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## SHAKESPEARE'S CORIOLANUS AND ARISTOTLE'S VIRTUES

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Shakespeare's play "Coriolanus" is a tragedy set in the early days of Rome when its domain extends only slightly beyond the city walls. We will begin with an overview of the play and then return to examine the lead character, Coriolanus, using Aristotle's virtues as our measure.

Caius Marcius, (afterwards Caius Marcius Coriolanus), is a Roman patrician who, as the action begins, has already established a reputation for military skill and bravery in his city's wars. He is equally well known for what is characterized throughout the play as pride and for his disdainful treatment of the plebeians.

The play, in fact, begins with the commoners plotting to assassinate Marcius as an enemy of the people blaming him for the scarcity and dearness of corn. But before this threat can play out, word arrives that the Volscians, a rival city-state, have formed an army and are marching on Rome. Marcius is called upon to serve under the Roman general Cominius and eagerly agrees. He is a warrior and relishes the opportunity offered by battle for glory and honor and is especially anxious to face a rival general, Tullus Aufidius, whom he both admires as his closest equal and hates as a sworn enemy.

Marcus' accomplishments in this action are nothing short of remarkable. With the Romans on the brink of defeat, he rallies his dispirited and fleeing countrymen, (those who were not so long ago seeking his death), and as the Volscians retreat into the city of Corioli, rushes alone through the city gates as they close behind him. He does battle against a multitude of Volscians and succeeds in carrying the action and opening the gates to his comrades who take the city.

Suffering from numerous wounds, he rushes to the aid of Cominius on another part of the field. Cominius, feeling himself at a disadvantage, has taken up a defensive position but Marcius will have none of that. Asking on what side of the line the Volscians have stationed their best men, he rallies a company of soldiers and attacks. In the midst of the action that follows, he grapples with his rival, Aufidius, and while their personal encounter is inconclusive, the Volscians retreat, dragging Aufidius reluctantly along and leaving the field and the victory to the Romans. Marcius is hailed as a hero by both plebeians and patricians and, in honor of his great deeds, is granted the surname of Coriolanus —Caius Marcius Coriolanus —and, soon after, is nominated for the Roman Consulship.

Given his recent glories, Coriolanus' election appears all but assured. However, according to longstanding Roman custom, candidates must appear before the commoners clothed in a gown of humility, display the scars of battle and beg for their support. To say that the prospect of compliance with this custom offends Coriolanus' sensibilities is to vastly understate the case. He despises the commoners and deems them unfit to judge while, at the same time viewing the entire spectacle as unworthy of his noble nature. It is only the influence of his mother Volumnia that finally persuades him to reluctantly, and with the minimum acceptable courtesies, stand before the people and to, finally, receive their blessing.

All appears to be proceeding well for Marcius, but two Tribunes, elected representatives of the people, are jealous, in fear of his growing power and determined to undo him. They call the people together and persuade them that Coriolanus, despite his recent service to the state, is their enemy and that, by the manner in which he asked their support for the consulship, he mocked them and foreshadowed their future treatment. The commoners, portrayed by Shakespeare as a fickle lot, renounce their approval and march on the Capitol to confront the Consul-elect and his patrician supporters.

This challenge to his election by a Roman mob is too much for Coriolanus. Where a modicum of tact and soothing words might still have saved his nomination, he instead speaks out in anger and expresses, without reservation, his view of the “rank-scented many”. They are without virtue and a potential source of sedition if not kept in their proper place. Egged on by the Tribunes and despite pleas from his friends and supporters, Coriolanus speaks on and is soon branded a traitor to Rome. The mob calls for him to be executed by being thrown from the Tarpeian rock but, in the end, Coriolanus, so recently the savior, is banished.

With much anger and some trepidation, he leaves Rome and makes his way to the home of his rival and enemy, Aufidius, where he offers him the choice of his throat or an alliance against Rome. Aufidius embraces him and enthusiastically chooses the latter course, establishes Coriolanus as his peer in command of the Volscian forces and immediately begins to make preparations for war.

Soon the march towards Rome begins and Coriolanus, through sheer force of character, assumes de facto command and earns the loyalty and love of the Volscian troops. His wrath drives the vanguard of his new allies towards the place of his birth and Rome trembles.

The Tribunes, who so cleverly incited the people, cower in fear of both the Volscians and the people, who now threaten to kill their representatives for inciting them against Marcius. Embassies, consisting of those nobles most loved by Coriolanus, are sent and rebuffed coldly and without ceremony.

Rome appears doomed, when another embassy appears. Coriolanus' wife, son and mother, Volumnia, appear in mourning garb to beg for mercy towards Rome. Coriolanus is most shaken by the appearance of his mother, whom he reveres and respects above any-

one else on earth. Her speech, made in the presence of the Aufidius and the Volscian commanders, utterly destroys Coriolanus' resolve and he agrees, without consultation, to negotiate a treaty of peace with a vulnerable Rome. He then returns with the Volscians intent on convincing them that he remains loyal and that the campaign has been concluded profitably and honorably.

Aufidius, apparently motivated by jealousy of Coriolanus' growing influence, has other ideas. He denounces him as a traitor who has sacrificed a great prize, his oaths and the blood and treasure expended on the expedition in order to dry the tears of an aged woman. This accusation naturally provokes Coriolanus but Aufidius goes on to taunt him as a "boy" and refuses to make use of his awarded surname. This attack on his honor throws Coriolanus into an all too familiar rage and before long he is reminding the assembled mob that, "if you have writ your annals true, 'tis there that, like an eagle in dove-cote, I flutter'd your Volscians in Corioli. Alone I did it. 'Boy!' At this, with Aufidius' prompting and despite protest from the Volscian nobility, the mob rises up and stabs Coriolanus to death.

Shakespeare's "Coriolanus" is a tragedy and a superficial reading of the text suggests that the hero is a victim of his pride. But Aristotle classifies pride as a virtue. For him the proud man resembles, to the extent humanly possible, a god walking the earth. He is concerned with great things —personal excellence and noble deeds — and, importantly, judges his worth correctly. The standard against which the proud man must be measured is, according to the Philosopher, complete virtue in the highest degree. He must be courageous, temperate, just, prudent and wise and it is for this reason that Aristotle characterizes pride as the "Crown of the Virtues."

He must also have a reasonable degree of wealth and power, for it is difficult for a poor man without influence or opportunity to perform noble deeds. Wealth and power are not, however, looked upon as worthy ends in and of themselves but simply as means to a greater end. The only external good of value to the proud man is honor. It is the greatest of external goods being "that which we render to the gods... and which is the prize appointed for the noblest deeds." However, he values not even honor a great deal and only that rendered by good men is welcomed. The praises of the vicious multitude are despised.

How would such a man behave? Aristotle describes a man of regal bearing, unhurried in gait and speech. He is even-tempered and not disposed to dwell long upon injuries suffered. He will be only

moderately troubled even by great misfortunes and will take good fortune in stride.

The proud man has few equals on earth. He rightly judges most men as inferior and the multitude as vastly inferior and he is contemptuous of what the world holds in highest esteem. Nonetheless, he is respectful of men of position and will not lord his superiority over the lower classes as when doing so, "among humble people it is as vulgar as a display of strength against the weak".

He will speak and act openly, directly and in a manner that makes clear his "loves and hates", though to the vulgar he may speak with "irony". Not to do so would be cowardly and the proud man cannot, by definition, be a coward. He is also completely "unable to make his life revolve around another unless it is a friend; for this is slavish, and for this reason all flatterers are servile and people lacking in self-respect are flatterers."

The proud man is quick to confer benefits but reluctant to receive them as the former is the mark of the superior and, when receiving favors will repay more than that which was received so as to incur a debt. He is also, for the same reason, quick to speak of services he has rendered but reluctant with regard to services received.

Is Coriolanus proud in the Aristotelian sense of the word? There are numerous arguments to be made in the affirmative as he is in many ways a noble and admirable man.

We are told that, prior to the play's action, he has distinguished himself in many a battle and received numerous wounds in defense of Rome. When the Volscian's rise, he does not hesitate to place a past commitment to serve under Cominius above ambition, though one senses that his superiority is recognized by all.

The battle of Corioli shows him to be bold and courageous to a degree that prefigures the exploits of Alexander. Indeed, in battle, his virtues act like a form of magnetism which attracts the loyalty and draws courage from those with whom he serves. Even his choice of enemies is noble as he seeks out Aufidius, the greatest of the Volscians, in battle. It is only against such a worthy adversary that he is willing to measure his valor.

The battle won, Coriolanus acts with modesty and dignity. He dismisses the severity of his wounds and the greatness of his accomplishment, refuses the cheap cheers of the multitude and declines an offer of the first tenth of the spoils, a reward he deems more be-

fitting a mercenary. His liberality is attested to both by this refusal and by the only thing that he asks of Cominius in return for his services; that freedom be granted to an old man and citizen of Corioli who did him some small service during the battle. His behavior also hints at the existence of a temperate character; such simple and austere tastes as befit a soldier. Not even his enemies are willing to accuse him of being covetous.

Flattery is a particularly servile vice wherein truth and self-respect are sacrificed for advantage and, in this regard, one must look upon Coriolanus with favor as he speaks his mind openly and without fear of consequence, as for example when he is at the mercy of the Roman mob with the consulship and his life in the balance.

But is his judgment of the plebeians just? Remaining within the confines of Shakespeare's play, the commoners are portrayed as fickle and cowardly. They claim increases in their corn ration as being their due but shrink from defending the Republic. They seek to flee in the face of danger and refuse to initially follow Coriolanus through the gate of Corioli. The victory secure, they sing his praises as the savior of Rome and then, with the city secure, are easily manipulated by the Tribunes into calling for his banishment, though the laurels of victory are still fresh. Finally, when he returns at the head of the Volscian army, we find them again trembling, repenting of their judgment and threatening to kill the Tribunes for bringing this misfortune upon them.

Yes, in many respects, Coriolanus is a virtuous and noble character. In fact, In Act III, Menenius Agrippa, patrician and friend to Coriolanus, holds forth that, "His nature is too noble for this world", and one is forced to ask if this is not the moral of this tale—a virtuous, honorable and rightly proud man crushed by a dishonorable world. It is, after all, the jealousy of inferiors that craftily confronts and triumphs over Coriolanus at each of the play's pivotal moments. It is envy and fear of his growing influence that causes the Tribunes to incite the mob, and, once again, the jealousy of Aufidius that leads him to plot his murder.

Alas, the lessons offered by Shakespeare's play are much more nuanced. Coriolanus does possess many virtues but he is not without vice and these vices figure prominently in his fall.

Most obvious among these is the vice of irascibility, an extreme relative to the mean of good temper. We call a person good tempered who is angry with the right people for the right reasons, as he ought, when he ought and for as long as he ought. He is neither

frequently perturbed nor led like a slave by his anger. The vice of irascibility deals with extremes along all of the dimensions noted above, but not, as Aristotle points out, in the same person “for evil destroys even itself, and if it is complete it becomes unbearable.”

The noble Coriolanus is made the fool by this vice and, through it, is easily manipulated by lesser men. As Coriolanus prepares to face the plebeians, the Tribune’s look to any, even the most trivial means to provoke him because, “being once chafed, he cannot be reigned to temperance; then he speaks what’s in his heart; and that is there which looks with us to break his neck.” Coriolanus, of course, rises to the first scent of bait and thus obliges their wish. Aufidius adopts the same strategy when he mocks Coriolanus with the name of traitor before the Volscians. Again, rather than respond with composure, he launches into an angry tirade that seals his fate.

But what of the cause of his anger? He is dishonored by the people and their Tribunes but what is this to the proud man? He categorically and with much disdain refuses to accept their accolades as worthless and yet allows their taunts to so easily drive away that self-control which is the mark of the virtuous man.

Yes, Coriolanus is hot-tempered. “He gets angry quickly, with the wrong persons and at the wrong things and more than is right.” But unlike the hot-tempered person, he also allows, after his banishment, anger to fester. He seeks relief from his anger through vengeance and, by his alliance with the Volscians, severs himself forever from his state, family and legacy.

More serious are vices related to prudence and justice and which have their root in too great a love of honor. It will be remembered that the proud man aims at virtue and noble action and claims honor as his due. Yet he loves honor not too much or for the wrong things or from the wrong people. The vice of excess in this regard is named by Aristotle as ambition.

Caius Marcius acts nobly in the battle of Corioli and does his nation great service. He is honored with laurels and the honorific surname of Coriolanus. These honors, granted by the respected patrician Cominius, he rightly accepts as being his due with dignity and gratitude. But a short time later he is offered recognition of a different sort.

The offer of the Consulship is, indeed, an honor, but it is more than that. It is an important and respected office in the Roman govern-

ment and it carries with it responsibilities to the state and its citizens. Rome, at this point in time is a Republic, the commoners who Coriolanus so openly despises are his fellow citizens and a just government aims at the common good of all citizens. It is, in fact, clear that Coriolanus does not support the existing constitution and that, if provided with the means, would abolish the Republic and replace it with an Oligarchy.

Given the circumstances, the prudent man would pause and consider the implications of accepting the office but Coriolanus does not and, instead appears to grasp at the honor without regard to its responsibilities. He appears to act from ambition.

The roots of this ambition lie in the relationship between the man and his mother, Volumnia. He is an only child and is adored. She is herself a powerful character and has clearly molded the man since birth with an eye towards the greatness, reputation and honors. And she is adored in return to an unnatural degree. For example, as he sees her approach to plead mercy for Rome, he exclaims, "My mother bows; as if Olympus to a molehill should in supplication nod; and my young buy hath an aspect of intercession, which great nature cries, 'Deny not.'" Simply put, it is apparent that Coriolanus' ambition rises from an overpowering desire to please his mother, who is as a god to him. The consulship is the latest in a series of votive offerings and one is reminded of Aristotle's admonition that the life of the proud man cannot revolve around another.

Once he commits himself to the consulship, Coriolanus finds himself on the horns of an unavoidable dilemma. Roman custom holds that he must humbly beg the plebeians to endorse his candidacy. The custom's origins are not discussed but it seems plain that is designed to impress upon the candidate the equality of citizens under the Republic. Coriolanus, of course, sees no hint of equality, rejects the foundational principle of the Republic as delusional and dangerous and chafes at the obligation. His choice then is to either honorably voice his true thoughts and feelings, (justice demands it and the truly proud man would not hesitate), certainly lose the office and likely face banishment or pretend to be that which he is not and make use of flattery to secure the assent of the people as a means to his and his mother's coveted end.

Volumnia counsels the latter. Coriolanus should dissemble and flatter in order to secure the consulship and, with the position secure, act against the people from a position of power. Remarkably, he agrees, albeit with great reluctance, and despite the fact that by



doing so, he will place an honor achieved by means of deceit ahead of virtue and, especially justice. It is perhaps ironic that his irascibility prevents him from consummating this much greater vice. He is almost immediately stung by some harsh word and returns to form; spitting venom at the commons and ensuring his banishment.

The tale of Coriolanus' exile is also one of passion overcoming prudence. After marching victoriously through Roman territories he camps at the gates of the city, prepared at last to exact the desire for revenge that consumes him. But, as final preparations for battle are made, Coriolanus' mother, wife and son approach on bended knee. Their words are powerful and instructive.

“We must”, says Volumnia, “find an evident calamity, though we had our wish, which side should win; for either thou must as a foreign recreant, be led with manacles through our streets, or else triumphantly tread on thy country's ruin, and bear the palm for having bravely shed thy wife and children's blood. For myself, son, I purpose not to wait on fortune till these wars determine. If I cannot persuade thee rather to show a noble grace to both parts than to seek the end of one, though shalt no sooner march to assault thy country than to tread.. on thy mother's womb that brought thee into the world.” “Ay and mine”, says Virgilia, that brought you forth this boy...” Finally his son, young Marcius exclaims, “A' shall not tread on me; I'll run away till I am bigger, but then I'll fight.”

Not content with the impact of these words, Volumnia touches upon something else held dear by her son. “The end of war's uncertain, but this is certain, that, if thou counter Rome, the benefit which thou shalt thereby reap is such a name whose repetition will be dogg'd with curses: whose chronicle thus writ: ‘The man was noble, but with his last attempt he wiped it out; destroyed his country, and his name remains to the ensuing age abhorr'd.’”

Volumnia's appearance is completely unexpected and Coriolanus, slave to his anger, had given not the least thought to how the presence of his mother, wife and son might impact his planned revenge. Perhaps he had a plan to keep them safe but he had clearly not counted on their continued loyalty to the state that had banished him.

Aside from lack of prudence, these speeches cast a harsh light on the true motives behind Coriolanus' legacy of military service to Rome. The proud man accepts honors as his due for noble deeds but he does great things not for honor's sake but because they are

great. Did Coriolanus fight as a service to his country or was he simply hungry for the honors offered by battle and the maternal praise that accompanied them? Apparently the latter as he is here surprised and instructed by the loyalty not only of his mother but also his wife and child. It is worthy of note that both the Romans and Volscians name Coriolanus a traitor and one cannot help but recall the counter example provided by Socrates who rejects plans to help him escape prison and a death sentence out of loyalty to and respect for the laws of Athens.

In any case, we once again find our imprudent hero in an untenable position. He can either carry through the attack and accept the loss of his beloved family and legacy or accept the compromise of a peace treaty and violate his oath, made to the Volscians, to join them in the destruction of Rome. As previously noted, Coriolanus chose the latter course and all but sealed his downfall and death at the hands of Aufidius.


There is certain nobility to Coriolanus. We marvel at his courage, appreciate his temperance and liberality and frankly stand awed by the manner in which he speaks openly and fearlessly in the midst of a craven and cowardly world. The lesser men who surround him amplify these aspects of greatness. The commoners are cowardly and fickle and even the gods must have smiled a bit at the scene wherein they learn that he whom they so rashly banished is returned at the head of an army. The Tribunes are cunning, duplicitous and cowardly, presenting a political archetype that is well recognized to this day and even Aufidius is driven by envy of a superior nature.

Yet this nobility is marred by vice. He desires honors too much and for the wrong reasons and for these honors he is willing to sacrifice virtue. He acts impetuously, the slave of passion, tosses aside justice when convenient and shows precious little prudence in his calculations.

We earlier asked if Coriolanus is proud in the Aristotelian sense of the word. Aristotle answers that "A greatness in every virtue would seem to be characteristic of the proud man. And it would be most unbecoming for a proud man to fly from danger, swinging his arms by his side, or to wrong another; for to what end should he do disgraceful acts, he to whom nothing is great? If we consider him point-by-point we shall see the utter absurdity of a proud man who is not good. Nor, again, would he be worthy of honor if he were bad; for honor is the prize of virtue and it is to the good that it is

rendered.” Coriolanus cannot rightly be called proud and his vices are indeed as unbecoming as Aristotle anticipates.

If the proud man is virtuous, worthy of great honors and estimates his worth correctly, how shall we characterize Coriolanus? Again according to Aristotle, “The unduly humble man is worthy of great things but does not judge himself so, while the vain man is not worthy but believes himself to be so.” There is little doubt that vanity must be added to the list of Coriolanus’ vices and Aristotle writes of the vain that they, “are fools and ignorant of themselves, and that manifestly; for not being worthy of them, they attempt honorable undertakings, and then are found out...”

The lesson of Coriolanus is not that he was too noble for this world but, rather, that his character was flawed and unfit to support his enormous ambitions. That he was ignorant of these flaws, and thus overestimated his abilities, further contributes to the downfall of this tragic hero. 

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