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# Coriolanus and Early Modern Notions of Self

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# CORIOLANUS

## *and Early Modern Notions of Self*

BY MICHELLE RUNYAN

“I would dissemble with my nature where  
My fortunes and my friends at stake required  
I should do so in honour.”  
(Volumnia 3.2.62-64)

“I will not do’t,  
Lest I surcease to honour mine own truth,  
And by my body’s action teach my mind  
A most inherent baseness.”  
(Coriolanus 3.2.120-123)

No work is created in a cultural vacuum and Shakespeare was not merely churning out stage versions of stories already told. By comparing Shakespeare's stories to his source material and looking at the historical moment that Shakespeare worked from, readers can understand more about the ideas that the minds of the day wrestled with. Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, a play inspired by the Plutarch story, is full of conflicting ideas of self, particularly when we look at the presentations of self seen in *Coriolanus* and *Volumnia*, as well as the way in which the passages on religion all but disappear from Shakespeare's version. By examining what elements of Plutarch's story Shakespeare kept and which he modified, and by understanding the shifts in thinking about self that were occurring during the Early Modern era, the reader is able to glean a better understanding of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and the ideas of self that emerged during that time.

Beginning with the character of *Coriolanus*, it is apparent that Shakespeare did not notably alter the character from Plutarch's story: *Coriolanus* has no father figure and is raised by a mother whom he has a very close relationship with; formal education is not a priority; his military career begins at a young age; he has a strong dislike of "flattery"; and his personality is one that is quick to anger. There are two major differences between the two versions: in Shakespeare's play, the relationship between *Aufidius* and *Coriolanus* plays a more significant role, and in Plutarch's story, *Coriolanus*'s usual brash speech is mitigated by a somewhat stronger talent for rhetoric.

The choices Shakespeare made with the character of *Coriolanus*—what to keep and what to alter from Plutarch—cause *Coriolanus* to be seen as more rigid and absolute than Plutarch. During Shakespeare's lifetime, philosophy was moving away from ideas of absolute truth and towards a skeptical outlook. So *Coriolanus*'s inability to be flexible with his idea of self and the order of the world is emblematic of the kinds of philosophies of self that were being grappled with in Shakespeare's time.

Examples of the mode of hierarchical thinking and ideas of absolute truth that were prevalent in society at this time can be seen in the language of the official sermon and of religious authority:

Almighty God hath created and appointed all things, in heaven, earth and waters, in a most excellent and perfect order....Every degree of people in their vocation, calling and office hath appointed to them, their duty and order. Some are in high degree, some in low....so in all things it is to be praised the goodly order of God without the which, no house, no city, no common wealth can continue and endure or last. (An exhortation)

Not to delight in assertions is not the mark of a Christian heart....I mean a constant adhering to and affirming your positions, avowing it and defending it, and invincibly persevering in it. (Luther)

In *Coriolanus* there is an emphasis on the Roman ideal of manhood. Plutarch said of this, "Those were times at Rome in which that kind of worth was most esteemed which displayed itself in military achievements; one evidence of which we find in the Latin word for virtue, which is properly equivalent to manly courage. As if valour and all virtue had been the same thing, they used as the common term the name of the particular excellence"

## CORIOLANUS, UNWILLING TO FLATTER, IS AN ALIEN FIGURE IN ROME.

(Plutarch). Coriolanus is aware of himself (in both the play and the story) as manly and virtuous. His struggle stems from his inability to present himself as something other than what he believes he is; he believes that the words and actions of his body are equivalent to his inner self and so is unable to be pragmatic in his dealings with the plebeians and the tribunes. His views on hierarchy and absolutism of self are similar to the Protestant sermons of the 1500s and the arguments of reformers such as Luther, as Coriolanus clearly adheres to and affirms his positions throughout the play, regardless of the consequences.

Coriolanus exists in a kind of liminal state within the play, unable to be a part of either the aristocratic patrician senate, which is built upon the ability to flatter and manipulate the plebeians with clever rhetoric, or the plebeians themselves, whom he abhors on the basis of class and because he considers them rebellious cowards. He refers to them as “dissentious rogues” (1.1.152), “where he should find you lions finds you hares” (1.1.160), “crows to peck the eagles” (3.1.142), and “the multitudinous tongue” (3.1.159). This distinction from the rest of society is due to both his strict adherence to the Roman ideal of manhood, by which he measures

not only himself but all citizens, and to his inability to separate the presentation of his public self from his inner self. Worden (2007) argues that, “Of all the sins of the court, none is more pervasive in Shakespeare’s plays than flattery. His characters condemn it as the enemy to good counsel, or see it in the necessary route to advancement, but those who fail to practise it become alien figures” (10). Coriolanus, unwilling to flatter, is an alien figure in Rome.

When Menenius and Volumnia attempt to convince him to placate the plebeians with flattery, he asks, “Why did you wish me milder? Would you have me false to my nature? Rather I say I play the man I am” (3.2.12-14). Then Volumnia tells him, “You are too absolute” (3.2.40). In every instance that the word “flattery” is mentioned in the play, it is in the negative, perhaps most notably when Coriolanus tell the plebeians that, “He that will give good words to thee will flatter beneath abhorring” (1.1.156-57). Coriolanus’s temperament and limited ability to speak without offending are intensified in Shakespeare’s play because there are so few moments, particularly in the first three acts, when he does not speak from a place of anger or disgust. When Menenius speaks to the tribunes on his behalf he says, “Consider this: he has been bred i’t’ wars / since a could draw a sword, and is ill-schooled / in bolted language” (3.1.322-324); his argument is not that he loves you but cannot express it, but that he is unable to properly hide his disgust of you (as the senators do).

Coriolanus’s problem with rhetoric, while still in evidence in Plutarch’s story, is not as amplified and in fact Coriolanus’s ability to speak is praised on more than one occasion. When Coriolanus leaves Rome and prepares the Volscians for war Plutarch says that, “Marcius was accordingly summoned, and having made his entrance, and spoken to the people, won their good opinion of his capacity, his skill, counsel, and boldness, not less by his present words than by his past actions” (Plutarch). Aufidius and the Volscians who plot Coriolanus’s death are so terrified that his good speech will earn him a pardon from the Volscians that they kill him before he is



able to speak, saying that he was “an admirable speaker” (Plutarch). Further, he willingly goes to the plebeians to beg their loves by “showing the scars and gashes that were still visible on his body” (Plutarch), which he refuses to do in Shakespeare’s play, once again further emphasizing his separateness from the rest of Roman society.

The only man from whom Coriolanus does not feel separated is Aufidius Tullus, and while the time spent on the relationship between the two men is cursory at best in the Plutarch story, Shakespeare spends a great deal of time developing Coriolanus’s relationship with Aufidius, which at times crosses over into the realm of the homoerotic. The first time he mentions Aufidius, Coriolanus says that “and were I anything but what I am, I would wish me only he...He is a lion that I am proud to hunt” (1.1.222-27). His language shows that he considers Aufidius an equal and that he believes Aufidius possesses the same type of manly valor that Coriolanus measures all men by.

When the two meet outside of combat for the first time, after Coriolanus has been banished from Rome and sought out his foe to either fight with or be killed by him, Aufidius tells him, “But that I see thee here, thou noble thing, more dances my rapt heart than when I first my wedded mistress saw bestride my threshold...I have nightly since dreamt of encounters ‘twixt thyself and me -- we have been down together in my sleep, unbuckling helms, fisting each other’s throat -- and waked half dead with nothing” (4.5.114-125). Their



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mutual admiration for each other is stronger than their enmity and the homoerotic tone of the scene in the context of Coriolanus's struggle with his sense of self and his feeling that Aufidius is an equal makes their relationship, or at least Coriolanus's view and need of their relationship, that of a mirror; Aufidius is the only man in which Coriolanus can recognize himself. This equality only lasts a short time, as Coriolanus eventually takes over Aufidius's army and Aufidius plots to betray and kill Coriolanus. In the end, when Aufidius has informed against Coriolanus to the Volscian senate, calling him a "boy of tears" (5.6.104), Coriolanus replies, "Like an eagle in a dove-cote, I fluttered your Volscians in Corioles. Alone I did it" (5.6.115-17), once again affirming his liminal presence within society.

The addition of this more developed relationship to the play emphasizes Coriolanus's struggles with himself, which in turn heightens the tragic aspect of the play. The fact that Aufidius survives and does not engender hate among the Volscian plebeians implies that Aufidius does

not exist in the same liminal state as Coriolanus. Rather than a mirror, Aufidius is actually a foil for Coriolanus, meant to show the reader that it is Coriolanus's choice to hold up the ideal of Roman masculinity as the standard he must live by without surcease, regardless of the consequences. Anne Barton argues that "the Volscian lord is reflective and intelligent as his rival is not... Aufidius is adaptable. Like Machiavelli, he understands the importance of accommodating one's behaviour to the times. He has also divined...that his rival is fatally inflexible...In this judgement, Aufidius is almost, if not entirely, right. Coriolanus in exile is a man haunted by what seems to him the enormity of mutability and change" (Barton 84). Coriolanus's unwillingness to give the appearance of being something other than what he is, while making him the most honest character in the play, ultimately leads to his inability to exist within any society successfully.

Additionally, the relationship between Aufidius and Coriolanus can be seen through the lens of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic, in which both (but especially Coriolanus) struggle to be recognized by the only other person they consider worthy. However, because Aufidius relinquishes his army to Coriolanus and then betrays him out of desperation (as Coriolanus has already proven more than 12 times that Aufidius cannot beat him in a fair fight), Coriolanus "wins" and no longer sees Aufidius as an equal, and rejects their equality with the metaphor of the eagle and the dove in his final scene. Having no equal, he is then vanquished (though not by Aufidius directly), because he no longer has anyone worthy of recognizing his self.

The militaristic kind of manliness that Coriolanus subscribes to can also be seen in his upbringing, which we can assume was fairly similar to his son's as his family continues to live with his mother because of their close relationship. Volumnia says that his son "had rather see the swords and hear a drum than look upon his schoolmaster" (1.3.52-53). Valeria comments that she

“saw him run after a gilded butterfly...he did so set his teeth and tear it! O, I warrant, how he mammocked it!” (1.3.56-61), and this allusion to violence is echoed later in the play when Cominus says that Coriolanus “leads [the Volscians]...against us brats with no less confidence than boys pursuing summer butterflies, or butchers killings flies” (4.6.94-98). Coriolanus’s upbringing is important because while he is generally unable to modulate his expression of the Roman manly ideal, the few times he does soften are in the presence of the women of the play. Plutarch says that

[Coriolanus] had always indulged his temper... and [was] possessed with the idea that to vanquish and overbear all opposition is the true part of bravery, and never imagining that it was the weakness and womanishness of his nature that broke out, so to say, in these ulcerations of anger.

Plutarch also circumscribes the role of women in a way that Shakespeare does not. In particular, there is a very large difference in the number of lines given to Volumnia in Plutarch’s story, where we don’t hear her speak until the very end, versus Shakespeare’s play in which Volumnia has a prominent role. Shakespeare provides the reader with many opportunities to hear from the women, in particular Volumnia, who stands as a stark contrast to

Coriolanus. The reader might then wonder: if Plutarch believes Coriolanus’s outbursts are “womanishness” then how do the women, who play such an important role in his life, behave?

Unlike Coriolanus, Shakespeare’s Volumnia does not struggle with rigidity of self that implicates a mode of being that relies on absolute truth. She comes much closer to the Early Modern idea of self, which “implies a fixed self operating behind the facade [of the presented self]” (Burke 18). She also exhibits a stronger self-control, unlike Coriolanus’s personality which resembled the “emotional instability [that] was characteristic of Europeans in the late Middle Ages, a ‘perpetual oscillation between...‘cruelty and pious tenderness’” (Burke 19). This instability is visible nearly every time he is near his mother when he turns from anger towards the plebeians to deference in a matter of lines. Volumnia exhibits the ability to be pragmatic and to play a strategic political game by sacrificing a superficial presentation of self for greater gains later. She tells Coriolanus that,

I would have had you put your power well on before you had worn it out....I have heard you say, honour and policy, like unsevered friends, i’t’h’ war do grow together. Grant that, and tell me in peace what each of them by th’ other lose that they combine not there. (3.2.16-17, 42-46)

Volumnia pushes Coriolanus to be strategic with his presentation of self, to be insincere when it is strategically useful.

## THE CONCEPT OF ‘SINCERITY’ WAS JUST BEGINNING TO TAKE HOLD IN THE EARLY MODERN WAY OF THINKING.

The concept of 'sincerity' was just beginning to take hold in the Early Modern way of thinking.

Shakespeare used the terms 'sincerity', 'sincere', and 'sincerely' thirteen times in his printed works...(while Milton, by contrast, used them forty-eight times in his prose works alone)...suggest[ing] that people were becoming more aware of the difference between an inner and an outer self. (Burke 19-20)

Further, that the presented outer self could be inauthentic; the concept of sincerity assumes the concept of insincerity. Volumnia uses this insincerely presented outer self, as do all of the patricians, when they are in public because they recognize that with the growing power and size of the plebeian population it is in their best interest to at least appear to be sympathetic. Coriolanus wonders why his "mother does not approve [him] further, who was wont to call them woollen vassals, things created to buy and sell with groats" (3.2.6-9), because he cannot conceive of choosing to be "false to [his] nature" (3.2.13); this is the ultimate difference between them and it is what leads to his tragic downfall.

While the relationship between Coriolanus and Volumnia is portrayed as close in both Plutarch and Shakespeare versions of the story, Volumnia is never seen counseling Coriolanus in Plutarch and her only real role is her speech of supplication at the end. In fact, her success is attributed at least in part to divine intervention, rather than the pragmatism and rhetorical skill she exhibits in Shakespeare's play.

In Plutarch there are two key passages that imply divine intervention was needed to save Rome from Coriolanus. The first is just after Coriolanus makes his deal with Aufidius, in which,

[Roman] soothsayers and priests, and even private persons, reported signs and prodigies not to be neglected.... [The priests] plac[ed] their hopes chiefly in time and in extraordinary accidents of fortune as to themselves, [and] they felt incapable of doing anything for their own deliverance. (Plutarch)

The last line takes the story out of the realm of the tragic because it hints that the real actor is divine intervention, rather than human agency. The second passage is specific to Volumnia, who in both versions is the ultimate savior of Rome, but who in Shakespeare shows up at Coriolanus's tent with the other women and young Martius in tow. Plutarch sets the scene a bit differently, with a long introductory passage on divine intervention as a way to "prompt the human will...[with] thoughts suggested to the mind, such either as to excite it to, or avert and withhold it from, any particular course. In the perplexity which I have described, the Roman women went...to the altar of Jupiter Capitolinus...[Valeria], suddenly seized with the sort of instinct or emotion of mind which I have described...not without divine guidance...went directly with them to the house of Volumnia" where she then tells Volumnia that "the divine being himself, as I conceive,



moved to compassion by our prayers, prompted us to visit you in a body...[to] join in our supplication" (Plutarch). By eliminating these passages from the play, and making Volumnia's strategic human action rather than Valeria's divine inspiration the force that saves Rome, Shakespeare bolsters the tragic elements of the play.

While Plutarch describe Coriolanus's outbursts of anger as "womanishness," Volumnia, the most important woman in Coriolanus's life and in Shakespeare's play, exhibits self-control and reasoned, strategic responses which were considered more masculine traits, and indeed, Sicinius engages her in a bit of wordplay when he asks her, "Are you mankind?" (4.2.18). Her language is martial when it is not strategic: "[Blood] more becomes a man than gilt his trophy. The breasts of Hecuba when she did suckle Hector looked not lovelier than Hector's forehead when it spit forth blood at Grecian sword, contemning" (1.3.36-39). Her speech of supplication to Coriolanus takes much different tact, from her opening curtsy to her disavowal of him, when she says, "This fellow had a Volscian to his mother. His wife is in Corioles, and this child like him by chance" (5.3.179-180). Volumnia is more "mankind" than Coriolanus.

Plutarch said that "humanizing and civilizing lessons, which teach our natural qualities to submit to the limitations prescribed by reason, and to avoid the wildness of extremes" were of greater benefit than even "the favours of the muses". Coriolanus is unable to take to heart the lesson that his extreme and obstinate attachment to the ideal of Roman masculinity goes beyond the limits of reason. Volumnia works within the limits, adapting her presentation of self in order to overcome what others cannot. Shakespeare's adaptation of Plutarch's story emphasizes this difference in their characters, thereby modeling and working through the differing philosophies of self that were circulating in his time.

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