

ern Critical

INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

William Shakespeare's Coriolanus



Modern Critical Interpretations

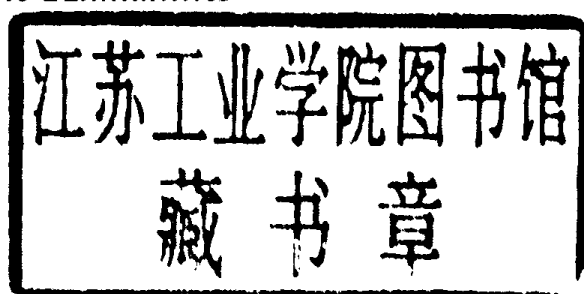
William Shakespeare's
Coriolanus

Edited and with an introduction by

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Editor's Note

This book gathers together a representative selection of the best modern criticism of Shakespeare's tragedy *Coriolanus*. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to John Rogers for his aid in editing this volume.

My introduction builds upon Hazlitt's analysis of *Coriolanus* as an instance of the close association between poetry and power. Eugene M. Waith begins the chronological sequence with his classic discussion of *Coriolanus* as heroic tragedy, with the Roman general as a grand instance of "the Herculean hero." In Kenneth Burke's equally classic essay, the play is viewed as a "grotesque" tragedy, so that the function of *Coriolanus* is to be "a master of vituperation," who is then tragically victimized so as to perform a ritualistic catharsis for his society.

The way in which the hero's virtue is also his vice, a frequent design in Shakespeare's tragedies, is studied in *Coriolanus* by Norman Rabkin. Imagery of hunger and feeding in the play is brilliantly related in Janet Adelman's essay to the dialectical interplay of dependency and aggression between *Coriolanus* and *Volumnia*. A. D. Nuttall, in an illuminating excursus, shows us the kind of Rome and the kinds of Romans Shakespeare created for this play. The philosopher Stanley Cavell, expounding interpretive problems of poetry and politics, essentially unveils religious analogues in *Coriolanus*. Perhaps finding a more benign totality in the play than most critics have done, Anne Barton concludes this volume by seeing *Coriolanus* as a tragedy that is primarily a history, whose hero belatedly accepts political change, but then dies before he has a chance to redefine himself in regard to that acceptance.

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I Introduction

I

William Hazlitt, writing in 1816, gave us what seems to me the most provocative criticism that Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* has received. Beginning with the observation that the play was "a storehouse of political commonplaces," Hazlitt sadly observed that Shakespeare, unlike himself, seemed a man of the Right, if only because "the cause of the people is indeed but little calculated as a subject for poetry." It might be salutary if many of our contemporary students of literature, who wish to make of it an instrument for social change, would meditate upon Hazlitt's profound reflections on poetry's love of power:

The language of poetry naturally falls in with the language of power. The imagination is an exaggerating and exclusive faculty: it takes from one thing to add to another: it accumulates circumstances together to give the greatest possible effect to a favourite object. The understanding is a dividing and measuring faculty, it judges of things not according to their immediate impression on the mind, but according to their relations to one another. The one is a monopolising faculty, which seeks the greatest quantity of present excitement by inequality and disproportion; the other is a distributive faculty, which seeks the greatest quantity of ultimate good, by justice and proportion. The one is an aristocratical, the other a republican faculty. The principle of poetry is a very anti-levelling principle. It aims at effect, it exists by contrast. It admits of no medium. It is everything by excess. It rises above the ordinary standard of sufferings and crimes. It presents a dazzling ap-

pearance. It shows its head turretted, crowned, and crested. Its front is gilt and blood-stained. Before it "it carries noise, and behind it leaves tears." It has its altars and its victims, sacrifices, human sacrifices. Kings, priests, nobles, are its train-bearers, tyrants and slaves its executioners.—"Carnage is its daughter."—Poetry is right-royal. It puts the individual for the species, the one above the infinite many, might before right. A lion hunting a flock of sheep or a herd of wild asses is a more poetical object than they; and we even take part with the lordly beast, because our vanity or some other feeling makes us disposed to place ourselves in the situation of the strongest party. So we feel some concern for the poor citizens of Rome when they meet together to compare their wants and grievances, till Coriolanus comes in and with blows and big words drives this set of "poor rats," this rascal scum, to their homes and beggary before him. There is nothing heroical in a multitude of miserable rogues not wishing to be starved, or complaining that they are like to be so; but when a single man comes forward to brave their cries and to make them submit to the last indignities, from mere pride and self-will, our admiration of his prowess is immediately converted into contempt for their pusillanimity. The insolence of power is stronger than the plea of necessity. The tame submission to usurped authority or even the natural resistance to it has nothing to excite or flatter the imagination: it is the assumption of a right to insult or oppress others that carries an imposing air of superiority with it. We had rather be the oppressor than the oppressed. The love of power in ourselves and the admiration of it in others are both natural to man: the one makes him a tyrant, the other a slave.

Even I initially resist the dark implications of Hazlitt's crucial insight: "The principle of poetry is a very anti-levelling principle." Wallace Stevens, who like Hazlitt and Nietzsche took the lion as the emblem of poetry, tells us that poetry is a destructive force: "The lion sleeps in the sun . . . / It could kill a man." Hazlitt, an unreconstructed Jacobin, writes with the authority of the strongest literary critic that the European Left has yet produced. I prefer him to T. S.

Eliot on *Coriolanus*, not just because Eliot writes with the grain politically, as it were, and Hazlitt against it, but because the Romantic critic also understands the drama's family romance better than the poet of *The Waste Land* does.

Eliot certainly was fonder of *Coriolanus* than Hazlitt could find it in himself to be. I cannot quarrel with Hazlitt's account of the Roman hero's motivations: "Coriolanus complains of the fickleness of the people: yet, the instant he cannot gratify his pride and obstinacy at their expense, he turns his arms against his country." When Volumnia cries out for the pestilence to strike all trades and occupations in Rome, because they have defied her son, Hazlitt allows himself a splendidly mordant comment:

This is but natural: it is but natural for a mother to have more regard for her son than for a whole city; but then the city should be left to take some care of itself. The care of the state cannot, we here see, be safely entrusted to maternal affection, or to the domestic charities of high life. The great have private feelings of their own, to which the interests of humanity and justice must courtesy. Their interests are so far from being the same as those of the community, that they are in direct and necessary opposition to them; their power is at the expense of *our* weakness; their riches of *our* poverty; their pride of *our* degradation; their splendour of *our* wretchedness; their tyranny of *our* servitude. If they had the superior knowledge ascribed to them (which they have not) it would only render them so much more formidable; and from Gods would convert them into Devils. The whole dramatic moral of *Coriolanus* is that those who have little shall have less, and that those who have much shall take all that others have left. The people are poor; therefore they ought to be starved. They are slaves; therefore they ought to be beaten. They work hard; therefore they ought to be treated like beasts of burden. They are ignorant; therefore they ought not to be allowed to feel that they want food, or clothing, or rest, that they are enslaved, oppressed, and miserable. This is the logic of the imagination and the passions; which seek to aggrandize what excites admiration and to heap contempt on misery, to raise power into tyranny, and to make tyranny

absolute; to thrust down that which is low still lower, and to make wretches desperate: to exalt magistrates into kings, kings into gods; to degrade subjects to the rank of slaves, and slaves to the condition of brutes. The history of mankind is a romance, a mask, a tragedy, constructed upon the principles of *poetical justice*; it is a noble or royal hunt, in which what is sport to the few is death to the many, and in which the spectators halloo and encourage the strong to set upon the weak, and cry havoc in the chase though they do not share in the spoil. We may depend upon it that what men delight to read in books, they will put in practice in reality.

Poetical justice is not political or social justice, because it ensues from the royal hunt of the imagination. Hazlitt is not concerned that this should be so; poetry and power marry one another. His proper concern, as a literary critic who would die for social change if he could, is that we protect ourselves, not against literature, but against those who would make a wrong because literal use of the poetics of power. Shrewd as Hazlitt's political insight is, his best insight into the play comes when he contrasts the attitudes toward Coriolanus of Volumnia, his mother, and Virgilia, his wife: "The one is only anxious for his honour; the other is fearful for his life." Glory indeed is Volumnia's obsession; Shakespeare makes her Homeric, a sort of female Achilles, while Coriolanus is more like Virgil's Turnus (as Howard Felperin notes), which may be why his wife is named Virgilia. What is most problematical in *Coriolanus* is the hero's relationship to his fierce mother, a relationship unique in Shakespeare.

II

Volumnia hardly bears discussion, once we have seen that she would be at home wearing armor in *The Iliad*. She is about as sympathetic as the Greek heroes in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*. Coriolanus himself sustains endless analysis and meditation; even the question of our sympathy for him is forever open. Neither a beast nor a god, he is a great soldier, far greater even than Antony or Othello. Indeed, to call him merely a great soldier seems quite inadequate. He is a one-man army, unique and pure, a sport of nurture rather than of nature, a dreadful monument to his mother's remorse-

less drive, her will-to-power. Perhaps he resembles Spenser's Talus, the iron man, more even than he suggests Virgil's Turnus. He has no military weaknesses, and no civilian strengths. Politically he is a walking and breathing disaster, in a play that persistently imposes politics upon him. The play would fail if Coriolanus were totally unsympathetic to us, and clearly the play is very strong, though its virtues do not make less weird Eliot's celebrated judgment that *Hamlet* was an aesthetic failure, while *Coriolanus* was Shakespeare's best tragedy. Hamlet contains us, while Coriolanus does not even contain himself. As several critics have remarked, he is a kind of baby Mars, and is very nearly empty, a moral void. How can a baby nullity possibly be a tragic hero?

For Frank Kermode, *Coriolanus* is a tragedy of ideas, but Kermode is unable to tell us what the ideas are, and though he calls Coriolanus a great man, he also does not tell us in just what that greatness consists. I may be unjust to Kermode if the crucial idea turns out to be solipsism and if the greatness of Coriolanus is in his imperfect solipsism which cannot become perfect so long as Volumnia is alive. But solipsism, perfect or not, constitutes greatness in a poet, rather than in a tragic hero. Milton's Satan is an almost perfect solipsist, and that, rather than his splendid wickedness, is why he is a heroic villain and not the hero of a cosmic tragedy. Satan is a great poet, almost the archetype of the modern strong poet (as I have written elsewhere). Coriolanus has no imagination and is no poet at all, except when he provokes his own catastrophe.

Kenneth Burke's *Coriolanus* is a tragedy of the grotesque, which I translate as meaning that politics and the grotesque are one and the same, and that seems fair and true enough. Coriolanus is to Burke a master of invective, rather like Shakespeare's Timon, and the wielder of invective makes a convincing tragic scapegoat. That gives us still the question of this hero's eminence; is he more than a great (and prideful) killing machine? A. D. Nuttall, in his admirable study of Shakespearean mimesis, finds the warrior's aristocratic spirit to be both large and shallow, "at one and same time a sort of Titan and a baby." But how can we get at the Titanism, or is it actually a mockery of the old giants, so that Coriolanus is merely a prophecy of General George Patton? Nuttall shrewdly takes away everything he gives Coriolanus, whose "character is one of great pathos," but: "The pathos lies in the fact that he has no inside." Again, Nuttall salutes Coriolanus for one moment of "true Stoic grandeur," when

he replies to banishment with: "I banish you." Nuttall then adds that we see a red-faced child in a temper tantrum. As Nuttall says, this is superb mimesis, but can we greatly care what happens to such a hero? In Homer, the answer would be affirmative, since Achilles is at least as much a spoiled child as Coriolanus is. Yet Achilles is a poet also, a powerful imagination brooding bitterly upon its own mortality, and so we care what happens to him. His greatness is convincing not just because others reflect it to us, but because his eloquence is universally persuasive.

Harold C. Goddard, the most generous and perceptive of all Shakespearean critics, finds the one fault of Coriolanus to be that he "lacks unconsciousness of his virtue." Less generously, we could label Coriolanus an instance of "Mars as narcissist," rather than Goddard's "proud idealist" who is entirely a victim of his virago of a mother. Perhaps the ambivalence that Coriolanus provokes in us can be set aside if we contemplate his heroic death scene, wholly appropriate for a tragic protagonist in Shakespeare:

CORIOLANUS: Hear'st thou, Mars?

AUFIDIUS: Name not the god, thou boy of tears!

CORIOLANUS: Ha?

AUFIDIUS: No more.

CORIOLANUS: Measureless liar, thou hast made my heart

Too great for what contains it. "Boy"? O slave!

Pardon me, lords, 'tis the first time that ever

I was forc'd to scold. Your judgments, my grave
lords,

Must give this cur the lie; and his own notion—

Who wears my stripes impress'd upon him, that

Must bear my beating to his grave—shall join

To thrust the lie unto him.

1. LORD: Peace both, and hear me speak.

CORIOLANUS: Cut me to pieces, Volscies, men and lads,

Stain all your edges on me. "Boy," false hound!

If you have writ your annals true, 'tis there

That, like an eagle in a dove-cote, I

[Flutter'd] your Volscians in Corioles.

Alone I did it. "Boy"!

AUFIDIUS: Why, noble lords,

Will you be put in mind of his blind fortune,

Which was your shame, by this unholy braggart,
'Fore your own eyes and ears?

ALL CONSPIRATORS: Let him die for't.

ALL PEOPLE: Tear him to pieces! Do it presently!—
He kill'd my son!—My daughter!—He kill'd my
cousin Marcus!—He kill'd my father!

2. LORD: Peace ho! no outrage, peace!
The man is noble, and his fame folds in
This orb o' th' earth. His last offenses to us
Shall have judicious hearing. Stand, Aufidius,
And trouble not the peace.

CORIOLANUS: O that I had him,
With six Aufidiuses, or more, his tribe,
To use my lawful sword!

AUFIDIUS: Insolent villain!

ALL CONSPIRATORS: Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill him!
Draw the Conspirators, and kills Martius, who falls.

This is Coriolanus at his worst and at his best, with the extremes not to be disentangled. His triple repetition of "Boy" reflects his fury both at Aufidius's insolence and at his own subservience to his mother, whose boy he now knows he will never cease to be. Yet his vision of himself as an eagle fluttering his enemies' dove-cotes raises his legitimate pride to an ecstasy in which we share, and we are captured by his exultant and accurate "Alone I did it." There is his tragedy, and his grandeur: "Alone I did it." If they have writ their annals true, then he is content to be cut to pieces by them. His death is tragic because it is a *sparagmos*, not Orphic, but not the death of Turnus either. What is torn apart is the last representative of the heroism that fights alone and wins alone, and that can find no place in the world of the commonal and the communal.

The Herculean Hero

Eugene M. Waith

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

He is their god. He leads them like a thing
Made by some other deity than Nature,
That shapes man better; and they follow him
Against us brats with no less confidence
Than boys pursuing summer butterflies
Or butchers killing flies.

.

He will shake
Your Rome about your ears

(4.6, 90–94, 98–99)

To which Menenius adds: “As Hercules / Did shake down mellow fruit.” In these words Coriolanus is not only presented as a god and compared to Hercules; he is “like a thing / Made by some other deity than Nature.” So extraordinary is he that even his troops, inspired by him, feel themselves to be as much superior to the Romans as boys to butterflies or butchers to flies. Like Menaphon’s description of Tamburlaine (“Such breadth of shoulders as might mainly bear / Old Atlas’ burthen”) and Cleopatra’s of Antony (“His legs bestrid

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