege of a class, whose members are bound by a code of honour, in which personal and political values converge. Coriolanus accuses his fellow-aristocrats, essentially, of surrendering this nobility:

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..... Your dishonour
 Mangles true judgment, and bereaves the state
 Of that integrity that should become it;
 Not having the power to do the good it would,
 For the ill which doth control it.

(III.i. 142–161)

Coriolanus is the true conservative, for whom ideologies of change are detestable because they block the way to individual enterprise and raise one group against another: a man who is quite unambitious, uninterested in material goods and social privileges, a loner who would feel insulted to be called a member of a “ruling class”.

His transcendent stance is well illustrated in his attitude to the gods. He lives at a time when the gods are recognised as objects of veneration (by the people) or manipulation (by the rulers). But Coriolanus has only perfunctory respect for the deities: he is the rational man, convinced that he is the sole shaper of his destiny. This is why he can be so well moulded — even into betrayal — by a process of mere indoctrination; this is why he understands military simplicities better than the slippery irrational world of politics; this is why, above all, he is vulnerable to pride.

Alone I did it.

(V.vi. 116)

His slow, hesitant maturation is marked by a departure from a position of proud self-sufficiency, towards some recognition that he is not, after all, his own master: that he may even be a helpless puppet in the grip of unknown forces. The play proclaims the moral inadequacy of solitude. It enunciates a simple pedagogical proposition: that manipulation goes with pride, as true education goes with humility.

There is a theological tradition for the view that even the greatest gifts of divine grace cannot protect a man from pride. For this purpose, an affliction — accidental, inexplicable, perhaps evidently unjust — is required. I recall a lesson in Anglican ethics: it is good to get up smiling after you have slipped on a banana skin. The implication is that it would not be so good to abolish banana skins. The point about affliction is that it is independent of our will. This is different from self-imposed adversities, from the asceticism that marks Coriolanus' upbringing. In the first part of the drama, his single-handed encounter with the enemy, his scornful rejection of praise, his ostentatious humility are all consistent with spiritual pride. Only after he has gone over to the enemy does he obscurely realise that he shares spiritual poverty with the rest of humanity, and is as surely marked out for oblivion. It will be for him an oblivion of a particularly painful kind, since just before his death the name CORIOLANUS — a resounding title, but in fact his only safeguard against nonentity — will be snatched from him.

It is not surprising that the patricians of Rome, faced with civil discontent and a direct threat to their own power, see in Coriolanus the only man with prestige enough to restore calm and unity to the republic — an honest man whose hands are clean of intrigue and corruption. For them, his qualities of character, his rigidly correct background, his military distinction — these fit him well for high government office. But the patricians see only that side of Coriolanus that is favourable to their own interests. As I have argued, simple qualities of psychological purity may be variously interpreted when they come to the surface in the ethical world. To the tribunes, after all, Coriolanus' character appears in very different colours.

Coriolanus embodies all that is meant by the term “character” — an enduring bundle of psychological characters that underlie behaviour. He is strongest as an individual existing in a simplified world of prescribed relationships. When he descends to the larger world of civic society, he can survive on condition that behaviour is governed by an undisputed code of prescriptive ethics — as long as men are individuals, interacting as individuals in allegiance to such imperatives as loyalty and service and sacrifice. Unfortunately, Coriolanus is required to pass from the first dimension — the world where individualism supplies its own morality — *not* to the second dimension of ethical interaction, but directly to a third and totally unfamiliar dimension: one in which tribunes and patricians are not individuals but *parties* competing for power. This is, of course, the *political* dimension, in which ethics is superseded; where might is right, and ends justify means. On the battlefield, action is immediate, visible and significant in itself; in the political arena, action is typically rehearsed, calculated. The journey from the integrity of military life to the machinations of politics is simply too long a journey for Coriolanus to travel, for his ideal is iron consistency, truth to himself, singleness of purpose. This is a handicap to anyone who moves from military to political authority. As Aufidius notes, Coriolanus is resolved

Not to be other than one thing, not moving
 From the casque to the cushion, but commanding peace
 Even with the same austerity and garb
 As he controlled the war.

(IV.vii. 42–45)

This is not to say that Coriolanus knows nothing about power. There is no doubt about his influence, his charisma, on the battlefield. But he is completely unfitted for political power; and we see something of his contempt of the practice of politics by his scornful treatment of Menenius the mediator, the pragmatic patrician who is throughout the play a bridge between the authorities and the people. He represents the view that application of Corio-

lanus' ideals of *virtus* and martial honour to the day-to-day business of politics would bring disastrous results, since the task of a politician is not primarily to be consistent but to create a stable state. Politicians may be honest, they may even be wise; but they *must* be men of the world, familiar with the market-place. A politician may profess ideological purity, but his survival depends on his instinct for what to say and what to leave unsaid. He must be popular, gregarious even; solitude is his enemy. But for Coriolanus, solitude is strength. He stands alone against all the other main characters in the play. For all of them, on whichever side they happen to be, are skilled in the practical arts of survival; all inhabit a world in which ethical absolutes are relativised by political expediency. For Coriolanus, treason is a terrible word, signifying the ultimate sin; for the others, it is secularised into a thousand everyday accommodations.

Politicians fasten on such antinomies as poverty/wealth, slavery/freedom, impotence/power, ignorance/knowledge. For both plebeians and patricians, these contrasts are aspects of a divinely-appointed order. The deprived may revolt, and — if successful — they pass over to the other side. Coriolanus alone eludes these dualisms; he considers himself to exist outside this politically-defined order, and challenges the assumption of its divine necessity. For him, two other distinctions are more vital: the psychological division between stupidity and wisdom, and the ethical division between baseness and nobility. The "history" of the play is a struggle between two political powers; but Shakespeare's drama grows out of a conflict between Coriolanus and everyone else — a conflict that rouses him to cry "I banish you" to the whole ruling establishment. This is not a tragedy about a great man in conflict with the masses; it is about the conflict between ethics and politics. Ethics wins: Coriolanus infringes his moral standards, and so necessarily he must die. But politics also wins: he dies alone, uncommemorated; the world throws off an eccentric, and continues to revolve unchanged.

Coriolanus is the most unlovable of Shakespeare's tragic heroes, because his chosen — or rather indoctrinated — value-system places him beyond the reach of human sympathy. We love — or at least endure — what we call "weaknesses", such as ambition, jealousy, infidelity, irresolution, cowardice, sensuality — because these are imaginable extensions of qualities existing in all of us. Such weaknesses can be the object of our forgiveness, and therefore pose no threat to our self-esteem. An audience can go home and congratulate themselves on being better, or more sensible, than Hamlet or Othello or Lear. But the man who believes himself to be above human weakness — whether there are grounds for his belief or not — pays the highest price for his exclusive eminence: the price of human sympathy. I recall a remark by an English critic in a review of Zanussi's "Constans": "There is

something cold, priggish, egotistical in the earnest loner who makes a cult of constancy".

For Farnham (Farnham 1970: 60–61), Coriolanus is unique among Shakespeare's tragic heroes, in repelling our pity. "In 'Coriolanus' the problem of evil is almost completely absorbed within the dramatic hypothesis of a man who is supremely guilty of pride the vice, and at the same time supremely noble in pride the virtue... Shakespeare constructs the hypothesis with mathematical precision; he uses the greatest care to strike a balance between the repellent Coriolanus and the admirable Coriolanus, and he keeps the balance in a spirit both ironically superior and dispassionately just... 'Coriolanus' is a magnificent failure, in which Shakespeare seems to have brought his tragic inspiration to an end by taking tragedy into an area of paradox beyond the effective reach of merely human pity". The idea that in this play Shakespeare somehow exceeds the frontiers of tragedy is one to which I would like to return at the end of the present essay.

Coriolanus makes it clear that he regards himself not simply as better than his fellow-men, but qualitatively superior to them. Quantitative differences are of no value to him; so, of course, he dismisses the democratic principle according to which power belongs to the largest group in society. He is the crystalline example of the Romantic, Nietzschean or existentialist hero, for whom life exists not as a sequence of responses to the environment and to biological law, but as a compact succession of free acts. These acts may, incidentally, serve ethically good ends, such as that of defeating one's country's enemies; but essentially they exist in an ethical vacuum, where the politically vital ends/means distinction is dissolved. They are *free* acts because they demonstrate that unique sovereignty, that urge to self-assertion and the right to say "No", which is the peculiarly *human* answer to the pressures of the natural milieu.

It is now time look once more at the nature of pride, and at the meaning of the term "tragedy" as applied to the career of Coriolanus. Pride uniquely disqualifies an individual from human intercourse; yet, as a generic characteristic, it is peculiarly human. From Icarus to the heroes of space-fiction, there lives a conviction that the essence of humanity lies in absolute liberation from animal and vegetable laws. On the one hand, this means rejection of tradition, with its network of unquestioned convention, superstition and myth, acceptance of a static world order; on the other hand, it involves self-deification. Coriolanus' attitude to custom and ceremony is clear:

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 heaped
For truth to overpeer.

(II.iii. 122–126)

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

(V.iii. 35–37)

Somewhere between the two extremes lies the Christian recipe, with its accent on forgiveness, mercy and above all humility — three concepts for which there is no place in Shakespeare's play. And reference to the Christian imperative forces us once again to ponder the perplexing notion of pride. Is Coriolanus proud? He is *described* as proud, and he is certainly "proud of" his own successes. But is he proud? I think it can be argued that his social encounters reveal not pride but an impatience, an indignation, a frustration or fury rooted in incomprehension of the ways of the world — attributable, possibly, to a flawed intelligence, and certainly to a bad schooling. At a crucial moment in the play, Coriolanus rejects the world in which he has been brought up; because it has deceived him. But to declare that to turn one's back upon the world is an act of pride would, theologically, be a very bold thing to do.

Coriolanus is a tragic figure, not because he comes into conflict with country or family, nor because he betrays both Rome and Rome's enemy; his tragedy lies deeper. He is a man living, as it were, in two dimensions only — in a state of sensory deprivation. He is a perfectionist, but his efficiency is like that of a machine: a superhuman force, as Wilson Knight puts it, lacking direction and aim. Seen as a series of events, his tragedy is that of the inevitable destruction of a man who turns his back on the order that made him; to this extent his banishment from Rome is tragic excommunication. But seen as an *experience*, his tragedy lies in a paradox: he believes that he is "in charge of himself", the epitome of the free man, while to the world outside, and to the theatre audience, he appears as remarkably un-human, mechanical, puppet-like. His very intransigence makes him a victim of changing circumstances, and he turns out to be as unstable and untrustworthy as the Roman populace whom he despises. No other play by Shakespeare, I think, dwells so deeply on the gulf between our picture of ourselves, and the picture that others have of us. The irreconcilability of these two images is surely the primary stuff of tragedy, because it sends us on a fruitless search for some stable solid quality that might be called the reality of a person. Shakespeare seems to share the view of those contemporary thinkers who maintain that our knowledge depends simply upon our interest; that

our virtues

Lie in th'interpretation of the time

(IV.vii. 49–50)

Between the self-image and the public image, there is not the truth; there is nothing at all.

Coriolanus is a modern and a highly relevant statement. It raises ethical questions that can be formulated better in Christian than in Roman terms. It raises psychological questions that are only meaningful in so-called democratic societies. It raises a political spectre — of a quasi-monastic world in which military values, exempted from ideological justification, enter the vacuum left by political idealism. When the final curtain falls on the destruction of Coriolanus and the death of Caius Marcius, silence is absolute. We are reminded that there is one thing more tragic than the defeat of pride, and that is the extinction of hope.

It is a modern play, finally, because it articulates a particular theory of history. The play ends in utter darkness, the darkness of history; the darkness of Macbeth's, and Hamlet's, and Lear's ultimate annihilation, but without that consoling "cosmic repair" onto which the curtain drops in Shakespeare's best-loved tragedies. In *Coriolanus*, only Aufidius, the enemy general, survives. The curtain marks the conventional end of a story, a spectacle; but beyond the curtain stretch meaningless aeons of history, the "tale told by an idiot" which Macbeth heard at the moment of his deepest despair. In *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare comes close to cracking the inherited mould of tragedy; for a little while, he invites us to gaze into modern, interstellar, space.

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