

"Unshout the noise that banish'd
Martius:" Structural Paradox and
Disassembling in *Coriolanus*

STANLEY D. MCKENZIE

IN CREATING THE world of *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare structures a moral quicksand. The play has long been considered unpopular with theater audiences, and Fascists and Communists alike rioted against a Paris production during the 1930s, both factions claiming it was propaganda directed against them. Literary critics have responded more favorably to *Coriolanus*, but often with perplexing conclusions; George Bernard Shaw perversely calls it Shakespeare's most perfect comedy, while O. J. Campbell believes it is a tragic satire. Such diverse responses stem from the basic design of *Coriolanus*. The play is singularly structured to create an overwhelming sense of unresolved paradox and uncertainty in the minds of the audience; this effect consequently conditions and impels the audience to accept an ethic of disassembling as the only means of coping with the world Shakespeare constructs in this play.

The primary paradox of *Coriolanus* centers upon the title character¹; the great military hero with his unbounded sense of personal pride and absolute standards of unyielding honor proves twice to be a traitor. Furthermore, Coriolanus' very function as "tragic hero" is unclear; although the focal point of the play and the constant subject of other characters' conversations, he is the least introspective of Shakespeare's major tragic figures. Upon being banished from Rome, Coriolanus bids his family and friends farewell:

While I remain above the ground, you shall
Hear from me still, and never of me aught
But what is like me formerly.²

(IV.i.51-53)

When next seen, however, Coriolanus is completely transformed, dressed in beggars' clothes and preparing to join his deadly foe Aufidius. He does comment briefly on the "slippery turns" of the world (IV.iv.12-24), but compared to Hamlet's or Macbeth's self-analysis, Coriolanus' thirteen lines of reflection scarcely provide any sense as to why he becomes a traitor. and it is difficult

for an audience to empathize with his situation. Mythological associations in the play shed little light on Coriolanus' nature. Several critics have attempted to fit him into the mold of Achillean or Herculean hero, or even to make him into a Christ-like scapegoat willingly sacrificing himself to save the wicked city for the sake of the righteous few.³ To credit Coriolanus for being Achillean is paradoxical, however, considering Shakespeare's satiric portrait in *Troilus and Cressida*; likewise only when Coriolanus sets aside his Herculean pride and righteous wrath can he be destroyed, but this lapse in his supposed heroic nature constitutes his one humane and compassionate act in the entire play; finally, Coriolanus dies not as the sacrificial lamb of forgiveness, but as the proud, cursing man of destruction.

If not the mythic hero or ritually slain scapegoat, Coriolanus most certainly is a mechanical engine of war,⁴ a remorseless, flailing Talus. His family and friends make the associations (I.iii.34-37; I.iv.56-61; II.i.158-61; II.ii.107-22; V.iv.18-21) and intend them as flattery, but the cumulative effect is to dehumanize Coriolanus and leave the audience appalled. The paradox of these attempts to praise Coriolanus by making him a mindless juggernaut is further enhanced when Valeria describes how his son, young Martius, tore a butterfly to pieces (I.iii.57-65); Volumnia, the little beast's grandmother, comments, "One on 's father's moods," to which Valeria adds, "Indeed la, 'tis a noble child." Although Coriolanus' mother and friends may approve of his destructive nature, his political enemies do not and plot to make him destroy himself. Their success, however, does not help in resolving how we respond to Coriolanus, since at their best the conniving tribunes are more despicable than Coriolanus in his most lethal rages.

Paradox in the characterization of Coriolanus is only the first step in Shakespeare's structuring of a play which constantly creates a sense of uncertainty in the audience about the appropriate response to the unfolding events. The major thematic metaphor of the play, for instance, is the concept of the body politic, introduced by Menenius' parable of the belly (I.i.96-154). Menenius calls the belly "grave" and "deliberate," "not rash" like the mutinous plebeians; yet no sooner has he calmed the mob than Coriolanus enters and stirs it up again with his vituperation. Coriolanus possesses none of the qualities ascribed to patricians in the fable, and he prolongs the unhealthy turmoil of the Roman state; in contrast, after his banishment Rome is tranquil with "tradesmen singing in their shops, and going / About their functions friendly" (IV.vi.8-9). Coriolanus has no sense of a corporate political structure and proposes to cure Rome by killing all the citizens. His inability to assimilate himself into the body politic becomes so extreme that he finally attempts to free himself from any bonds or relationships whatsoever⁵:

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

(V.iii.34-37)

The plebeians and their tribunes are equally willing to sever Coriolanus from the body politic and believe the way to cure the state is by killing him. But Rome's corporate safety depends upon Coriolanus' singular body, which bears twenty-seven wounds; Menenius points out the paradox of the tribunes wanting to cure the state by killing its chief defender (III.i.294-302). Equally paradoxical, however, is Coriolanus' refusing to show his wounds to the Roman people, but then after banishment marching to destroy Rome in order to maintain the honor of those wounds acquired preserving Rome!

The plot of *Coriolanus* is riddled with betrayals, fickleness, and contradictions, all contributing to the sense of paradox and uncertainty. Coriolanus betrays first Rome and then the Volscians; Aufidius in turn betrays Coriolanus, who dies with the cry of "traitor" ringing in his ears. The fickle Roman plebeians admit it would be monstrous not to make Coriolanus consul, but within an hour of giving him their voices, they deny him the position; after hounding him from Rome, they later disclaim responsibility for his banishment. The tribunes accuse Coriolanus of scorning the law and conclude contradictorily that the law should therefore be set aside so that he can be executed without trial; after persuading the plebeians that Coriolanus deserves to die, the tribunes again reverse themselves and call for his banishment. The Volscian senators are equally inconsistent when they glorify the enemy who killed their children. Even Coriolanus' marriage is contradictory in that Virgilia hates the wars which Coriolanus loves.

The play also has continual reversals of expectations. When it appears that Coriolanus has been killed, he suddenly reappears from within the walls of Corioles; he looks as if he were flayed, but the blood covering him is mostly Volscian. After the battle the looters' spoils turn out to be worthless, and Coriolanus asks that a Volscian prisoner who once befriended him be released; this unexpected generosity is seriously marred, however, when Coriolanus cannot recall the man's name and so simply drops the matter. Volumnia anticipates that Coriolanus will be elected consul, and the tribunes plan to have him thrown down the Tarpeian rock, but both expectations are thwarted. A Volscian and Roman spy unexpectedly meet, yet even though the Volscian is on his way to Rome to find this very man, he does not recognize him. After Coriolanus' banishment, the tribunes expect never to fear him again and

refuse to believe that he is marching against Rome with Aufidius. Menenius goes to Coriolanus' camp expecting to be greeted joyfully and tells the guards who restrain him to expect severe punishment; when coldly dismissed by Coriolanus, however, Menenius must suffer the guards' taunts. After Coriolanus unexpectedly spares Rome, he expects Aufidius to defend his decision back in Corioles, but Aufidius instead plots to have him murdered. In Corioles, Coriolanus appears "before the people, hoping / To purge himself with words" (V.vi.7-8) in complete contrast to his contempt for the plebeians in Rome, where he expected his deeds to speak for themselves; both expectations prove false.⁶

For the audience, reversal of expectations is enhanced through extensive ironic foreshadowing. Events in the last half of the play often have an aura of *déjà vu*,⁷ but with no assurance as to the outcome. Volumnia's persuading Coriolanus to humble himself before the Roman citizens is replayed when she dissuades him from attacking Rome. Likewise the tribunes and Aufidius both use the word "traitor" as a catalyst to send Coriolanus into a rage before the Roman and Volscian people respectively (III.iii.66; V.vi.84). The opening scene of the play, where Menenius persuades the rebellious plebeians to "undo" themselves, contains numerous ironic images that are picked up later as Menenius fails but Volumnia succeeds in getting Coriolanus to undo his attack upon Rome; for example, Menenius' belief that Coriolanus will be more tractable if he is well-fed ironically links Coriolanus' attack upon Rome to the plebeians' food riots. Upon rejecting Menenius' pleas to spare Rome, Coriolanus is called "constant" and "the rock, the oak not to be wind-shaken" (V.ii.94, 111) only minutes before he yields to Volumnia.

Repetition of certain gestures also enhances the ironic foreshadowing. Kneelings occur between Coriolanus and Volumnia, first when he triumphantly returns to Rome after defeating the Volscians and later when he marches upon Rome at the head of the Volscian army. There is also the taking of hands both when Coriolanus is banished and when he signifies that he will spare Rome. Coriolanus hugs Cominius during the battle against the Volscians and repeats the embrace when he joins Aufidius; in both instances the hugging is accompanied with imagery of a husband clasping his bride on their wedding night (I.vi.29-32; IV.v.106-18). The most stunning ironically foreshadowed gesture is Aufidius' placing his foot on Coriolanus' dead body. Volumnia earlier predicts that Coriolanus will "beat Aufidius' head below his knee, / And tread upon his neck" (I.iii.46-47), and in Act V Coriolanus plans to "triumphantly tread" upon Rome (V.iii.116); "the ground shrinks before his treading" (V.iv.19-20), but Volumnia tells Coriolanus

thou shalt no sooner
March to assault thy country than to tread
(Trust to't, thou shalt not) on thy mother's womb.⁸
(V.iii.122-24)

Young Martius shouts, " 'A shall not tread on me" (V.iii.127), and Coriolanus finally treads on no one; he instead is trod upon until a shocked Volscian Lord tells Aufidius, "Tread not upon him" (V.vi.133).

Along with repetition of gestures, people's words continually return to haunt them. Coriolanus rallies his soldiers with the cry that "If any think brave death outweighs bad life, / And that his country's dearer than himself" (I.vi.71-72), then they should follow him; he little realizes that soon he will become a traitor, but then spare his country at the expense of his own life. Likewise when meeting Aufidius in battle, Coriolanus proclaims, "I'll fight with none but thee, for I do hate thee / Worse than a promise-breaker" (I.viii.1-2); he is no more aware of the ironic foreshadowing in these words than is Volumnia when she calls for plagues to afflict Rome after Coriolanus' banishment, only to find herself diverting the pestilence of her revengeful son. Even Volumnia's appeal to Coriolanus to spare Rome for the sake of his family proves ironic when the Volscians murder Coriolanus with cries of, "He kill'd my son!—My daughter!—He kill'd my cousin Marcus!—He kill'd my father" (V.vi.121-22).

The ironic foreshadowing, reversal of expectations, betrayals, contradictions, and paradox in *Coriolanus* create an environment of all-pervasive mutability. Despite the professed emphasis upon loyalty and steadfastness, nothing in the world of *Coriolanus* can be trusted. The rhetoric of virtually every line in the play contributes to this uncertainty. Iterative imagery, which usually shapes and clarifies audience responses in Shakespeare's plays, is paradoxical in *Coriolanus* and serves only to confuse; the three commonly analyzed images of food, disease, and animals are associated so indiscriminately in both positive and negative contexts with the different characters that they simply negate themselves.⁹ Coriolanus, for example, identifies himself with animals he considers noble (eagles, dragons, etc.), but unwittingly reminds the audience of the predatory nature of these creatures.¹⁰ Throughout *Coriolanus* Shakespeare uses words of positive emotional impact in situations that reinforce the value normally given to the words, but then shifts the words into pejorative contexts. This dichotomy has often been noted for the words "honor" and "noble," but the same phenomenon occurs with other key words as well. Coriolanus' heroics in defending Rome are often referred to as "ser-

vice," but when he turns traitor, the worth of the word suddenly shifts. Coriolanus' last words before entering Aufidius' house are, "I'll do his country service" (IV.iv.26); the servant's opening words in the scene immediately following repeat the word in the context of *bad* service: "Wine, wine, wine! What service is here? I think our fellows are asleep" (IV.v.1-2). Coriolanus' intrusion hampers the lazy servingmen, and the word "service" is reduced to a feeble pun in what may be the only bawdy joke in the play as Coriolanus responds to the query, "Do you meddle with my master?" with the quip, "Ay, 'tis an honest service than to meddle with thy mistress" (IV.v.46-48). After Aufidius enters and Coriolanus identifies himself, "service" becomes "painful service," "revengeful services," and the only alternative to "shame" (IV.v.68, 89, 100-01). Henceforth Coriolanus serves neither Rome, Aufidius, nor himself well.

The shifting-value word with highest emotional impact is "home," which appears more often (thirty-four times) in *Coriolanus* than in any other Shakespeare play; "house" occurs in synonymous contexts another eleven times. Plebeians are urged to return home in times of public turmoil, and Sicinius is told to "fly to your house" (V.iv.35) to escape being killed. Even Coriolanus prudently returns home after his standing for consul ends with the citizens demanding his death. The sanctity of "home" is made ironically clear when Aufidius describes his hatred of Coriolanus:

Where I find him, were it
At home, upon my brother's guard, even there,
Against the hospitable canon, would I
Wash my fierce hand in 's heart.

(I.x.24-27)

Coriolanus does end up in Aufidius' home, and before he reveals his identity the servants cry, "Here's no place for you," "I cannot get him out o' th' house," "Pray you avoid the house" (IV.v.8, 20-21, 22-23). Coriolanus' proper home is Rome, as Volumnia makes explicit when she confronts him. She first identifies herself with mother Rome ("thou shalt no sooner / March to assault thy country than to tread / . . . on thy mother's womb") and then pretends to accept Coriolanus' determination as inexorable and declares all bonds binding him to his home dissolved:

So, we will home to Rome,
And die among our neighbors. . . .
This fellow had a Volscian to his mother;

His wife is in Corioles, and his child
Like him by chance.

(V.iii.172-80)

Volumnia's strategy works, but what is the value of Coriolanus' Roman home? Upon being banished, Coriolanus asserts, "There is a world elsewhere" (III.iii.135), and he tells Aufidius' servants that he dwells "Under the canopy. . . . I' th' city of kites and crows" (IV.v.38-42). Yet Volumnia's success depends upon Coriolanus' inability to reject the values of "home." The irony is compounded in that after sparing Rome he does not return home with his family, but instead leaves with the Volscians. In the last scene of the play, Coriolanus calls Corioles his "home" (V.vi.76) for the first and only time; yet here his very name condemns him, and he is brutally murdered in his new home.¹¹

Along with these mutable image motifs, *Coriolanus* reverberates with rhetorical figures of contrast and irony. For example, Shakespeare uses oxymoronic *contrapositum* (Puttenham's *syneciosis*) such as "valiant ignorance" (IV.vi.104); also frequent is his use of *contentio* (*antitheton*), at times overtly in lines such as, "You have deserv'd nobly of your country, and you have not deserv'd nobly" (II.iii.88-89), which Coriolanus correctly perceives as an *enigma* as well, but more often in the form of metaphors or similes: "Triton of the minnows" (III.i.89), "crows to peck the eagles" (III.i.139), "When steel grows soft as the parasite's silk" (I.ix.45), or Coriolanus' claims of how the universe must rebel to see his mother on her knees before him (V.iii.58-62). The most elaborate use of contrarities occurs in Coriolanus' first speech describing the plebeians (I.i.168-84), which sets the tone for the entire play and which Derek Traversi calls "surely one of the most disconcerting initial utterances ever put into the mouth of a tragic hero."¹²

Various forms of rhetorical irony (*illusio*) permeate the play, particularly in Menenius' exchanges with the tribunes; both use *elevatio* in discussing Coriolanus:

Bru. He's a lamb indeed, that baes like a bear.

Men. He's a bear indeed, that lives like a lamb.

(II.i.11-12)

Menenius employs sarcasm (*irrisio* and *negando* or *antiphrasis*) when he tells the plebeians that theirs is a "most wise rebellion" (I.i.158) and again when he and Cominius repeatedly taunt the tribunes with "You have made good [air] work!" (IV.vi.80-118) upon learning of Rome's impending destruction

by Coriolanus. Also ironic are numerous positive assertions made after the audience has already seen the disproof of the statement. Menenius becomes the victim of Shakespeare's *illusio* with his claim that Coriolanus and Aufidius can "No more atone than violent'st contrariety" (IV.vi.73) when the audience already knows they have become allies; Menenius later insists that the envoy of women have no chance of moving Coriolanus (V.iv.1-29), but these assertions again come after Coriolanus has yielded to Volumnia.

Shakespeare's elocutionary thrust throughout *Coriolanus* is to create a continual sense of uncertainty as to the literal truth of the lines.¹³ Larger rhetorical patterns enhance this uncertainty, since virtually every statement in the play is in some way qualified. Most obvious are the pervasive conditional words "if," "but," "though," and "yet" (often creating outright paradox), such as in "grave but reckless senators" (III.i.92). Even Cominius' encomium on Coriolanus contains conditional qualification:

It is held
That valor is the chiefest virtue, and
Most dignifies the haver; if it be . . .
(II.ii.83-85)

The "if it be" unwittingly questions the virtue of Coriolanus' valor that the speech celebrates.¹⁴ Qualification also occurs in constant disagreements within the dialogue; Menenius claims that Coriolanus' wounds are "Like graves i' th' holy churchyard," but Coriolanus retorts, "Scratches with briers, / Scars to move laughter only" (III.iii.51-52).

The language of *Coriolanus* develops continually through internal contradiction, conditional qualification, and paradox. The most striking lines in the play use this rhetorical tension, and examples are legion:

O noble fellow!
Who sensibly outdares his senseless sword,
And when it bows, stand'st up.
(I.iv.52-54)

Wouldst thou have laugh'd had I come coffin'd home,
That weep'st to see me triumph?
(II.i.176-77)

Anger's my meat; I sup upon myself,
And so shall starve with feeding.
(IV.ii.50-51)

Shakespeare's poetic imagination maintains the tension with a continual vocabulary of negation; the prefix *un* is a favorite of Shakespeare's, but in *Coriolanus* he coins at least fifteen words with *un* used nowhere else in his canon, including "unroof'd the city" (I.i.218), "ungravely" (II.iii.225), "unbuild" (III.i.197), "unbarb'd sconce" (III.ii.99), "unhearts me" (V.i.49), and "Unshout the noise that banish'd Martius!" (V.v.4).¹⁵ The strong, positive, creative word negated provides for memorable imagery, but it also adds to the total sense of antithesis and paradox which permeates the play.

Thus Shakespeare uses vocabulary, rhetorical figures, ironic foreshadowing, thematic development, and characterization to create an all-pervasive sense of uncertainty and paradox surrounding the events of the play; there are simply no "right" responses for the audience.¹⁶ The only absolute figure in the play, intending to purify Rome in fire, yields and loses everything. But what is to be made of him? His inflexible idealism was instilled by his mother, yet Volumnia is the one who diverts him. In the final confrontation, Volumnia catalogs the inherent paradoxes of the situation: she and Virgilia have been impoverished since Coriolanus' exile, but they are more unfortunate now that he has returned, since rather than making their "eyes flow with joy, hearts dance," his mission makes them "weep and shake with fear and sorrow" (V.iii.99, 100). The women must lose either

The country, our dear nurse, or else thy person,
Our comfort in the country,

(V.iii.110-11)

and Coriolanus must either be led captive through the streets, or else

Triumphantly tread on thy country's ruin,
And bear the palm for having bravely shed
Thy wife and children's blood.

(V.iii.116-18)

Volumnia's success, however, is equally paradoxical, as Coriolanus recognizes in his moment of retreat from absolutes:

O my mother, mother! O!
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. But let it come.

(V.iii.185-89)

When Coriolanus is confronted by the three forms of womanhood, it is not the chaste Valeria nor the life-affirming Virgilia, but the old death-crone Volumnia who prevails and saves Rome at the expense of her son's life.¹⁷ The gods laugh at "this unnatural scene" (V.iii.184), but the paradox is not complete until Coriolanus is actually killed, only to have his murderer "struck with sorrow" (V.vi.147); the play closes with one final paradox as Aufidius, only moments after treading on the body, says that though Coriolanus "widowed and unchilded many a one" in Corioles, "Yet he shall have a noble memory" (V.vi.151, 153).

In *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare immerses us in an environment of perpetual paradox. Adrift in such a world, we instinctively search for anything that works or even survives; when no right choices are available, simple survival becomes attractive and whatever works seems good. The play provides two successful survivors—Aufidius and Volumnia. Aufidius is Coriolanus' alter ego, as Coriolanus states:

I sin in envying his nobility;
And were I any thing but what I am,
I would wish me only he.

(I.i.230-32)

The best analyses within the play of Coriolanus' character come from Aufidius (IV.vii), who never faults Coriolanus for what he is. Unlike Coriolanus, however, Aufidius perceives the nature of their world and recognizes that absolute values cannot survive. Aufidius is a relativist and has total confidence that he will eventually triumph over Coriolanus in a world where nothing is absolute or immutable:

So our virtues
Lie in th' interpretation of the time,
And power, unto itself most commendable,
Hath not a tomb so evident as a chair
T' extol what it hath done.
One fire drives out one fire; one nail, one nail;
Rights by rights fouler, strengths by strengths do fail.

(IV.vii.49-55)

Aufidius has no moral qualms about how he kills Coriolanus or uses Coriolanus' sense of honor to destroy him. Aufidius then immediately bends to declare himself a "loyal servant" subject to the power of the Volscian Senate

(V.vi.138-41); he lives and prospers in contrast to the naively absolute Coriolanus.

Volumnia is more significant than Aufidius, and the basis of her relative success is clearer. When Coriolanus refuses to be false to his nature in front of the plebeians, Volumnia counsels otherwise:

I have a heart as little apt as yours,
But yet a brain that leads my use of anger
To better vantage. . . . You are too absolute,
Though therein you can never be too noble,
But when extremities speak. I have heard you say
Honor and policy, like unsever'd friends,
I' th' war do grow together. . . .
If it be honor in your wars to seem
The same you are not, which, for your best ends,
You adopt your policy, how is it less or worse
That it shall hold companionship in peace
With honor, as in war? . . .
I would dissemble with my nature where
My fortune and my friends at stake requir'd
I should do so in honor.

(III.ii.29-64)

Brilliantly using all the rhetorical devices discussed earlier, Volumnia advises her son to dissemble with the plebeians to gain political power. For all her fierce pride, Volumnia advocates adjusting to the reality of a situation even at the expense of compromising cherished principles. When Rome is reduced to a policy of "desperation" (IV.vi.126-28), she saves the city through a masterful display of her earlier advice. Dissimulation (*interpellatio*) is a major figure of irony, and in her final confrontation with Coriolanus, Volumnia truly dissembles with her nature; she draws upon all of her son's feelings toward her, demolishes the concepts of honor and nobility she herself had taught him, plays upon his sense of guilt by claiming he dishonors her if he does not accede to her wishes, and finally denounces any relationship with him whatsoever. Coriolanus cannot withstand statements from his mother such as:

Thou hast never in thy life
Show'd thy dear mother any courtesy.
(V.iii.160-61)

Volumnia earlier claims she would rejoice if Coriolanus died gaining honor (I.iii.2-25); she now pragmatically destroys her son's idealistic sense of honor so that she and Rome may live.

Coriolanus finds repugnant Volumnia's earlier advice to him, claiming that to dissemble with the plebeians is to be possessed of "Some harlot's spirit" (III.ii.112). Aufidius comments on Volumnia's dissembling by accusing Coriolanus of having betrayed the Volscians "At a few drops of women's rheum, which are / As cheap as lies" (V.vi.45-46). Despite these pejorative comments on dissembling, it is the only thing that works in *Coriolanus*. Aufidius dissembles in order to kill Coriolanus, as did the tribunes in getting him banished from Rome. Menenius recognizes that the dissension between Coriolanus and the plebeians "must be patch'd / With cloth of any color" (III.i.251-52), and Coriolanus' last words to Volumnia are that "All the swords / In Italy . . . Could not have made this peace" (V.iii.207-09). Volumnia's dissembling words, however, do achieve peace, and Menenius cries,

This Volumnia
Is worth of consuls, senators, patricians,
A city full; of tribunes, . . .
A sea and land full.

(V.iv.52-55)

Volumnia is thus presented as the best kind of political leader a state can have—the pragmatic dissembler!

A democratically inclined audience will most likely find such a conclusion distasteful. Shakespeare creates in *Coriolanus* a world of chaos, impelling us to search for some kind of ordering force, a restorer of harmony, a resolving element; this proves to be Volumnia. Sensing that whatever successfully provides stability and security in such a world must be right, we are conditioned to approve of a functional ethic which sees "honor" and Machiavellian "policy" as synonymous and which advocates "noble cunning" (IV.i.9) in the face of adversity. In today's society, however, we particularly dislike politicians who justify dissembling as being for a good cause, namely their own election. Furthermore, dissembling as a functional ethic destroys high ideals and leaves us with a sense of loss, a feeling that although these ideals may be impractical, nevertheless their loss is greater than the stability gained by rejecting them.

A sense of loss, however, lies at the heart of tragedy; Desdemona dies while Iago lives and Hamlet is surely worth more than Fortinbras, yet *Othello* and *Hamlet* remain popular. The sense of loss concerning *Coriolanus*, however, is itself paradoxical. We may despise the political dissembler, but the fire in

Coriolanus' eye as he marches to purify the wicked city in flames is equally frightening as we recognize all too easily the revolutionary zealot with admirable ideals whose disregard for human life in the pursuit of absolute principles turns him into a monster of destruction. Critics often discuss *Coriolanus* in terms of conflict in ethical values, but these conflicts can never be resolved, since the predominant functional ethic of the play is moral passivism, indeed an ethic of amorality. There are no absolutes in *Coriolanus*; moral values intensely adhered to become self-destructive, and aggressive idealism "melts" before the dissembling passivism of relative ethics.

Coriolanus thus challenges traditional Elizabethan ethical values as Shakespeare exposes his audience to the unsettling realities of Machiavellian politics in a disordered world. The development of Renaissance skepticism has been thoroughly documented by William R. Elton in both its atheistic and Epicurean aspects as well as its religious manifestations.¹⁸ Elton concludes that, along with the "skeptical disintegration" of belief in a special providence,

another factor was the breakdown of the medieval analogical relation, and the progressive distancing of God from man. Thus the Deity became, in effect, a *Deus absconditus*, whose seemingly arbitrary and capricious workings were, according to such influential figures as Calvin and Montaigne, beyond the power of feeble human reason to grasp or to evaluate.¹⁹

In *Coriolanus*, Volumnia reflects this skeptical attitude as she says of the tribunes,

Cats, that can judge as fitly of [Coriolanus'] worth
As I can of those mysteries which heaven
Will not have earth to know.

(IV.ii.34-36)

Whether the absence of perceivable divine order in a dramatically portrayed pagan world would affirm or deny the existence of a Christian God for Shakespeare's audience remains ambiguous, but his other tragedies (whether placed in pagan or Christian settings) all have at least some kind of operable natural law of inherent value. Even in the nihilistic world of *King Lear*, we are left with a sense of the intrinsic worth of the initial bonds which Lear violates, thus precipitating the tragedy. Only *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare's final tragedy, is devoid of any absolutes whatsoever; in this respect it most closely resembles the "comic" *Troilus and Cressida*, a similarly unpopular pagan-world play

where absolute ideals succumb to degenerative mutability.²⁰

The world Shakespeare presents in *Coriolanus*, however, has become all too familiar to the twentieth century where "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold." Consequently, experiencing *Coriolanus* does not clarify our understanding of the human predicament; it only adds to our sense of confusion and perplexity. We suffer along with Coriolanus as he says:

My soul aches
To know, when two authorities are up,
Neither supreme, how soon confusion
May enter 'twixt the gap of both, and take
The one by th' other.

(III.i.108-12)

Thinking of ourselves as moral beings, we enter into the world of dramatic art expecting ethical conflicts to be resolved in some manner that will test, enhance, challenge, broaden, or even narrow our existing moral ideals. We expect more from the world of art than from reality and require clear resolution of ethical conflicts in art as a last refuge for our sense of moral idealism. *Coriolanus*, unfortunately, leaves us in a moral vacuum.

Notes:

- 1 G. Wilson Knight, *The Imperial Theme* (London: Methuen, 1951), sees paradox in the "nobility" of Coriolanus, which can be admired but must simultaneously be recognized as a "death-force" (p. 181). Reuben A. Brower, *Hero & Saint: Shakespeare and the Graeco-Roman Heroic Tradition* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 354-81, analyzes the paradox of a character who is at once a unique, self-sufficient war machine who fights "Alone" as well as an immature "Boy" still dependent upon his mother. Irving Ribner, *Patterns in Shakespearian Tragedy* (London: Methuen, 1960), discusses the paradox "that in the noblest attributes of man may be an inherent evil which can overcome the nobility from which it springs" (p. 189). Katherine Stockholder, "The Other Coriolanus," *PMLA*, 85 (1970), 228-36, analyzes how Coriolanus' inability to understand and unify his internal self and his external image causes him paradoxically to be simultaneously awesome and ridiculous.
- 2 All references to *Coriolanus* are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).
- 3 See Brower, pp. 372-77; Eugene M. Waith, *The Herculean Hero in Marlowe, Chapman, Shakespeare, and Dryden* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 122-43; Paul N. Siegel, "Shakespeare and the Neo-Chivalric Cult of Honor," *The Centennial Review*, 8 (1964), 60-65; John Holloway, *The Story of The Night* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), pp. 129-30; H. J. Oliver, "Coriolanus as Tragic Hero," *Shake-*

- speare Quarterly*, 10 (1959), 60n. A case might as convincingly be built for Coriolanus as an "anti-Christ" figure in his hatred of the people and his refusal to show his wounds.
- 4 See Knight, pp. 159-63, and Derek Traversi, *Shakespeare: The Roman Plays* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 207-88 *passim*.
 - 5 Cyrus Hoy, "Jacobean Tragedy and the Mannerist Style," *Shakespeare Survey* 26 (1973), 49-67, observes that Timon, Macbeth, and Coriolanus "are prepared to be at odds [with the world] for the sake of their own . . . wholeness, for the sake of that condition of self-consistency where thought and act, intention and word are at one. It is the tragedy of each that the drive for wholeness brings about a collision between the private inner man where the impulse to action originates, and the outer public world where action must fulfill itself" (p. 61).
 - 6 Coriolanus' "words" and "sword" are continually at cross-purposes. He conquers Corioles with his sword, but refuses to speak about it; later he again enters a Volscian city and emerges victorious with his words of conquest over Rome; his sword is subdued, however, by his mother's words, and he is killed by Volscian swords while depending upon his words to protect him. See D. J. Gordon, "Name and Fame: Shakespeare's Coriolanus," *Papers Mainly Shakespearian*, ed. G. I. Duthie (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1964), pp. 40-57.
 - 7 See Brower, p. 378.
 - 8 The alliterative "t" sounds cause "womb" to suggest "tomb"; Coriolanus will have to tread on the grave of his mother, whose body gave life to his, before he can assault Rome.
 - 9 See especially Maurice Charney, *Shakespeare's Roman Plays: The Function of Imagery in the Drama* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1961), pp. 142-69. Charney also analyzes the "acting," "alone," and "godlike" images associated with Coriolanus (pp. 169-96), but finally concludes that "we are left with a deeply paradoxical impression of him" (p. 196).
 - 10 Matthew N. Proser, *The Heroic Image in Five Shakespearean Tragedies* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1965), p. 144.
 - 11 Coriolanus is truly at home only on the battlefield; whenever he ventures away from this "home" into the political arena, the results are disastrous.
 - 12 Traversi, p. 213. Traversi sees the "intense contradiction" and "elaborately sustained marriage of opposites" throughout the speech as setting a pattern which leads to Coriolanus' inevitable destruction when he joins Aufidius.
 - 13 James L. Calderwood, "Coriolanus: Wordless Meanings and Meaningless Words," *Studies in English Literature*, 6 (1966), 211-24, argues that in the chaotic world of *Coriolanus*, customs and rituals "have become meaningless symbols in Rome; symbols themselves have become meaningless, and, most important, words have become meaningless" (p. 211). Lawrence N. Danson, "Metonymy and *Coriolanus*," *Philological Quarterly*, 52 (1973), 30-42, believes that "the most prominent rhetorical figures in *Coriolanus* . . . [are metonymy and synecdoche,] figures of fragmentation and usurpation" (p. 30).
 - 14 See Brower, pp. 354-61. Clifford Davidson, "Coriolanus: A Study in Political Dislocation," *Shakespeare Studies*, 4 (1968), 263-74, claims that "Coriolanus represents not virtue but *virtus* and, like Hotspur, he illustrates its failure as an ethic" (p. 271).

- 15 The remaining unique usages are less imaginative: "unactive" (I.i.99), "unelected" (II.iii.199), "unstable" (III.i.148), "unsever'd" (III.ii.42), "unclog my heart" (IV.ii.47), "unmusical" (IV.v.58), "unburnt" (V.i.27), "unsaluted" (V.iii.50), and "widowed and unchilded" (V.vi.151). Often the effect is strikingly enhanced through the substitution of parts of speech (*anthimeria*).
- 16 At times we simply cannot trust our own senses; Coriolanus' soliloquy on "Custom" (II.iii.117-23) plus his remarks to the 4th and 5th citizens on not troubling them beyond their voices (II.iii.109-10) and his comments to the 6th, 7th, and 8th citizens that "Indeed I would be consul" (II.iii.131) are all later quoted by the 3rd citizen (II.iii.168-73) who is not present for any of the original statements!
- 17 On Virgilia, see Proser, pp. 154-56, 170. Northrop Frye, *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1967), calls Volumnia a "'white goddess' . . . whom it is death to love. . . . [Her] supreme happiness as a mother consists not so much in giving her son life as in exposing him to death" (p. 49). On Volumnia's "shrewd" dissembling, see Willard Farnham, *Shakespeare's Tragic Frontier: The World of His Final Tragedies* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1950), pp. 248-59.
- 18 William R. Elton, *"King Lear" and the Gods* (San Marino, Cal.: Huntington Library, 1966), pp. 9-33, 125-30, 246-49.
- 19 Elton, p. 335.
- 20 Farnham suggests that in Shakespeare's last tragedies, "Tragic emotions and the essential simplicities of tragic understanding are in constant danger of being overwhelmed by paradox. . . . In *Coriolanus* he pushes this paradox to its limit of tragic validity, and sometimes even beyond, with the result that he makes it more acceptable to the mind than to the heart" (pp. 2, 263-64).