

## Coriolanus : No Apologies

「コリオレイナス—弁明なき主人公」

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### 要 約

シェイクスピアの戯曲「コリオレイナス」は、主人公の誇りが悲劇の原因となる古典的悲劇と見なされている。多くの批評家は「コリオレイナス」をシェイクスピアのより話題性の高い作品の一つとは評価していない。しかしこの作品に対する批評家と一般の観客の反応は実に多様である。本論では、筆者は主人公コリオレイナスの誇りではなく、彼自身の真実への固執が彼の死をもたらしたという解釈を展開している。

### ABSTRACT

Shakespeare's play *Coriolanus* is often viewed as a classic tragedy in which the hero's tragic flaw is pride. Many critics have also thought that *Coriolanus* is not one of Shakespeare's more provocative works. However, the reactions of both the critics and audiences are quite varied. In this paper I present the view that not pride, but Coriolanus's adherence to his own truth led to his demise.

### INTRODUCTION

*Coriolanus* is one of Shakespeare's later and less well known tragedies. In some ways it is a very simple play; the plot is linear as well as the characters. Yet, this apparent simplicity is not as it seems, as is also the case with many of Shakespeare's characters, for the responses this play and the main character evoke are many and vary from extreme to extreme. Many see *Coriolanus* as a tragedy following Aristotle's formula of tragic flaw, in this case pride as the flaw. Coriolanus can be thought of as a political play about the balance of power between the patricians and the plebeians. Yet, there is also the military struggle between the Romans and the Volscians and the relationship between Coriolanus and his mother--Freud before Freud.

Shakespeare was naturally unacquainted with twentieth-century psychiatry. Yet whether by instinct or wisdom, what he sets down in this play with clinical precision is a case of not wholly normal mother-son relationship....Until this is analyzed, it is

futile to say anything about the politics of the play in the narrower sense (Goddard, 1951).

This brings to mind what Bloom said of Shakespeare and Freud: "Freud's vision of psychology is derived, not altogether unconsciously, from his reading of the [Shakespeare] plays" (Bloom 1994). One interesting study by Daniell about the responses elicited by the play, followed a Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Coriolanus* throughout Europe (Daniell, 1980). He found, perhaps not surprisingly, that peoples' reactions varied greatly and were very dependent on their political situation or beliefs: that is, perspective.

Literary reaction to the play has also been varied. People can't agree whether or not it is a worthy Shakespeare play, what kind of play it is, and also the nature of the main character. Ripley, who wrote about *Coriolanus's* history on the stage in England and America, had this to say, "*Coriolanus's* stage history is driven by the theater's conviction that the play is flawed, that its idiosyncratic character is the product not of aesthetic strategy but defective craft", and also, "But never, it is safe to say, has the play been staged without apology by a first-class company as a fully realized masterpiece" (Ripley, 1998). T.S. Eliot, however, thought it was "Shakespeare's most assured success" (Eliot 1919). Swinburne rated it "a more perfect piece of man's work was never done in all the world than this tragedy" (Swinburne 1880), while Henry Irving said it is "not worth a damn" (Winter 1916). Dryden, during the Restoration, first commented on the play saying, "something in this very Tragedy of *Coriolanus*, as it was written by Shakespear, that is truly great and truly Roman" (Dennis, 1943). He thought of the play as a historical play and valued it for bringing Roman history to the stage—hardly praise of any lasting value. Shaw called *Coriolanus* "the greatest of Shakespear's comedies" (Shaw 1962), while Campbell said it was an "experiment in tragical satire" (Campbell 1943). McKenzie sees *Coriolanus* as an unique new style. "The play is singularly structured to create an overwhelming sense of unresolved paradox and uncertainty in the minds of the audience" (McKenzie 1986). "Paradox is endemic. Perhaps no work of literature so mercilessly cuts the ethical ground from beneath our feet just as we feel we have found firm footing, so maddeningly shifts the balance of sympathy from one moment to the next" (Ripley 1998). *Coriolanus* himself is similarly viewed from extreme to extreme. "Coriolanus behaved like a traitor, abroad, entirely like a brute, and partly like a fool, at home" (Worthen 1989), and with "a rude and barbarous demeanor, which we should not be extremely sorry even in real life to see chastised, much less in the shadows of a theatrical Representation" (Wolstenholme 1974). Hookham likened him to an animal saying that "Coriolanus has absolutely no good attribute except physical courage, which he shares with most men and many animals" (Wyndham 1927). While Palmer saw him as a "splendid oaf who has never come to maturity" (Palmer 1945). Olivier referred to him as "a very straightforward, reactionary son of a so-and-so" (Cook 1983). Yet, many are the supporters of *Coriolanus* the man. Hudson admits faults in the hero, but also that

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"the huge creature whom they [his faults] destroy is a noble, even a lovable being" (Hudson 1872). "Apart from his valor and soldierly greatness, Coriolanus is a great moral hero" (Snider 1922).

Indeed, the first time I saw the play in 1988 with a friend, I thought Coriolanus to be a man of extreme virtue and not the man of excessive pride described in the program notes, while my friend thought him to be an extremely irritating fascist. I wanted to defend Coriolanus, as he had not had the chance in his downfall with the plebeians, in a mock trial, but the passions of my friend had not been so aroused. I read the play that night, and over the next week saw the performance two more times and read it five more times. The play seemed to have much to say about the current "politically correct" movement, and I was curious as to why I could have such opposite feelings to those of the learned people quoted in the program notes, and my friend. Two years later I saw the play in London performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company. One year after that, I was on a one week hiking trip in the Adirondac Mountains in upstate New York when I decided to spend a rainy day reading in my tent and talking with any people who passed through. One such passer-by was a member of the New York City Shakespeare Company who had understudied the role of Coriolanus. We talked about the play for more than an hour. The point of this personal rambling is that this play grabbed my attention more than any other play by Shakespeare or anyone else for that matter, perhaps because I don't think that pride is Coriolanus's tragic flaw at all but rather that his (our) society's values were (are) flawed.

However, the common opinion is that Coriolanus is too full of himself. "His heroic fault, which is pride, is announced in the first scene as a theme for discussion; and the play is that discussion" (Van Doren 1939). "The hero is proud. Pride lies in his very essence" (Saccio 1998). "It is not the Roman people who bring about his destruction; it is the patrician haughtiness and passionate self-will of Coriolanus himself" (Dowden 1875). The commoners and their tribunes also view him in this light, but know that in *Coriolanus*, in view of how they are portrayed, anything said by them must be suspect or even diametrically opposed to reality. In the opening of the play a citizen states, "but he pays himself [for service to his country] with being proud" (Act I, Scene I). Then, the voices of the people, the tribunes Sicinius and Junius echo such thoughts, "Was ever man so proud as is this Marcus?", and "He has no equal" (Act I, Scene I).

His mother is seen as the creator of her son's psyche: his honor and pride. "The mother had instilled into Coriolanus his bravery and desire of glory; these had led to pride; his pride had grown to excess, to a more than human strength of will and action" (Gervinus 1863). The very first time his mother Volumnia speaks, interestingly in prose as is much of this play, we are clearly shown what kind of woman she is. It is Act I, Scene III, and she is talking with Coriolanus's wife while he is away fighting the Volscians:

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 embracements of his bed where he would show most love. When yet he was but tenderbodied, and the only son of my womb; when youth with comeliness plucked all gaze his way; when for a day of king's 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 the wall if renown made it not stir,--was pleased to let him seek danger where he was like to find fame. To a cruel war I sent him; from whence he returned, 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.

Volumnia loves her son greatly as she amply expresses by saying a king couldn't buy her son away from her for a mere hour: riches are of no value compared to her son's presence. Yet, honor is to be valued above all, including wealth and even her son's very life, as she states next:

Hear me profess sincerely,--had I a dozen sons, each in my love alike, and none less dear than thine and my good Marcius, I had rather had eleven die nobly for their country than one voluptuously surfeit out of action.

Volumnia instilled such strong honor in her son. The honor that she preached as an adult to a child was to be molded totally according to her words with no room for half truths--the child could only develop according to what he was taught. Volumnia created her son, but without the adult knowledge that she then possessed. Also, her motives were not as real as she preached. She was making her son so as to increase her family's position, and could change her beliefs to fit the occasion in order to achieve her desire as she demonstrates when Coriolanus is in trouble with his bid for the counselship (see below). Thus, Coriolanus was raised with the moral fiber to hold his honor and truth above all else.

*This is what I feel is the tragic flaw in Coriolanus--his adherence to his own truth--not pride. In some we could call this stick-to-it-tiveness, inner courage, strong moral fiber--not pride. Yet, in most eyes, Coriolanus oversteps the bounds of decency when he doesn't adhere to saying nothing if you can't say something nice. I think him too honest and too true to his own heart in a society that demands political cunning with many faces suitable for many occasions--truth not as a personal absolute, but as relative. Coriolanus can't assuage his character to fit the situation. He does play the man he is, but he is not acting, while everyone else is. His true friend Menenius says this about Coriolanus in Act III, Scene I:*

His nature is too noble for the world:

He would not flatter Neptune for his trident,

Or Jove for's power to thunder. His heart's his mouth:

What his breast forges, that his tongue must vent;

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And, being angry, does forget that ever

He heard the name of death.

Coriolanus is bound by his own nature to speak what he believes is the truth. He says many things that are not at all kind, even quite rude, to those, most everyone, who don't measure up to his standards. The first line in Menenius's statement, to me, sums up his whole tragic flaw: "His nature is too noble for the world". Coriolanus's worldly comfort and very life are not worth as much as his own honor and service to his country as he relates in Act I, Scene VI:

If any think brave death outweighs bad life,

And that his country's dearer than himself;

Let him alone, or so many so minded,

Wave thus [waving his hand] to express his disposition.

And follow Marcius.

Coriolanus believes all he says to his very core. It is interesting to note that the word "alone" occurs more often in *Coriolanus* than any other of Shakespeare's plays (Saccio 1998). It is also notable that he earns his surname Coriolanus while fighting alone in the city of Corioli. Coriolanus indeed would rather be alone than not be true to his soul, which he demonstrates in Act IV by leaving Rome, alone, banished. He easily could have avoided banishment, but he couldn't speak sugary words false to his poor opinion of the commoners and their tribunes. When his adversaries are accusing him of being a traitor to the people in Act III, Scene II, he does not back down, but rather his tongue vents what his breast forged:

The fires i' the lowest hell fold-in the people!

Call me their traitor! Thou injurious tribune!

Within thine eyes sat twenty thousand deaths.

In thy hand clutch'd as many millions, in

Thy lying tongue both numbers, I would say

'Thou liest' unto thee with a voice as free

As I do pray the gods.

He abhors the tribunes and the common people ("the beast with many heads" Act IV, Scene I) because they live so far removed from what he considers honor, and though they could kill him, he cares not. Indeed, when his sentence is lessened from death to banishment after Menenius and Cominius intercede on his behalf, he is not at all humbled (Act III, Scene II):

You common cry of curs! whose breath I hate

As reek o' the rotten fens, whose loves I prize

As the dead carcasses of unburied men

That do corrupt my air, I banish you:

And here remain with your uncertainty!  
Let every feeble rumour shake your hearts!  
Your enemies, with nodding of their plumes,  
Fan you into despair! Have the power still  
To banish your defenders; till at length  
Your ignorance, which finds not till it feels,  
Making not reservation of yourselves,  
Still your own foes, deliver you as most  
Abated captives to some nation  
That won you without blows! Despising,  
For you, the city, thus I turn my back:  
There is a world elsewhere.

It is passages like this that make it hard for most people to not see Coriolanus as a proud haughty aristocrat.

After his banishment he goes to his great enemy, Tullus Aufidius, general of the Volscians, and he offers Aufidius his service or his life. Before meeting Aufidius in Antium where Coriolanus would be hated for his military exploits, he is disguised and muffled as he worries about ignoble death (Act IV, Scene IV): "then know me not, / Lest that thy wives with spits and boys with stones / In puny battle slay me." Yet, shortly thereafter, he nobly offers his throat for Aufidius to cut (Act IV, Scene V): "Mistake me not, to save my life; for if I / had fear'd death, of all the men i' the world / I would have 'voided thee." Aufidius knows Coriolanus's character all too well--the respect is mutual (Act IV, Scene V): "If Jupiter / Should from yond cloud speak divine things, / And say 'Tis true, I'd not believe them more / Than thee, all noble Marcius." Aufidius recognizes Coriolanus's true character, as do all the characters in the play who possess any integrity.

Coriolanus is killed by the Volscians some time after he doesn't sack Rome at his mother's request. When he gives in to his mother, he knows he is not doing what is true to his soul, and that he will die for it (Act V, Scene III): "The gods look down, and this unnatural scene / They laugh at. O mother, mother! 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." He broke his own code at this point which he had never done before. Even if he were to continue to live, he was no longer what he had been. The "unnatural scene" is obviously related to the mother entreating the son and to the Roman coming to sack Rome. However, it is also an "unnatural scene" because Coriolanus is wavering on his intended actions--very unnatural for him. The conflicts or paradoxes in the play had never beguiled Coriolanus. He always did what was clearly right as defined by him. Yet, when he had to choose between his mother and Rome, what he truly loved, and his own honor, he was done in. He chose his human emotions, not his own lofty

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ideals, which ultimately meant death.

Throughout the whole play, prior to the "Intercession scene" with his mother, Coriolanus remains honest unto himself and others--though not at all political. His undoing in Rome occurs when he runs for consul, which he didn't want (Act II, Scene I):

Know, good mother,  
I had rather be their servant in my way  
Than sway with them in theirs.

He knows that he is a warrior, not a politician, and that politics requires "sway"ing your opinion--not being constant. Yet, his friends and mother would have him honored in ways they can understand and desire, but which he cares not for. But, being politically unwise, or apolitical, he does as is requested of him, and in Act III runs for consul, and is subsequently threatened with death, and finally banished. Throughout Coriolanus's nomination for the consulship, and then his banishment, only he adheres to his own truth, but little does the truth matter when politics are concerned. Coriolanus accuses the tribunes of having manipulated the commoners against him, which they did do but deny (Act II, Scene III): "And this shall seem, as partly 'tis, their own, / Which we have goaded onward." Menenius is politically adept and not bound by his truth or honor, as Coriolanus is, which Menenius reveals in Act III, Scene I: "I'll try whether my old wit be in request / With those that have but little: this must be patch'd / With cloth of any colour." Volumnia also sees little wrong with lying (Act III, Scene II):

Because that now it lies you on to speak  
To the people; not by your own instruction,  
Nor by the matter which your heart prompts you,  
But with such words that are but rooted in  
Your tongue, though but bastards and syllables  
Of no allowance to your bosom's truth.  
Now, this no more dishonours you at all  
Than to take in a town with gentle words,  
Which else would put you to your fortune and  
The hazard of much blood.  
I would dissemble with my nature where  
My fortunes and my friends at stake required  
I should do so in honour: I am in this,  
Your wife, your son, these senators, the nobles;  
And you will rather show our general louts  
How you can frown than spend a fawn upon 'em,  
For the inheritance of their loves and safeguard  
Of what that want might ruin.

She blatantly says to lie and tries to manipulate him as many others do throughout the play. She couches this in terms of honor and war so as to appeal to her son's nature, to trick him into doing her bidding, not his own. Coriolanus knows that she is asking him to not be true to his own nature as he states (Act III, Scene II):

Why did you wish me milder? Would you have me  
False to my nature? Rather say, I play  
The man I am.

He can't play false to his nature when he considers doing so as Volumnia and his supporting patricians are urging him, but finds it too great an insult to his honor (Act III, Scene II):

Lest I surcease to honour mine own truth,  
And by my body's action teach my mind  
A most inherent baseness.

When Coriolanus does surcease to honor his own truth when he gives in to his mother's pleadings to save Rome, he does so out of love. He valued his love for his family, and perhaps his friends also, above his honor, and he paid with his life. Many are the intricacies of his love for his mother, but the fact that Coriolanus's downfall is sealed with love, the final straw in his confrontational life, is what is so interesting, so provocative. This is a man that would seem to be possessed of anything but love. Coriolanus dying due to his love is reminiscent of the last scene of *Romeo and Juliet* in which the prince admonishes the Capulets and Montagues: "See what a scourge is laid upon your hate, / That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love!"

Though thought of as proud, I strongly feel that Coriolanus was not at all proud. He was trying to live up to his mother's ideals which are nearly impossible standards to meet--he had no room for being proud. There are many lines that Coriolanus speaks that clearly seem to indicate that he is anything but proud, yet like Cassandra he isn't believed. A few are: "Sir, praise me not" (Act I Scene V), "Pray now, no more; my mother, / Who has a charter to extol her blood, / When she does praise me grieves me. I have / As you have done,--that's what I can; induc'd / As you have been,--that's for my country: / He that has but effected his good will / Hath overta'en mine act." (Act I Scene IX), and "I had rather have one scratch my head i' the sun / When the alarum were struck, than idly sit / To hear my nothings monster'd." (Act II Scene II).

He is viewed as proud as his honor is too true, even not humanly possible, and how he heaps abuse on the plebeians and tribunes endears him not. The heroes of Ayn Rand's novels, such as John Galt and Howard Roark, embody the individual par excellence, as does Coriolanus. They have their own truths and don't look for acceptance from a society whose values they don't respect or even consider below contempt. This kind of behavior however is viewed as being proud. I rather think that such reactions on society's part reflect fragile ego syndrome--ego in need of mutual assurance, or you can be better, but not by too much

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or at least be humble or apologize. Coriolanus is not Randian enough as he cannot ignore the commoners but actually shows emotion when he vents his vitriol on them. Were a slave to confront and list their masters faults truthfully, though physical harm or possibly death be the results, most would find such action high minded and noble indeed. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King lived out their ideals, even though living their ideals was most mortal to them. Now take the converse. Were the master to list the slave's faults truthfully, it would be viewed in a much different light. The slave holds no power; the master speaks with impunity. Coriolanus ends up in both positions, and his nature is never at all altered. He is first akin to the master. He takes the part of the slave when the wrath of the people is kindled and he is at their mercy. Yet, at this moment when the people could, indeed seemed likely to, kill Coriolanus, he wouldn't be bowed. He didn't even slightly diminish his ineluctable character as he demonstrates with ample bile following the decree of his banishment in Act III Scene II (see above). Such is the case with Coriolanus; no one holds any power over him, and he is true to his own truth regardless of the consequences. Is this pride or fortitude?

### CLOSING REMARKS

This play, though simple and linear, is very hard to define. Exemplifying this are all the diverse opinions about the play and hero. That such simplicity could be so paradoxical truly speaks volumes (has and will for time to come) to Shakespeare's genius. As Iago and Cressida spoke very movingly about honor and truth, and yet were in reality false to all they said, so I hold that though framed as proud, Coriolanus is not proud at all. Here I think that Shakespeare's seemingly simple though actually perplexing portrayal of Coriolanus is more refined than say Iago and Cressida, for example, as hating Iago and having contempt for Cressida is easy and requires little of our imagination. However, Shakespeare probed and even defined the human psyche such that even understanding Coriolanus, who on the surface is easily defined, is decidedly problematic. Hamlet is problematic, though in different ways; he was decidedly complex and basically good (Saccio 1998). We can't even agree on whether simple Coriolanus is basically good or bad. In this way, Shakespeare is questioning our own inner truths--what we perceive as truth. Or for that matter, do we even know our inner truths? That is a question.

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