Coriolanus: The Tragedy of *Virtus*

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From the opening entry of "a company of mutinous Citizens, with staves, clubs, and other weapons" to the next to last, barely coherent action—"Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill him!" "Hold, hold, hold, hold!"—*Coriolanus* displays an ancient world riven by war and civic turmoil.[1] For all its occasional evocations of a marmoreal *Romanitas*, it is also a busy play. Its protagonist accepts with relish and superhuman energy the opportunities for martial action that his world presents: Coriolanus is probably the most active of Shakespeare's tragic heroes, certainly the one least given to reflection. Yet the play's busyness is not always warlike. Much of it consists of talk, especially the contentious talk of political debate. Characters plan courses of action, rehearse public appearances, plot acts of vengeance, conjure with names, report off-stage events—and even events that the audience has seen occur on-stage. Much of the discussion revolves around Coriolanus himself. His nature and motives, his martial prowess and farouche political manners, are incessantly and variously canvassed. To a belligerent citizen, Coriolanus's heroics are performed to please his mother, and to be partly proud; to the indulgent Menenius, his nature is too noble for the world; to Aufidius, shrewd and grudgingly admiring, his actions are a matter for almost obsessive, but inconclusive, rumination:

> 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.
>
> (IV.vii.37–48)

The object of all this speculation contributes to it practically nothing. Coriolanus acts on the battlefield purely out of martial

1 *Coriolanus*, ed. Philip Brockbank, The Arden Shakespeare (London, 1976), I.i.1, s.d., and V.vi.130. Further references to this edition are incorporated in the text in parentheses.

instinct, in the field of political conflict, as often as not, out of impatience and choler. When he does debate with himself a course of action, he seems to rationalize rather than reflect. As candidate for consul, he must submit to the vouches of the people because custom calls him to it, but custom is for Coriolanus a startlingly empty concept. When, in exile, he exchanges loyalty to Rome for loyalty to the Volscians, his pronouncement is cursory, and embellished by the baldest of philosophical platitudes:

> O world, thy slippery turns! . . .
> 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.
>
> (IV.iv.12, 18–24)

When, as conqueror, Coriolanus decides to spare Rome, the process of decision takes place under a shroud of silence.

The relation between the hero and his world, especially the political world of the Roman republic, is thus problematical. Coriolanus is both an active force and a passive specimen. He dominates his play as perhaps no other Shakespearean tragic hero does, not only by his pre-eminence in the action but also by the way he fills the minds of his fellow characters. But the very measure of his dominance reveals his weakness. The attempts of others to understand him, and their ability frequently to predict his conduct, demonstrate by contrast the paucity of his own self-knowledge. This limitation, in turn, reveals the circumscribed field of freedom left open by his intransigent devotion to the Roman ideal of *virtus*. Coriolanus is the embodiment of Rome in its early, heroic phase, but he is also an outsider there, as it were, unwitting of—perhaps one should say innocent of —the often sophisticated, and decidedly unheroic, ways in which his fellow citizens take the measure of one another and of the hero himself. Coriolanus's tragedy, then, takes place in a context more insistently political than those in which Shakespeare's other tragic heroes create and submit to their fates. *Coriolanus* does not, like *King Lear*, reduce political issues to their highly concentrated first principles. Nor does its political realm have the potent religious reverberations that sound in *Macbeth*. These absences may be regretted, but the latter, at least, may be greeted by some with relief. Freed from obeisance to Jacobean doctrines

about the sanctity of the royal body and the regal office, Shakespeare is not encumbered by the great chain of being and its clanking portentousness. Instead, by a remarkable exercise of historical imagination, he dramatizes in a secular spirit the nascent power and the internal conflicts of a state remote from his own time and its political norms. With almost Machiavellian detachment, the polity of the Roman republic, with its institutional intricacies and their social origins and consequences, is searchingly anatomized. Only a rigid critical piety will judge such a dramatic enterprise to be inherently lacking in tragic potential. In fact, it is precisely in terms of the politics of Rome, in the junction and disjunction between the city and its heroic champion, that Shakespeare finds the ingredients of tragedy.

The tragedy of Coriolanus originates in his intense allegiance to the cult of *virtus*. Plutarch introduces and explicates this term near the beginning of his *Life of Coriolanus*, making it the main determinant in the character of Coriolanus and of his Rome: "Nowe in those dayes, valliantnes was honoured in Rome above all others vertues: which they called *Virtus*, by the name of vertue it selfe, as including in that generall name, all other vertues besides. So that *Virtus* in the Latin, was asmuche as valliantnes."[2] Plutarch illustrates Coriolanus's dedication to this ideal in his childhood exercises, in his inward arming of himself to match his outward strength, in his first battlefield feat, and in his later accumulation of victories. He becomes the exemplar of Roman *virtus*, his achievements metonymic for Rome's conquests:

> This desire being bred in *Martius*, he strained still to passe him selfe in manlines: & being desirous to shewe a daylie increase of his valliantnes, his noble service dyd still advaunce his fame, bringing in spoyles apon spoyles from the enemie. . . . In so much the Romaines having many warres and battells in those dayes, *Coriolanus* was at them all: and there was not a battell fought, from whence he returned not with some rewarde of honour. (p. 317)

Shakespeare takes over this essential element from Plutarch's *Life*, introducing Coriolanus with a reference to his virtue, as his death will be lamented with a reference to his valour. Shakespeare also, of course, firmly establishes the association between Coriolanus and a conquering Rome in the battle scenes that he stages near the beginning of the play. Coriolanus's combative,

2 "The Life of Caius Martius Coriolanus", in *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes*, trs. Sir Thomas North (1579), repr. in *Coriolanus*, ed. Brockbank. Further page references to this reprint are incorporated in the text in parentheses.

impetuous, heroic nature finds fulfilment only on the battlefield. Though Shakespeare introduces in the speeches of other characters Plutarch's various explanations of Coriolanus's heroism, he does not commit himself to them. The Coriolanus we see pursues *virtus* for its own sake, according to the classic rules. He is fiercely competitive in the pursuit, but properly contemptuous of material reward, and embarrassed even by the plaudits of his general. Shakespeare risks unbalancing his play by placing its most spectacular action early, but by doing so he brushes aside in the hurly-burly of battle the questions raised about why Coriolanus is as he is, before they can become dominant. Instead, the martial vigour of the protagonist is matched with the conquering impulse of the youthful Roman state.

Shakespeare's displacement of battlefield heroics to a position early in the play also has the effect of locating dramatic emphasis in a different conflict. In Plutarch, the opening account of Coriolanus's *virtus* gives way to a new theme: "Now he being growen to great credit and authoritie in Rome for his valliantnes, it fortuned there grewe sedition in the cittie, bicause the Senate dyd favour the riche against the people who dyd complaine of the sore oppression of userers, of whom they borrowed money" (pp. 317–18). In this fashion, rather casual and only faintly ominous, Plutarch introduces the dissensions within Rome that will destroy its pre-eminent man of *virtus*. Shakespeare from the outset makes this theme more pervasive. He begins his play with tumultuous political dissension, and he does not let it disappear from view even during the battle scenes of Act I. In the central part of the play, political conflict dissolves the apparent concord between a valiant Coriolanus and a conquering Rome established on the battlefield. For Coriolanus's valour exists in a political context, and a more complex one than the triumphant expansion of the Roman state. Coriolanus's inability to come to terms with this complexity is part of his tragedy; its full measure resides in the fact that his inability is a function of his absolute devotion to Roman *virtus*. The play's implicit political thesis may be summarized as follows. Valour is cultivated at Rome as an instrument of imperial dominance in Italy at large, but it is also in effect an instrument of patrician dominance in the city itself. The warrior hero fights the enemies of Rome in the battlefield and through his military prestige advances the political interests of the patricians in the forum. In the event of failure—and failure is tragically inevitable given the incom-

patible kinds of service exacted from the man of *virtus*—he is sacrificed. Coriolanus is exiled from Rome in the interests of a precarious political unity, in which the patricians accommodate themselves to the new tribunicial power without risking all of their own power and position in civil war. Even in exile, as potential conqueror of Rome, Coriolanus remains its product, and its servant. His intransigence earns him hatred among the Volscians as it did among the Roman people. His submission to his mother's pleas gives Rome its climactic victory and justifies the claims of the patrician order to be the champions of the republic. Coriolanus's climactic defeat is thus also his most signal service to Rome and to his fellow patricians.

The political cast that Shakespeare gives to *Coriolanus* takes its shape naturally enough from Renaissance treatments of the history of Rome, and ultimately from the Roman historians themselves. The imperial achievement of Rome—its rise from humble beginnings to the conquest and suzerainty of much of the known world—was of course a principal datum of ancient history for the Renaissance, as for other ages. This imperial destiny is assumed in *Julius Caesar*, becomes the central historical force in *Antony and Cleopatra*, and plays in a shadowy way even behind *Cymbeline*. In the last two of these plays Rome's role in the providential scheme of Christian redemption is also glanced at. Yet Rome, or rather the Roman republic, was also an exemplum for the Renaissance of the dangers of political strife and the abuses of popular or oligarchic rule. The "continuall factions, tumults, and massacres of the Romans and Italians" were a staple of popular history, and also of more learned or sophisticated political discourse, like that of Lipsius or Bodin: the story of Coriolanus himself was invoked by Bodin as evidence of the discommodities of democratic rule. To the conventional Renaissance political mind, this phase of Roman history proved the superiority of monarchic rule (the defiantly unconventional Machiavelli and, in England, the more circumspect Sir Thomas Smith are exceptions or partial exceptions). *Titus Andronicus*, in its crude and almost ahistorical way, and *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, in their masterly ways, show Shakespeare sharing common assumptions about the inherent contentiousness of the Roman republic and the working of a historical inevitability in the emergence of the emperors.

The problem for this historical view is the long persistence and impressive achievements of the Roman republic. The para-

dox of its external successes and its internal disorders is expressed, at least implicitly, by the Roman historians themselves. Livy, with whom Shakespeare would have been acquainted from his schooldays, balances against one another in his early books precisely these two historical facts. He celebrates Rome's military triumphs in Italy but deplores the precarious unity within the city. In due course, the particular theme of patrician and plebeian conflict comes to definition—first achieving prominence, indeed, around the time of Coriolanus. Livy is not explicit about the interplay of the two contrary tendencies in the history of the republic—he even follows the story of Coriolanus with the comment that Rome was in those times free from petty jealousy—but to the Renaissance reader the paradox would have been apparent and problematical. The epitomes of Florus, frequently reprinted with Livy, and also a school-text in Renaissance England, present the problem even more sharply. Florus's four books are organized under rubrics that alternate external wars and internal discords. In Book I, after sections on the kings and their expulsion, Florus records a series of twelve wars, and then returns to domestic affairs with a section headed "De seditionibus" and a series of four "discordiae urbis". Plutarch himself, Shakespeare's immediate source, poses the same problem. He repeatedly expresses the view that the degeneration of the later Roman republic into a state of prolonged civil war proved the necessity of a monarchy. Yet he does not attempt to explain the long period of republican prosperity, unless by his emphasis on the influence of great men and by his ascription of a singular and persistent good fortune to Roman endeavours—both of which, of course, beg the question. The paradox gains expression, in a muted way, even in Plutarch's *Life of Coriolanus*. Despite the fact that Rome has exiled its premier embodiment of *virtus* and racked itself with civic discord, its dominance over its neighbours remains unimpaired. The conclusion of the *Life of Coriolanus* records the subsequent defeat of the Volscians, and North's version of Plutarch at this point conveys a sense of contemptuous ease: "After that, the Romaines overcame them in battell, in which *Tullus* was slaine in the field, and the flower of all their force was put to the sworde: so that they were compelled to accept most shamefull conditions of peace, in yelding them selves subject unto the conquerers, and promising to be obedient at their commandement" (p. 368).

Against this historiographical background, the politics of

Shakespeare's play acquire perspective. From the mutation of republican into imperial Rome, treated in *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* along more or less conventional lines, Shakespeare turns to a much earlier phase of history. Dramatizing the tragedy of Coriolanus in an insistently political context, he addresses the question, which the received Renaissance account of Roman history implicitly raises but does not answer: how was it that a state so contentious achieved a success so striking? The general lines of Shakespeare's answer (so to call it) have been suggested above, though with excessive simplicity. The play's political complexity reveals itself in the series of dramatic parallels and contrasts that Shakespeare creates: setting the constant Coriolanus against both patricians and people, or the politic patricians and tribunes against the easily manipulated Coriolanus and people, even bringing together the tribunes and Coriolanus in their political contentiousness and their scant respect for the people. Such relationships will be discussed as they unfold in the course of the play; discussion must begin, however, with the way in which Shakespeare establishes the play's political bearings at the outset.

The grievance of the "mutinous Citizens" whose irruption on stage opens *Coriolanus* is the patricians' parsimony, or alleged parsimony, in the face of the famine visiting Rome. By concentrating on the dearth as the source of political conflict, Shakespeare largely ignores another issue, dealt with at some length by Plutarch—the people's indignation at the exactions of usurers. His choice between these two issues may represent merely a characteristic dramatic economy, but it may also reflect a topical event, the midlands insurrection of 1607, which was a protest against dearth and high prices, among other things. If so, Shakespeare's treatment of the Roman dearth does not support the view, seemingly appealing to scholars, of the prosperous burgher-playwright expressing unqualified antipathy to popular political protest. Shakespeare's treatment of the people's grievance is not partisan: its point is to show how the politics of Rome is caught up in mutual mistrust and contempt. In these circumstances, even the basic facts about the dearth are obscured. Do the nobles in fact have a superfluous supply of corn? The people say they do, but the nobles avoid the question. Menenius fobs off the people's grievance with a tale, and Coriolanus pours scorn on their prattling about storehouses crammed with grain, but neither patrician affirms or denies the truth of the people's

claim. Later in the play, we learn that corn has finally been distributed free to the people. In Plutarch, the origin of this corn is duly noted, but Shakespeare again leaves the point obscure. The consequence of his silences is to direct attention not towards the rights and wrongs of this particular issue, but towards social and political relations generally in this state. For whatever reason, the body politic of Rome is not performing its most basic function, which is to nourish its members adequately; more than that, the contentious relationship between the noble and popular orders in republican Rome eliminates the possibility of either a common response to dearth (if there is really a dearth) or a just alleviation of distress (if there are really storehouses crammed with grain while the people starve). Shakespeare and his audience would doubtless not allow the right of the people to have corn at their own price—the rights of property must be respected. At the same time, they would believe in the moral obligation of the rich to relieve the distress of the poor, especially if they had superfluous supplies of food. In Rome, neither order respects these social laws. When the distribution of corn finally takes place, the act becomes entangled in political contention regarding the rights and privileges of the orders. Coriolanus condemns the distribution as a deplorable weakness, an attempt to bribe the people which will only encourage their insolence. For all his lack of diplomacy in declaring his view, Coriolanus sees the matter clearly. The assumption behind his argument is that in his Roman republic, where rival orders inevitably attempt to encroach on one another's ground, there is no place for charity: it will always be mistrusted or misconstrued, made a factor in debate or the struggle for power, never accepted simply as charity. For Coriolanus, the principle involved is one of merit and reward: in this case, the people have failed to contribute to the defence of the city, so they deserve none of its benefits.

The opening of the play does offer an alternative model of the state less harsh than Coriolanus's: Menenius's fable of the state as human body. Standing in such a prominent position at the beginning, this fable directs attention to the fact of the play's political orientation, and provides an ideal point of comparison for the actual political manoeuvrings that take place. But the point of the comparison is largely negative. The Roman state in *Coriolanus* is less a well functioning body than a machine rolling forward with overwhelming inertia—as Menenius unguardedly depicts it, before taking up the more diplomatic fable of

the body:

> you may as well
> Strike at the heaven with your staves, as lift them
> Against the Roman state, whose course will on
> The way it takes, cracking ten thousand curbs
> Of more strong link asunder than can ever
> Appear in your impediment.
>
> (I.i.66–71)

Likewise, political relationships within Rome have little of the civility with which Menenius endows his bodily members. They are more accurately characterized when Menenius abruptly loses patience with his auditors a little after recounting his fable:

> But make you ready your stiff bats and clubs;
> Rome and her rats are at the point of battle;
> The one side must have bale.
>
> (I.i.160–2)

Falling between an evocation of Rome's massive, inhuman power and a vicious image of incipient battle, the accommodating manner and harmonizing lesson of Menenius's fable are thrown into question. Menenius produces an accomplished rhetorical performance, ingeniously developing his political commonplaces, amusing his audience with action and repartee—but, too obviously, it is also *merely* a rhetorical performance. His audience seems to recognize it as such. On the other hand, the citizens show that they can contribute just as readily as Menenius to the exercise: "The kingly crown'd head, the vigilant eye,/The counsellor heart, the arm our soldier" (I.i.114–5). On the other hand, they are impatient for him to bring the fable to a point: "Y'are long about it. . . . Ay, sir; well, well. . . . How apply you this?" (I.i.126, 141, 146). Menenius's wise saws and modern instances seem to strike his stage auditory as a little threadbare, just as they strike the theatre audience as an implausible model for the Roman state that is actually exhibited on stage. Coriolanus's contempt for the proverbial lore of the people also tends to throw into question the bland commonplaces of Menenius's speech:

> They said they were an-hungry, sigh'd forth proverbs—
> That hunger broke stone walls; that dogs must eat;
> That meat was made for mouths; that the gods sent not
> Corn for the rich men only. With these shreds
> They vented their complainings.
>
> (I.i.204–8)

Coriolanus, one imagines, would be equally unimpressed by Menenius's proverbial wisdom: as usual, his blunt frankness represents the most accurate register of one aspect of Roman poli-

tical realities. Certainly the fable has little applicability, and little tact, as an analogy for a Rome suffering from dearth. Menenius, delighting in his rhetorical conceit, pushes things improbably far: the piteous conclusion, in which the senatorial belly complains that the other members leave him but the bran is unconvincing, especially coming from the well-fed Menenius. Yet he produces at least a momentary effect on the citizens, stopping their rush to civic mischief. This is perhaps the most revealing dramatic point about Menenius's performance: the patrician wordsmith gains respite from civic turmoil, as the patricians have placated another troop of citizens by granting the institution of the tribunate. Shakespeare thus adumbrates for the first time the arts of improvisatory political accommodation that characterize the patrician order.

Coriolanus's first entry, hard on Menenius's fable of the body, introduces a different kind of patrician—the man inured by battle to an unyielding rigour, which he maintains in civic life. Coriolanus's violent hostility to the people is rooted not so much in pride or a choleric temperament—two explanations offered at different points in the play—as in the unyieldingness that makes him Rome's foremost warrior, a quality proudly hailed by Volumnia and other patricians until its consequences become impolitic. The value Coriolanus sets on constancy puts him at odds with the still-discordant wavering Roman multitude, but at the same time, more subtly, it separates him from the trimming patricians. To the people Coriolanus is brutally frank:

> He that trusts to you,
> Where he should find you lions, finds you hares;
> Where foxes, geese: you are no surer, no,
> Than is the coal of fire upon the ice
> Or hailstone in the sun . . .
> Hang ye! Trust ye?
> With every minute you do change a mind.
> (I.i.169–81)

But Coriolanus's indignation with the nobles is only slightly less marked:

> The rabble should have first unroof'd the city
> Ere so prevail'd with me; it will in time
> Win upon power, and throw forth greater themes
> For insurrection's arguing.
> (I.i.217–20)

Word of a new Volscian war and the company of fellow officers draws from Coriolanus a direct statement of the value by which he governs himself and judges others. Reminded of his promise

to second Cominius in the field, he answers with joyful simplicity, "Sir, it is,/And I am constant" (I.i.237–8). Coriolanus's constancy is what makes him a peerless representative of Rome in his role as soldier but a victim of compromises he cannot fathom in his role as man of state. The virtue continues to be associated with him, even when he is off-stage. The praises of Volumnia represent him as the remorseless, mechanical champion of a conquering Rome:

> His bloody brow
> With his mail'd hand then wiping, forth he goes
> Like to a harvest man that's task'd to mow
> Or all, or lose his hire.
>
> (I.iii.34–7)

Valeria's description of young Martius, Coriolanus's son, has the same qualities. With his "confirmed countenance," Martius wages war on 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, catched it again; or whether his fall enraged him, or how 'twas, he did so set his teeth and tear it" (I.iii.61–5). Shakespeare's invention of this incident (it is not in Plutarch) confirms that he views the patrician order, in one of its aspects, as devoted to the production of an unbroken line of machine-like warriors. Father and son have the same name, and the similarity of their "moods" is noted approvingly by both Valeria and Volumnia.

Yet in the language of these speeches, Shakespeare also reveals the limitations entailed by Coriolanus's constant service to his city. These limitations are partly personal (made clear to the audience through Coriolanus's wife, Virgilia, but not apparent to Coriolanus's other fellow patricians); they are also partly the limitations that his very formidableness as a warrior places on him in the realm of Roman politics. The harvest man, however efficient, is at the same time no more than a slave, and the conditions of his labour are obliquely ominous for Coriolanus. When he fails to labour so successfully and so subserviently in the field of political affairs, he does lose his hire—his place as a citizen of Rome. The comparison of the senior and junior Martii also cuts two ways. If young Martius is the promising copy of his father, Coriolanus is a rather absurd magnification of his son. The obsessive ferocity of both has a saddening futility. Virgilia makes a telling foil to her husband's constancy to *virtus*, and its limitations. Humanly fearful of blood and warfare, she also displays an admirable constancy of her own, in her resolute

refusal to cross her threshold while her husband is abroad. Virgilia's Penelopean constancy contrasts with the exultant inhumanity of Volumnia and her lineage; perhaps it hints, too, at how much Coriolanus lacks the wiles of a Ulysses. For Coriolanus's rigid constancy is accompanied by a fatal predictability. This trait will enable Coriolanus's political enemies, the tribunes and Aufidius, to ensnare him by simple provocations, and it will finally enable Rome, in the person of Volumnia, to save itself and destroy Coriolanus by calling on the constant loyalty—to his *gens* if not his *urbs*—that his training as a Roman has instilled.

Coriolanus's feats in the battlefield scenes answer triumphantly to the expectations of his mother, but they also reinforce the sense of the human incompleteness of so single-minded an exemplar of *virtus*, and suggest his potential danger to the state. Coriolanus thrives on conflict; he is in his natural element on the battlefield as he never is again in the play. But in his passion for martial conflict he makes disconcertingly little distinction between friends and enemies. He assails his own plebeian forces with violent contumely, as Volumnia had approvingly predicted; even when encouraging them, his language is cast in terms of enmity:

> Come on, my fellows:
> He that retires, I'll take him for a Volsce,
> And he shall feel mine edge . . .
> 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 argued fear! Mend and charge home,
> Or, by the fires of heaven, I'll leave the foe
> And make my wars on you.
> (I.iv. 27–9, 34–40)

With his fellow officers, Coriolanus's comradeship is more relaxed but still edged with a sharp competitiveness (I.vi.47–8), and on occasion with an extraordinary erotic charge (I.vi.29–32). Coriolanus's allegiance is almost exclusively to *virtus* itself; his civic and even matrimonial attachments are decidedly feeble by comparison. Thus, he respects even his fellow patricians only to the extent that they are worthy aspirants to *virtus,* and the tenuousness of his loyalty is expressed by his readiness to make enemies of his unworthy forces, and by his overruling desire to see battle with Aufidius:

> Were half to half the world by th'ears, and he
> Upon my party, I'd revolt to make

Only my wars with him.

(I.i.232–4)

The single-minded warrior is clearly a dangerous champion: the Roman ethos expressed by Volumnia risks its own destruction when it produces a man of *virtus* to whom Rome itself comes to appear unworthy in point of *virtus*.

In the face of his extremity of conduct and language, the question naturally arises whether Coriolanus is in truth an epitome of Roman values or rather an aberration from them. Against Coriolanus's invective at his men, for example, may be set Cominius's generous encouragement, and against Coriolanus's impetuous and risky tactics may be set Cominius's prudent generalship. Does Cominius represent a Roman norm against which Coriolanus should be measured? It would be easier to affirm this if Cominius voiced any doubts about Coriolanus's battlefield conduct, but he does not. On the contrary, he formally praises his lieutenant before the army and again before the senate, making the Corioles campaign the climax of his martial achievements and opening the way to his nomination as consul. In political affairs, Cominius also acts more prudently than Coriolanus, and occasionally counsels a similar circumspection, but his presence in the crucial consulship scenes is shadowy. Cominius is willing to play a subsidiary role to nobles like the genial but shrewd Menenius, submitting to the accommodations by which the patrician order retains political power and position. In fact, it is Cominius's earnest but ineffectual attempts to the ideal of the body politic that are aberrant, as the reception of his following speech shows:

I have been consul, and can show for Rome
His enemies' marks upon me. I do love
My country's good with a respect more tender,
More holy and profound, than mine own life,
My dear wife's estimate, her womb's increase
And treasure of my loins: then if I would
Speak that—
Sic. We know your drift. Speak what?
Bru. There's no more to be said but he is banish'd,
As enemy to the people and his country.
It shall be so!
All Pleb. It shall be so, it shall be so!
Cor. You common cry of curs! whose breath I hate
As reek o'th'rotten fens.

III.iii.110–21)

Coriolanus's combativeness and insecure loyalty to the state are more representative of the political reality of Shakespeare's Rome.

The bonds of community are always tenuous in this republic: the tribunes have scant respect for the people they represent; the people themselves admit to unstable loyalties; nobles and people, during Coriolanus's exile, create a brief amity, which dissolves into mutual recriminations when Coriolanus and his new allies begin their assault on the city.

However representative of his Rome, Coriolanus is nevertheless exceptional in the intensity and completeness of his commitment to the *virtus* which, formally at least, "was honoured in Rome above all other vertues." The exceptional martial feats of Coriolanus are figured in his solitariness, as he enters alone, and escapes alone from, the gates of Corioles, fights singly against Aufidius, and is singled out before the army by the praise of Cominius. At the same time as it marks him as a man of surpassing heroism, however, his solitariness marks him proleptically as outcast and victim. Coriolanus's solitary entry into the gates of Corioles is an invention of Shakespeare (Plutarch has him accompanied by "very fewe men to helpe him"—p. 322). His heroism leaves his soldiers bluntly unimpressed, and his apparent death leaves them unmoved, if not relieved: "Foolhardiness! not I." "Nor I." "To th'pot, I warrant him" (I.iv.46–7). The misadventure also draws a handsome tribute to Coriolanus from the patrician Titus Lartius:

> Thou art left, Martius:
> 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.
>
> (I.iv.54–61)

This is in effect a premature funerary elegy, in which Coriolanus's surpassing prowess is amply acknowledged. But his "fierce and terrible" nature is confined by the speech more safely than it is in the play's action—Coriolanus's superhuman ferocity, after all, is directed not only at his enemies, but just as much at his fellow Romans. Plebeian soldiers and patrician officer alike convey the sense that a dead Martius makes a more comfortable fellow citizen than the living Martius. In the event, Coriolanus saves himself, and by his example stirs the army to the capture of Corioles, so that his double relation to Rome is here enacted: Rome needs the *virtus* of the warrior in its conquering mission, but Rome is also embarrassed by it; Coriolanus's isolation and

eventual sacrifice are needed if a minimal political harmony is to be achieved. This aspect of his role—Coriolanus as tragic scapegoat—has been touched on at the opening of the play: "First, you know Caius Martius is chief enemy to the people. . . . Let us kill him, and we'll have corn at our own price" (I.i.6–10). Volumnia also expresses a willingness to sacrifice Coriolanus. The terms in which she does so are conventional enough, but they take on a further meaning in the present context: "had I a dozen sons, each in my love alike, and none less dear than thine and my good Martius, I had rather had eleven die nobly for their country, than one voluptuously surfeit out of action" (I.iii.22–5). All these hints will be gathered up when Coriolanus's isolation from his Rome becomes absolute and his death real. He departs into exile alone (not, as in Plutarch, "with three or foure of his friendes"—p. 343) and in doing so bestows a measure of concord on the city. As Aufidius's ally he sentences himself to death by relenting to his family's appeals, but in doing so he spares Rome for further victories.

The central phase of the play—Coriolanus's return to Rome for a ceremonial "ovation", his nomination to the consulate, and the events that lead instead to his exile—demonstrates Shakespeare's acute sense of the contending political forces that play about Coriolanus, and of the contradictory demands that his city, and especially his fellow nobles, make of him. The attempt of the patricians to appropriate and institutionalize his heroism for their political purposes is met by Coriolanus's roughly principled resistance—and by the self-serving resistance of the tribunes. The process of institutionalizing Coriolanus begins even before his return to Rome, in Cominius's speech after the Corioles campaign, with its conferral upon Martius of his new cognomen, Coriolanus. The act of renaming produces a complex nexus of significances. On the one hand, it acknowledges his exceptional merits: his own *virtus*, by winning for him a new, honorific name, seems to make him what he later expresses the aspiration to be, "author of himself". On the other hand, the power to rename him belongs to the consul, and through the consul to the Roman state, which thus, in the act of setting him apart, asserts its proprietorship over its warrior servant. The name itself, taken from a defeated enemy, obliquely expresses the fact that Coriolanus's nature finds fulfilment in enmity; but beyond that, it also hints at the insecure loyalties of its bearer. The man who was willing to take any side in order to join

combat with Aufidius now has his name strangely bound up with his city's enemies.

Coriolanus's dominance of the play's early battle scenes is picked up when the action returns to Rome, ahead of the army's return. The awful and only partly human magnitude of his feats is again rehearsed by Volumnia: "Death, that dark spirit, in's nervy arm doth lie,/Which, being advanc'd, declines, and then men die" (II.i.159–60). But the question of how such a hero can belong in civic society also begins to take on prominence. The return of the action to Rome is marked by disagreement between Menenius and the tribunes over Coriolanus's nature: for the one, "He's a bear indeed, that lives like a lamb"; for the others "He's a lamb indeed, that baes like a bear" (II.i.10–11). (In the final phase of the play he will prove to be both marauding bear and sacrificial lamb.) The further exchanges between Menenius and the tribunes re-establish the pattern of mutual recrimination into which relations between nobles and people habitually fall. Coriolanus's triumphant return has the momentary effect of uniting the entire population of the city:

> All tongues speak of him, and the bleared sights
> Are spectacled to see him. Your prattling nurse
> Into a rapture lets her baby cry
> While she chats him. The kitchen malkin pins
> Her richest lockram 'bout her reechy neck,
> Clamb'ring the walls to eye him; stalls, bulks, windows,
> Are smother'd up, leads fill'd and ridges hors'd
> With variable complexions, all agreeing
> In earnestness to see him. Seld-shown flamens
> Do press among the popular throngs, and puff
> To win a vulgar station. Our veil'd dames
> Commit the war of white and damask in
> Their nicely gauded cheeks, to th'wanton spoil
> Of Phoebus' burning kisses.
>
> (II.i.203–16)

But beneath this unity lies a more pervasive sense of Coriolanus's being appropriated by the patricians as their political champion. It is Menenius, not the tribunes, who first stresses that the people "love not Martius", marking him off as patrician property; this claim is reiterated as Menenius converses with Volumnia about Coriolanus's new wounds:

> *Men.* Where is he wounded? [*To the Tribunes*] God save your good worships! Martius is coming home: he has more cause to be proud. [*To Volumnia*] Where is he wounded?
> *Vol.* I'th'shoulder, and i'th'left arm: there will be large cicatrices to show the people when he shall stand for his place. He received in the repulse of Tarquin seven hurts i'th'body.

Men. One i'th'neck, and two i'th'thigh—there's nine that I know.
Vol. He had, before this last expedition, twenty-five wounds upon him.
Men. Now it's twenty-seven: every gash was an enemy's grave.
(II.i.141–55)

Both Menenius and Volumnia, with their intimate and rather gloating calculus of Coriolanus's wounds, regard his badges of distinction as belonging to them; Menenius instinctively makes Coriolanus's glory a weapon of his own against the tribunes. In their anxiety to propel Coriolanus towards the consulate, these patricians reveal—without overtly expressing—their political designs on Coriolanus. They also reveal a childish, unquestioning delight in the prospect of Coriolanus's displaying his wounds to the people. This ritual is one that Coriolanus finds repugnant, not only out of distaste for the popular right to approve a new consul but because he has the valiant man's disdain for flaunting the marks of his *virtus*. This issue thus becomes a means of setting Coriolanus in contrast not only to the people (who indeed treat the procedure more tactfully than Menenius and Volumnia) but also to members of his own order. If the noble Coriolanus resists the ignominy of a public exhibition before the base plebeians, he is also resisting a kind of baseness among his fellow patricians.

The process of institutionalizing Coriolanus, begun in the field after the battle of Corioles (I.ix), continues with the Herald's announcement of Coriolanus's feats and of his new name, and with a processional entry into the city (II.i), and resumes immediately afterwards with Cominius's speech to the Senate (II.ii). The two ceremonial scenes in the city, with their formal speeches of praise, are added by Shakespeare to Plutarch's account. They have the effect of making the actual feats that the audience has witnessed seem more and more remote dramatically, and of showing that those feats cannot be treated as Coriolanus wishes:

Com. He covets less
Than misery itself would give, rewards
His deeds with doing them, and is content
To spend the time to end it.
(II.ii.126–9)

Coriolanus's deeds are not allowed to stand simply for themselves: they have a political bearing, and as the memorialization of them moves from field to city to senate, that bearing is revealed more and more clearly as serving to aggrandize the patrician order. But this process requires a degree of co-operation from Coriolanus and a degree of consent from the people, and the

latter stages of the consulate sequence bring these personal and political forces into opposition to the patricians. The most sustained and active opposition to Coriolanus's elevation to the consulate comes from the tribunes. Their opposition is first voiced in II.i, immediately after the description of Coriolanus's triumphant, and unifying, entry into Rome. By this juxtaposition, the tenuousness of Roman political unity is made clear, as are some of its various grounds—the tribunes' tenaciousness of office, the commoners' malice, Coriolanus's pride and intemperance. Shakespeare gives no reason to settle blame on the tribunes more firmly than on any of the other contending forces in the state. If they thrive on political enmity and opposition and hold tenaciously to their new office and to the rights of the people, they are simply acting as Romans of the republic. They are also acting along lines exactly parallel to Coriolanus, who likewise lives by contention and is likewise tenacious of the rights and dominance of his own order. The tribunes introduce partisan concerns indecorously into the Senate (Menenius: "That's off, that's off!/I would you rather had been silent"—II.ii.60–1), just as Coriolanus misspeaks at key moments (Menenius: "What the vengeance,/Could he not speak 'em fair?"—III.i.260–1). At the climax of the consulate sequence, the tribune Brutus and Coriolanus clash on the subject of service to the state:

> *Bru.* But since he hath
> Serv'd well for Rome—
> *Cor.* What do you prate of service?
> *Bru.* I talk of that, that know it.
> *Cor.* You?
> (III.iii.83–5)

Coriolanus's incredulous answer does not conceal the fact that the tribunes do perform a service appropriate to their position. It is not a noble service, but it is, like Coriolanus's military service, the one their position demands.

The crucial difference between Coriolanus and the tribunes lies in the superior calculation with which the tribunes conduct themselves, and in this respect their role assumes a parallel with the patricians. As the patricians, in the persons of Menenius and Volumnia, attempt to manipulate Coriolanus into the consulate, so the tribunes manipulate the people into opposition. In the central scenes of the consulate sequence, the methods of the two are insistently juxtaposed. Coriolanus is coached into "wholesome" and "mild" speech, with no pretence on the patricians' part that his appearances before the people and the tribunes

are anything but political charades. Volumnia even rehearses Coriolanus in gesture and word like a director instructing a player:

> Go to them, with this bonnet in thy hand,
> And thus far having stretch'd it—here be with them—
> Thy knee bussing the stones—for in such business
> Action is eloquence . . .
> say to them
> Thou art their soldier, and being bred in broils,
> Hast not the soft way which, thou dost confess,
> Were fit for thee to use.
> (III.ii.73–83)

At the same time the tribunes—with more verve and aptitude, perhaps, than Volumnia, and certainly with more pliant pupils—coach the people in their rejection of Coriolanus:

> *Bru.* Lay
> A fault on us, your tribunes: that we labour'd,
> No impediment between, but that you must
> Cast your election on him.
> *Sic.* Say you chose him
> More after our commandment than as guided
> By your own true affections . . .
> Lay the fault on us.
> *Bru.* Ay, spare us not. Say we read lectures to you.
> (II.iii.224–34)

> *Sic.* Assemble presently the people hither:
> And when they hear me say, 'It shall be so
> I'th'right and strength o'th'commons,' be it either
> For death, for fine, or banishment, then let them
> If I say fine, cry 'Fine', if death, cry 'Death'.
> (III.iii.12–16)

The circle of political contrasts and resemblances drawn in this part of the play is closed by the recognition, implicit in these parallel passages, that the dramatic relation between Coriolanus and the people is not one of simple contrariety. The renowned patrician warrior and the despised plebeian fragments both play political parts written for them by others. Even the contrast that does exist is not wholly to the people's disadvantage. However deficient in their devotion to *virtus*, the people show on occasion a generosity and clear-sightedness rare among Shakespeare's republican Romans. These attributes are exercised especially in the people's discussions of Coriolanus himself, in which their attempts to fathom and do justice to his nature serve a choric purpose, directing an audience's understanding and reflecting its bafflement. The "two Officers" who open II.ii (if they are to be counted as plebeians) rehearse the various ways in

which Coriolanus's conduct may be understood, and the "seven or eight Citizens" who open II.iii resume the subject, as well as reflecting on their own wavering character as a class. The conclusion of each discussion is the inescapable but not altogether satisfactory one that "he's a worthy man". Coriolanus's single-minded *virtus* is incapable of leading him to a comparably just conclusion about the people. Yet, as we have seen, he has more in common with them than he realizes. Even in their mutual enmity, similarities emerge between Coriolanus and the people. At the play's opening, the mutinous citizens hope to relieve the dearth by killing Coriolanus: "Let us kill him, and we'll have corn at our own price" (I.i.9–10). This sentiment may represent the illogicality of a rampaging crowd, but no less illogical is Coriolanus's way of answering their grievances and their accusations against the patricians:

> Would the nobility lay aside their ruth,
> And let me use my sword, I'd make a quarry
> With thousands of these quarter'd slaves, as high
> As I could pick my lance.
>
> (I.i.196–9)

At the centre of the political forces that contend in the consulate sequence, Coriolanus, despite his violent energy, is in a sense a passive character. He is unconscious of the complexity of the political forces that surround him, obediently though reluctantly following the dictates of his political seniors until provoked to another predictable course by the tribunes. The nature and defects of Shakespeare's Coriolanus, especially in these scenes, are interestingly glossed by Plutarch's comments at the corresponding point in his narrative:

> he was a man to full of passion & choller, & to muche geven to over selfe will & opinion, as one of a highe minde and great corage, that lacked the gravity, and affabilitie that is gotten with judgment of learning & reason, which only is to be looked for in a governour of state: and that remembred not how wilfulnes is the thing of the world, which a governour of a common wealth for pleasing should shonne, being that which *Plato* called solitarines. As in the ende, all men that are wilfully geven to a selfe opinion and obstinate minde, & who will never yeld to others reason, but to their owne: remaine without companie, and forsaken of all men. (p. 333)

Though all these strictures apply to Shakespeare's Coriolanus, they take on a special significance in the Rome Shakespeare has created. The "solitarines" of Coriolanus has not been viewed there as an aberration but as a virtue: his single-handed battlefield deeds are the main theme of Cominius's speech to the Senate, and his inhuman, machine-like *virtus* is praised in that

speech as well as by Volumnia. Conversely, the ideal of civic amenity implicit in Plutarch is hardly to be found in the actual politics of Shakespeare's republic (as distinct from the ideal politics of Menenius's fable). Menenius conversing with the buttock of the night, or Virgilia sewing a fine spot in gentle retirement, or the people indulging in banter over their diversely coloured wits, all provide examples of Plutarchan gravity or affability, but this spirit does not transfer to political life, where partisanship, calculation, and rancour generally prevail. Hence Coriolanus's honest inability to play the part before the people that is required of him. He is savagely contemptuous of the people's voices both because he has been trained up in a *virtus* that disdains craving reward and because the patricians themselves privately regard the ceremony as empty (III.ii.52–7).

The consequence of Coriolanus's embarrassing frankness is his exile. In treating the final phase of the play, Shakespeare shows the remorseless power of Rome even over a Coriolanus it has cast out. He also brings to a focus, without attempting to explain, the historical paradox by which the disorders of the early Roman republic coexist with Rome's progress towards its destined mastery of Italy. The political acrimony that produces Coriolanus's exile is not completely stilled, but the nobility is willing to temporize in the new political situation. Coriolanus, constant to the only value he has been taught, the soldier's *virtus,* transfers it to the service of the Volscians. But the power of Rome, and in particular of the nobility, proves greater than the *virtus* of its servant: working through Volumnia, it turns back Coriolanus's assault on the city by the eloquence which throughout the play has turned his *virtus* to its own purposes. It does so by an appeal that even the exile cannot reject—one to Coriolanus's familial rather than political loyalty. Yet if it is familial in substance, Volumnia's plea is political in effect; Volumnia returns to Rome to the kind of reception earlier accorded the triumphant Coriolanus. The city's destined mastery and the privileged position within it of the patricians are thus reasserted together. The crushing, machine-like ability of the Roman state to overwhelm its enemies, evoked by Menenius to the mutinous citizens at the beginning of the play, is demonstrated again. For his part, Coriolanus is persuaded to turn aside from his natural constancy of purpose, to temporize with an enemy, and to defend his actions by the kind of disingenuous and self-magnifying speech-making that he has always despised.

In this way, Rome undermines the foundations of his *virtus* and assures his destruction.

The conjoined greatness and vulnerability of Coriolanus are perfectly revealed in his first response to exile. With a magnificent disdain he turns the sentence back on the people: "I banish you!" (III.iii.123). Coriolanus proclaims himself the authentic Rome in exile. The proclamation does have a basis of truth, but it nevertheless represents a desperate aspiration, especially in a Coriolanus so completely shaped by his city. Similarly his declaration "There is a world elsewhere!" (III.iii.135) is resonant but vague, as if Coriolanus does not know what such a world might be or where it might be found. In fact, the world elsewhere is destined to fall under the sway of Rome, and can hold no refuge for Coriolanus. As the lonely fen-dwelling dragon he will now be set apart as an anomaly, to be hunted down. Yet Coriolanus's departure from his family and patrician friends in IV.i is a fine thing in its unforced, and unexpectedly human, grace. His leave-taking also brings out one more time the way in which the patricians deal in words that their actions belie:

> Nay, mother,
> Where is your ancient courage? You were us'd
> To say, extremities 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 . . .
> You were us'd to load me
> With precepts that would make invincible
> The heart that conn'd them.
>
> (IV.i.2–11)

It is Volumnia who, in the next scene, will descend to the undignified vituperation that Coriolanus now eschews. The inconstancy of the Romans, nobles and people, is also rapidly and rather predictably sketched in one more time as Coriolanus first leaves the city in an exhausted peace, and then advances on it at the head of the Volscians. Volumnia's expression of civic enmity gives way first to Menenius's expression of politic accommodation: "All's well, and might have been much better if/He could have temporiz'd" (IV.vi.16–17). But Menenius requires in turn only the news of Coriolanus's advance on the city to break out in the old language of vilification:

> You have made good work,
> You and your apron-men; you that stood so much
> Upon the voice of occupation and
> The breath of garlic-eaters!
>
> (IV.vi.96–9)

The people likewise shift from reverence for the tribunes to a fearful regret for their role in Coriolanus's exile.

For one more time, too—for the last time—the constant Coriolanus is set in contrast to his compatriots:

> I tell you, he does sit in gold, his eye
> Red as 'twould burn Rome; and his injury
> The gaoler to his pity.
>
> (V.i.63–5)

Alienated from his former friends and comrades, "a kind of nothing, titleless", Coriolanus displays both a tremendous, impersonal power, but also the vulnerability of solitude. With resourceful persistency, Rome uncovers that vulnerability, sending to Coriolanus first his friend and comrade Cominius, then his honorary father Menenius, and finally his mother and the rest of his family. It is Volumnia who succeeds in turning back Coriolanus's assault, by putting into practice herself the precepts of verbal artfulness that she had earlier wasted on her son:

> I would dissemble with my nature where
> My fortunes and my friends at stake required
> I should do so in honour.
>
> (III.ii.62–4)

Volumnia's politic attitude to truth in this speech, together with Menenius's cheerful admissions to the Volscian guards about his lying on behalf of Coriolanus, naturally put in question the honesty of Volumnia's appeal. The kind of conflict that Volumnia declares she feels, between mother and Roman, is of course effected, by her speech, in Coriolanus. But his conflict, between son of Volumnia and enemy of Rome, is felt, through his awkward sentences and pained silence, to be intolerable in a way that Volumnia's eloquently expressed quandary is not. Besides, patrician Rome does not really allow of such a conflict as Volumnia's, between familial and political allegiance, for the two realms are continuous. The typology of Volumnia as Hecuba and young Martius as Ascanius, hinted at in this scene, makes the point that Coriolanus's familial *pietas*, like Aeneas's, is bound up with the fortunes of the city. Volumnia's final thrust before Coriolanus relents also conjoins familial and political ties:

> This fellow had a Volscian to his mother;
> His wife is in Corioles, and his child
> Like him by chance.
>
> (V.iii.178–80)

In appealing to Coriolanus's familial *pietas*, therefore, Volumnia is at the same time appealing to his Roman nature, and whether

or not she does so consciously, she uses her role as mother to win a victory for her city. The conflict within Coriolanus can have no such convenient resolution: bound by oath to the destruction of Rome, he can relent only with dishonour. The appearance of his family makes Coriolanus feel that he plays the role of Rome's enemy like a dull actor who has forgot his part. But on his return to the city of the Volscians the audience detects an equally inauthentic quality to Coriolanus's own proclamation of his military victory, its economic benefits, and his diplomatic skills. He sounds for the first time not like the warrior patrician but like the politic patrician. Though Aufidius's acuteness and ruthlessness now find their opportunity, and though Coriolanus's instinct for arousing enmity also contributes to his destruction, the full measure of his tragic end is to be found in this transformation. Coriolanus the general is also the boy whom Aufidius taunts—the submissive product of his compromised but triumphant Rome.