

“As if a man were author of himself”: the (re-)fashioning of the oedipal hero from Plutarch’s Martius to Shakespeare’s Coriolanus

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When Shakespeare began to consider the idea of dramatizing Plutarch’s *Life of Caius Martius Coriolanus* from the English translation by Thomas North, his priority seems not to have been only that of constructing a political tragedy out of a crucial moment in the early period of the Roman Republic, when aristocratic hegemony begins to be threatened by socially subversive popular forces, in order to highlight a relationship between classical history and the contemporary Jacobean political situation¹. This ideological intention is certainly accurate, and it would by itself invalidate such traditional, influential but nevertheless hackneyed statements according to which “the first impression produced by a comparison of the biography and the play is that the latter is little more than a scenic replica of the former”². Yet, what seems even more relevant to me, is to realise how Shakespeare, now with mature psychological insight and expert knowledge of source material, responded consciously to latent information and subtle hints offered by the implicitly dramatic structure of Plutarch’s *Life of Coriolanus*. Here he endeavours to create not simply the simultaneously positive and negative figure of the warrior and political leader, with due observance to the prerequisites of Stuart ideology, but more precisely the figure of a modern individual in his existential frailties and psychological ambiguities.

Shakespeare’s expert manipulation of the political dimension of the play is deeply indebted to the multifaceted suggestions in the source text. Martius’s psychological attributes as given by Plutarch’s confident authorial judgment, are listed (on page 243)³ as: *passion, choller, self-opinion, obstinacy, stoutness*. It is precisely these features of characterization that are employed by the

¹ This is what many New Historicists have successfully argued in the last decades. See for all of them the seminal article by W.G. Zeeveld, ‘*Coriolanus*’ and *Jacobean Politics*, “*Modern Language Review*”, 47 (1962), 321-34.

² M.W. MacCallum, *Shakespeare’s Roman Plays and their Background*, London-Melbourne, Macmillan, 1910, p. 484.

³ *The Life of Caius Martius Coriolanus*, in *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes, Compared together by that Grave Learned Philosopher and Historiographer, Plutarke of Chaeronea*: Translated out of Greeke into French by James Amiot... and out of French into English, by Thomas North, Imprinted at London by Richard Field for Thomas Wright, 1595 (first edition, 1579). *Coriolanus*’s *Life* goes from p. 235 to p. 257.

dramatist to invent an ideologically usable and politically exploitable hero, in accordance with the absolutist stance maintained by the first Stuart monarch.

The widely acknowledged verbal and behavioural belligerence of Shakespeare's Coriolanus, generally considered to be the result of pride, bad temper and selfishness, appears to have been substantially inspired by Plutarch/North. Nevertheless, it becomes in the play a continuous and prolonged discursive and metadiscursive manifestation, in which referential information and/or axiological implications offered by the Plutarchean narrator co-operate in the creation on the part of the playwright of his hero's extraordinary powers of oratory and dramatic and theatrical expertise⁴. The somewhat mystifying will for power proposed by the dominant patrician class, which emerges in so many celebrations of Coriolanus as champion of the Roman senate and nobility, insists on such aristocratic values as personal virtue, limitation of good and evil, religion grounded in chastity, existential integrity, and ontological stability of the self. These are typical Roman values, and are often referred to as such in the Greek narrator's eloquent, impassioned prose, frequently emphasized by his fervent Elizabethan translator. Yet, within the play's highly elaborated linguistic and paralinguistic strategy, as well as within its diegetic dynamics, such attributes or qualities seem to become more and more superfluous, in as far as they tend to move into a precarious dependence on complex ideological negotiations and ambiguous political compromises⁵. Plutarch's Martius is unambiguously supported by the patricians, chiefly by the youthful components of this class, who allow themselves to be fascinated by their hero's challenging "stoutness" against the people, in which they obviously find a guarantee of conservation and continuity. Plutarch's nobles, both old and young, do not require from their hero that *mildness* in countenance which appears to be indispensable with the Shakespearean warrior forcibly turned into political leader, and which satisfies the pragmatic demands of many Tudor and

⁴ See my analysis of *Coriolanus* in Alessandro Serpieri et alii., *Nel laboratorio di Shakespeare: dalle fonti ai drammi*, Parma, Pratiche Editrice, 1985, vol. I (*Il quadro teorico*), and vol. IV (*I drammi romani*), where the relationships between source texts and Shakespearean plays are discussed on various levels, from construction of plot to discourse.

⁵ On this particular aspect see J. Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, Brighton, Harvester, 1984, 220 ff.

Stuart political theorists, as suggested by both Cominius's and Menenius's requests to Coriolanus to act *mildly* with the people's demands (III, 2, 138-145)⁶.

All this implies that Shakespeare's Coriolanus is politically speaking a much more complex, multifaceted and ambiguous personality than Plutarch's, or North's, Martius, anchored as the latter is to safe ideological assessments unfortunately unknown to his more "modern" version; and this intellectual and psychological a-symmetry corresponds to the epistemological imbalance existing between a classical philosopher and historiographer on one side, and a modern poet and playwright on the other. In their different fields of activity, both historiographer and playwright are deeply responsive to their respective cultural and ideological contexts, but it is precisely their different responses that mark the epistemic divergence between a world made up of moral certainties and subsequent operative solutions, and a world made up of moral adjustments and subsequent operative dis-solutions.

Nevertheless, the political dimension conferred on the protagonist, which is adapted by the playwright in order to make him suitable to a Renaissance cultural and ideological context, is only one of the many aspects of the intrinsic modernity – not to say contemporaneity – of Shakespeare's Coriolanus. Indeed, behind the toughness, stubbornness, immense class pride, and in particular, unquestionable moral and existential integrity attributed to Martius by his classical historiographer (undoubtedly also exploited by his Renaissance dramatist to underline a conflict between those characteristic aristocratic properties and the typically plebeian traits of fickleness, unreliability, and incoherence), behind all this the Shakespearean hero shows deep lacerations and perilous gaps, which cast doubt on his apparently unassailable organic oneness.

To begin with, the famous "passion and choler" attributed to classical Martius becomes in the play the endemic symptom of an aggressiveness which has not merely social and political connotations, since it can be related with one facet of the hero's behaviour which is briefly implied in the narration of the source text, but emerges instead as one of the leading existential traits of

⁶ All quotations are from the "Arden Shakespeare" Edition, edited by Philip Brockbank, London-New York, Routledge, 1990.

theatrical Coriolanus. Both classical and Jacobean Martiuses are characteristically *chaste*: being continuously occupied in stressing wars, it goes without saying that little time is left for sexual pleasures. But Shakespeare means to make the hero's chastity thoroughly explicit. After the triumph at Coriolis, all the paroxysmal social and political events are never interrupted by a single private, domestic scene (as occurs in *Julius Caesar*, for example, with Caesar and Calpurnia and with Brutus and Portia, in some scenes transparently allusive to matrimonial intimacy). Of what might have happened in his sexual life during his exile from Rome we are assured by the protagonist himself, when he swears to his wife Virgilia, in the name of chaste Diana, "the jealous queen of heaven", that after leaving his family, house and country, his "true lip hath virgin'd e'er since" (V, 3, 48). The hero's sexual abstinence is also proffered as a positive, or even a necessary endowment by his invasive mother Volumnia, who takes the opportunity to chastize her daughter-in-law when the latter expresses her fears of the war's consequences on her husband's physical and psychological health. Volumnia admonishes Virgilia, and the audience and reading public as well, opining that "if my son were my husband/I should freelier rejoyce in that absence wherein he/Won his honour, than in the embracement of his bed" (I, 3, 2-4). I intend to investigate later the psychological implication of the conjugation son/husband in Volumnia's emotional perception of Coriolanus. It should not be forgotten that, for both Plutarch and Shakespeare, Volumnia is a *widow*. For the English Renaissance, widows are perceived as sexually vulnerable and hence socially dangerous, because their erotic *abstinence* (see Volumnia's allusion to marital *absence* in the previous quotation) and the resulting state of imposed chastity tends to make them verbally aggressive and hence politically subversive⁷. A very popular *conduct book* of the period warns the reader that "[widows] have a spirit of solacitie, and feele within themselves a frequent titillation, their seed being hot and prurient, doth irritate and inflame them"⁸.

⁷ This problem has been convincingly investigated by Valerie Traub in *Desire and Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama*, London-New York, Routledge, 1990.

⁸ Nicholas Fontanus, *The Womans Doctour*, London, 1652, fol. 54.

Yet for the moment, it is enough to note how Volumnia's words to Virgilia – an indubitably Shakespearean invention – appear to aim at reminding the Jacobean audience about a specific prerequisite of the typical monarch, or political leader, of modernity. Sexuality and political leadership are perceived as incompatible categories by the political theorists of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, in as much as sexual activity distracts the ruler's integral structure of psyche and mind from the cares of the state. Sex is invariably either a "profanation" of the king's body politic, or a "sickness" in the king's body natural, as appears in all political controversies of the period, from the staunch Puritan Philip Stubbes's *The Anatomie of Abuses*⁹ to the unimpeachable Anglican bishop John Jewel's *Apology*¹⁰. It was not by chance, then, that much of Queen Elizabeth's power had been founded on the cult of virginity (ostentatiously demonstrated by her choice of mythical chaste referents such as Diana, Cynthia or Astrea), a cult which she had astutely used as a means of controlling both the diverse factions of the court and the Parliament itself, at various moments of her long political career¹¹.

Thus, although Coriolanus's sexual abstinence, whether innate or inculcated by his maternal upbringing, satisfies most of the characteristic English Renaissance political requirements, it is the expected consequence of this sexual abstinence itself that generates the main characteristic of "modern" – that is Shakespeare's - Coriolanus. The violent strength of Coriolanus's allocutions in the play owes very little to linguistic and rhetorical borrowings from the source text, which often allude to Martius's vehement and coercive oratorical capacity, but whose information is often given simply in the form of metalinguistic signals, regarding more the style of his verbal delivery than the actual contents of his speeches. All of "modern" Coriolanus's utterances are characterised by vehemence and insolence and are interpretable in the light of twentieth-century theories of sexual repression and physical or verbal violence. It is sexual abstinence, which is required of a

⁹ Philip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses* (1583), Amsterdam, Theatrum Orbis Terrarum – New York, Da Capo Press, 1973.

¹⁰ Bishop John Jewel, *An Apology, or Answer in Defence of the Church of England* (1562), Amsterdam, Theatrum Orbis Terrarum – New York, Da Capo Press, 1972.

¹¹ See Philippa Berry, *On Chastity and Power: Elizabethan Literature and the Unmarried Queen*, London-New York, Routledge, 1989.

soldier essentially employing his time outside the marriage bed, and which meets the legitimate political expectancies of the social class that supports him, that provokes an implosion of repressed sexual energy, and which consequently tends to explode outwards, manifesting itself in both linguistic and physical aggression.

I am convinced that the most striking aspects of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, aspects that establish the marked differentiation of the character from its source model, concern its existential dimension in as far as the sexual sphere is involved. The protagonist is chaste, it is true, in a proper response to the requirements of his political status; but he appears all the same able to deploy an unexpected range of erotically determined patterns of behaviour, which are nevertheless unrelated to their legitimate manifestations as normally assumed in the cultural context of the play, extending instead to reversals of ethically and socially codified expectations. Indeed, various turbulent sexual elements are active in the hero's psychological profile, permitting a forbidden and censured sexuality come to the surface of his personality.

The most obvious component of *Coriolanus's* erotic configuration, one which inherently affects his existential outlook, appears to me to be the sort of Oedipus complex towards his mother Volumnia. This feature is prefigured by Plutarch, who insinuates a fluid, ante-litteram psychoanalytic doubt in the reader, by pointing out the substantial difference between the common Roman soldier, who normally sought glory both for glory's sake and/or for the pleasure of his own reputation, and Martius, for whom, atypically,

the onely thing that made him to love honour, was the joy he sawe his mother take of him. For he thought nothing made him so happie and honourable, as that his mother might heare euery body praise and commend him (p. 237).

In Shakespeare's hands this passage is expanded in dramatic terms to become even more significant. A latent link between the hero's subordination to his mother and his verbal and

behavioural aggressiveness is even perceived by class-distanced plebeians, as demonstrated at the very beginning of the play, when one citizen reports his conviction that Martius's love of wars and extraordinary capacity for martial violence is due to a hidden desire for satisfying his mother's social and political expectations:

I say unto you, what he hath done famously,
 he did it to that end: though self-conscienced men
 can be content to say it was for his country, *he did it*
to please his mother, and to be partly proud, which
 he is, even to the altitude of his virtue. (I, 1, 35-9; emphasis mine)

Volumnia herself explains to her daughter-in-law how she, and she only, is the addressee of all the hero's war achievements: "To a cruel war *I* sent him, from whence he returned, his brows bound with oak" (I, 3, 14-5; emphasis mine). Here may be detected the reflection of an important facet of Elizabeth's politics, much admired by her Stuart successors, centred on a further negotiation of chastity as a controlling device for military power. One of her most appreciative seventeenth-century biographers, Sir Robert Naunton, recalls the way the Great Queen, unable as a woman to fight, incited her courtiers and suitors to military enterprises by means of a strategic, endemic subtraction of sexuality, resulting in a symptomatic interplay between *heroic* and *erotic* values:

And it will be a true note of Magnanimity that shee loved a souldier, [...] which falling into the Courtiers consideration, they took as an invitation to winne honour together with their Mistris favour by exposing themselves to the warres¹².

¹² Sir Robert Naunton, *Fragmenta Regalia; or, Observations on Queene Elizabeth, her Times and Favourites* (1641), ed. J.S. Cerovski, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1960, p. 80.

Ambiguous implications between courage in war and sexual abstinence emerge in the peremptory affirmation by Volumnia when she affirms she “had rather had eleven sons nobly die for their country, than one voluptuously surfeit out of action” (I, 3, 24-5). Here, in condemning sexual excess as a waste of political energy, she suggests the ideological interconnection between chastity and political leadership which she has evidently imposed upon her son.

Coriolanus’s obsession with his mother comes to the fore again when he refuses to listen to his own war eulogy on the basis that only his mother would theoretically have “a charter to extoll her blood” (I, 9, 13-5), and even more so when he expresses his fear of deluding her in the superb second scene of the third act, when he refuses to surrender either to the people or to the tribunes (as requested by the patricians in order to recover the plebians’ favour) after his electoral rebuff; “I muse my mother does not approve me further”, he says (III, 2, 7-8), where fear of losing motherly approval means fear of sexual regression and loss of virility. Otherwise, to be won by the mother’s will, as ultimately happens, means renouncing both existential advancement and erotic emancipation. That is why, soon after bowing to his mother’s request, Coriolanus finds in himself a significantly degrading “harlot’s spirit” (III, 2, 112): his autonomous will has receded, dragging back with it the sexual independence from his mother which he had been laboriously and painfully gaining.

Another modulation of Oedipal fear, namely fear of mother’s punishment, becomes manifest in the same scene when Coriolanus affirms that he is yielding to Volumnia’s request for him to go to the market place, in order to appease the people, only because he cannot bear her reprimands any more: “Pray be content. Mother, I am going to the market place: chide me no more” (III, 2, 130-2). This pathetic appeal corresponds to the sensation that the hero later expresses below the besieged walls of Rome, where Volumnia frustrates her son’s resistance through the astute gesture of kneeling before him: an act of reverence that overturns all traditional patterns of behaviour between parent and child, and whose paradoxical, strategically transgressive relevance seems to have been studied by the woman to wound her son’s fragility and consequently to arouse

his sense of guilt: “What’s this? Your knees to me? To your *corrected* son?” (V, 3, 56-7; emphasis mine).

It is also important to recall that Volumnia, on the occasion of Coriolanus’s departure from Rome, had previously been saluted by him much more like a wife than a mother:

Nay, mother

Resume that spirit when you were wont to say,

If you had been the *wife* of Hercules,

Six of his labours you’d have done, and sav’d

Your *husband* so much sweat (IV, 1, 15-9; emphasis mine).

Thus the war against Rome has substantially been a passionate fight against this maternal and pseudo-marital bond; that is why the hero’s final and fatal surrendering to his mother sounds like the tragic acknowledgment of failure to be freed from his Oedipal dependence.

A further dimension of Coriolanus’s hidden sexual sensibility – a dimension, by the way, which has been exploited with diversified aesthetic results in recent productions of the play – is the one signified by his homoerotic attraction towards his antagonist in the play, namely towards Aufidius. In this case there is no suggestion of borrowing from the source text, where Tullus Aufidius is simply figured as one of the most influential Volscians to whom banished Coriolanus turns in his intent to seek vengeance against Rome, and who only joins the collective aristocratic conspiracy against Coriolanus which occurs at the very end of the story for personal reasons of envy. On the contrary, Aufidius is given a fundamental role, both dramatic and psychological, from the very beginning of the Shakespearean tragedy.

At the most immediate level, Aufidius seems to be identified as Coriolanus’s “other”, that is as the mirror of his own physical potency and military valour: “were I anything but what I am, I would wish me only he”, the hero says (I, 1, 230-1). Nevertheless, this external projection is

intimately perceived within a very peculiar sense of guilt: “I sin in envying his nobility” (I, 1, 229). This slip of the tongue, which is implied in the utterance of the term “sin”, is contextually destined to become the symptom of the removed unconscious perception of a hidden secondary nature, in the hero’s relationship with a forbidden object of desire. An object of desire which requires to be won through *physical fight*: “To Aufidius thus I will appear and fight” (I, 5, 19-20), where “thus” alludes to the glory and power implicit in his body soaked with the blood of his enemies, *ergo* physically strong, and sexually victorious.

The paradigm of physical fight as a hidden search for erotic touch is easy to find in Shakespeare’s dramatic discourse (see for example the use of *to wrestle* in *As You Like It*, I, 3, 18-21; *to sport* in *Othello*, II, 1, 222-6; *to rebel* in *Hamlet*, I, 3, 43-4); but here, in *Coriolanus*, the paradigm is not operative at a mere linguistic level, because it tends to actualize itself in physical, concrete, bodily action. A violent duel between Coriolanus and Aufidius takes place at the end of Act I, after a mutual chase (in itself suggestive of a mutual attraction) and with an extraordinary exchange of insults, whose excessive vehemence does not simply seem to constitute a sort of dramatic strategy oriented to the emotional response of the audience. More pertinently it would appear to be the outlet for a host of repressed feelings and suppressed passions. That is why this duel is felt by many modern directors to require performance as a passionate collision of sweaty limbs, damp hair, and dribbling mouths, rather than the illusion of duelling with fake swords or the impact of cardboard shields and helms.

An actual chase after the hero’s erotic object occurs in Act IV, when Coriolanus goes to Aufidius’s house in Antium, intending to put his military competence at the Volscians’ service. Although Shakespeare finds readymade in Plutarch both a diegetic and a linguistic quality to guide his dramatic rendering of the situation, all the same he inserts new material, which make the play appear original with respect to its source text. Certainly original is the sexual homoerotic implication of Coriolanus’s search for Aufidius, as revealed in a cue by the hero, within the frame of a verbal skirmish with Aufidius’s servants, which is a thoroughly Shakespearean invention.

Coriolanus, disguised as a beggar, is teased by a servant in these terms: “How, sir! Do you meddle with my master?” (IV, 5, 47); to which the hero replies with a linguistic pun that displaces the ordinary meaning of the verb “to meddle” as “to mix oneself up with someone” on to its obscene Elizabethan connotation, that meaning “to have sexual intercourse with someone”, contextually expressing an implicit homosexual preference: “Ay; ‘tis an honest service than to meddle with thy mistress” (IV, 5, 48).

Later on, in the course of dramatic action, this chase turns into an actual pursuit: Coriolanus cannot leave the object of his latent desire. Where Plutarch neutrally reports that after Volumnia’s successful entreating, “the next morning [Martius] dislodged, and marched homewards into the Volsces countrie againe” (p. 255), Shakespeare assigns to Coriolanus the specific and definite choice of attaching himself to Aufidius, in making him opt for both Aufidius’s country and Aufidius’s house: “I’ll not to Rome, I’ll be back with you” (V, 3, 198); and it is noteworthy that he says so even while consciously perceiving that, for political reasons, such a choice will necessarily imply his own personal destruction.

In as far as he strategically functions as Coriolanus’s mirror, Aufidius too must appear sexually attracted by his antagonist. In fact, when he rejoices in accepting the Roman general’s cooperation in the war, the tenure of his emotions is much more intense, when compared to the feelings prefigured in the classical source. Plutarch’s Tullus is concisely recorded as “a marvellous glad man” whose unique gesture of affection toward Martius is “taking him by the hande” (p. 248). On the contrary, Shakespeare invents a great deal about both Aufidius’s feelings and gestures. The Volscian’s joy appears to be articulated in a long, discursively variegated structure, where a substantial role is played by an energetic *body* language. Highlighting the source suggestion of Aufidius taking his guest by the hand, Shakespeare lets him reclaim complete personal contact: “Let me twine mine arms about that body” (IV, 5, 107-8), and at the end of the play, the erotic significance of this request will be made explicit by Aufidius himself, when, on the eve of the hero’s murder, he recalls their first encounter outside the battle fields as the moment “when first I

did *embrace* him” (IV, 7, 10; emphasis mine), in all the secondary sexual meaning – also active in seventeenth-century English - of the verb “to embrace”. After all, the homoerotic tonality of Aufidius’s behaviour to Coriolanus had been noted even by the common people: “Our general himself *makes a mistress of him*”, says one from the Volscian general’s household, “sanctifies himself with’s hands, and turns up the white o’th’eye to his discourse” (IV, 5, 200; emphasis mine).

It is perhaps calculated, in the perspective of an ideological containment, that the major responsibility for homoerotic desire is to be assigned by the playwright more to Aufidius than to Coriolanus, as the former is invested with far fewer political exigencies than his military rival. The climax of homoerotic tension that occurs in this play directly concerns Aufidius, not Coriolanus, although the Volscian leader’s object of desire is obviously the Roman general. In a passage absolutely untraceable to Plutarch’s narration, Aufidius reports a dream he has frequently experienced, the dream of a physical and unequivocally erotic *bodily fight* with Coriolanus:

I have nightly since
 Dreamt of encounters ‘twixt thyself and me-
 We have been down together in my sleep,
 Unbuckling helms, fisting each other throat-
 And wak’d half dead with nothing. (IV, 5, 123-7)

The motive of the erotic dream highlights the sexual component of the bodily fight, which is an emerging unconscious will for mutual bodily possession. Unbuckling helms alludes to undressing, and undressing means delivering the bodies from any social or political constraints; fisting each other’s throats means neutralizing any interpersonal social and political distance; finally, awaking half dead entails the idea of a socially and culturally prohibited homosexual orgasm, thanks to the linguistic pun, no less active in seventeenth-century England than nowadays, based on the recondite sense of *die* as *ejaculate*.

The conclusion of this psychodrama is coherent with the expectations of the hegemonic culture. Whatever the circumstances, the ending of subversive sexuality, either Oedipal or homosexual, must be death. The object of any socially illegitimate and psychologically uncanny strain needs to be ideologically suppressed. With the killing of Coriolanus, and with Aufidius's foot "ideogrammathically" trampling upon his corpse, a previous sexual and political order takes the lead again, condemning the unorthodox upsurge of passions to practical silence and political absence.

