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**Author**

Cortes, Mayra A

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Undergraduate

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

“THE MAN IN BLOOD”: GROTESQUE AND CLASSICAL MASCULINITY IN  
SHAKESPEARE’S *CORIOLANUS*

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY

MAYRA A. CORTES

ADVISOR: ROBERT N. WATSON

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*~~Dedicated to the prideful, courageous, and devoted Coriolanus in us~~*

## ABSTRACT

“The man in blood”: Grotesque and Classical Masculinity in Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*

By Mayra A. Cortes

My thesis focuses on Shakespeare’s Roman play *Coriolanus*, and centers around the question of why Coriolanus adamantly refuses to show his war wounds. My contention is that Coriolanus seeks to construct for himself a classical body, in which he can remain impenetrable and independent while inhabiting a naturally grotesque body—a wounded bleeding body—that paradoxically makes his heroic masculinity and continually threatens to emasculate him. Shakespeare focuses the limelight on his hero’s wounded body to highlight Coriolanus’s masculine anxiety; and, in Coriolanus’s body, he places his tragic hero’s psychological depth and turmoil to present to us not the tragedy of a cold metallic sword, but the greatest tragedy of the wounded man. In this thesis, I highlight how Shakespeare deviates from the Roman custom of publicizing war wounds as a means to prove a man’s masculinity, by emphasizing the masculine anxiety that the open bleeding body brings to his anachronistic early modern hero who seeks, by all means, to privatize his wounded body. By examining Coriolanus’s anxiety of displaying his wounded body, I illuminate how his desire to be impenetrable discloses his natural human condition that longs for a state of wholeness while inhabiting a hollow bodily confinement.

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## Introduction

*Coriolanus* is Shakespeare's last tragic play, written between late 1608 or early 1609 (Hofling). It has been one of Shakespeare's most neglected plays. In fact, in times of political upheaval, such as war and its aftermath, it has often been cut from performances and critics seem to find greater faults with the aristocratic hero, whom they attack of being a tyrant (George 1). Many reasons have been given for the play's unpopularity, starting with its difficult and obscure syntax, which leaves the accustomed lovers of the Bard craving for poetic symphony in a play that only seems to offer them war cries, drums, trumpets, shouts of revolt, and a hero who "talks like a knell" (5.4.21).<sup>1</sup> But more than anything, those who find *Coriolanus* distasteful blame it on the unlikable personality of the hero, whose belligerence, pride, and aloofness leaves the audience with a bitter after taste. Furthermore, the tragedy has often been attacked for its incapacity to inspire sympathy or emotion. Janet Adelman, for example, writes that the audience is "made as rigid and cold as the hero by the lack of anything that absolutely commands our human sympathies" (119). For many, the tragedy of the play is that it is not tragic, in the sense that it does not inspire pathos.

Coriolanus does not seem to confide his inner struggles in his few soliloquies, which has led several critics, among them Cynthia Marshall to characterize him as an "unknowable character" (94). In addition, Paul Cantor and Michael Goldman attribute to the hero a "lack of inwardness" (qtd. in Marshall 94). Without much access to his inner turmoil and his obstinacy to withhold himself from the audience, making himself known only aurally through his coarse and piercing language, Coriolanus can be an extremely complex character to engage with. Vivian

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1. All citations of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* are based on the *Folger Shakespeare Library*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, unless otherwise stated.

Thomas argues that Coriolanus is a victim of his culture and that the inability to see this has “led many critics to suggest that he fails to attract sympathy and even that the play itself is a failure” (214). In general, Shakespeare’s tragic characters possess unappealing traits and, in fact, commit more atrocious crimes than Coriolanus; one only need read *Othello*, who is driven by jealousy to strangle his wife. And yet many readers sympathize with him and consider him a tragic character rather than a vicious murderer. Coriolanus, on the other hand, never kills or wounds anyone on stage. Thus, it is rather strange that Coriolanus has been seen as one of Shakespeare’s most despicable and violent tragic heroes, when he does not harm anyone in the play or commit any type of crime before the audiences’ eyes. In fact, the biggest crime he seems to commit against us and those on stage is disturb our ears with his piercing language and unsettle our eyes with his pierced body. The play suggests that the greatest mortal crime that he inflicts is upon himself. Nonetheless, it is understandable why some would find him to be a contemptible hero, for threatening to cauterize the most sacred and essential bond: the family.

I do not attribute the unpopularity of *Coriolanus*, as some have argued, due to the waning creative powers of the Bard—the play’s difficult syntax and lack of pathos—or to the disdainfulness of the hero’s personality. Instead, I would like to suggest that the reader, unlike an audience member viewing a stage presentation of *Coriolanus*, faces more challenges trying to connect with the tragic hero. For example, readers are apt to forget that Coriolanus does not kill anyone on stage because they might merge and not distinguish the actions that occur off-stage versus on-stage. Therefore, they might not pay attention to the artistic choice of why Shakespeare would present such a bellicose warrior who never wounds or kills anyone on stage, but who is instead always visually presented as the wounded man. The audience member viewing a stage presentation, unlike the reader, is able to physically view the fictive wounds of

Coriolanus, the actor, when he comes out bleeding from Corioles and when he is stabbed to death by the Volscians. The reader faces more challenges trying to engage emotionally with the hero than an audience member seeing a live performance of *Coriolanus* because the reader, like the plebeians, is obstructed from physically viewing Coriolanus's wounds. This, therefore, makes it much harder for the reader to sympathize, at least on a corporeal level, with the tragic hero who is the prominent victim of the play.

Many argue that Shakespeare wrote his plays not to be read as texts but as scripts to be performed. Nevertheless, before any performance takes place, the play must be read. Shakespeare requires us to read his play with an attentive ear to language while also remembering that language is attached to performance. Shakespeare places his readers in the same position as the common people, who are impeded from viewing the hero's wounds. Thus, many are apt to feel unattached to the aloof hero. In doing so, Shakespeare emphasizes the obsession of visual presentation in Rome, in Renaissance England, and in our current society, where visual proof still reigns supreme over verbal proof. Volumnia, in one of her several speeches, remarks, "Action is eloquence, and the eyes of the ignorant / More learned than the ears" (3.2.95-96). Aside from her haughty comment that ignorant people are persuaded with performance rather than with words, her comment reveals a society that sees in the body's actions a more reliable language of truth. The body's action on stage, as in real life, is often taken to be a more reliable signifier of true emotions than verbal language. In Shakespeare's culture, the eyes were in fact considered "the main channel to the heart" (Watson *Shakespeare and the Hazards*). In no other of Shakespeare's play does the word "wound" and its variations (such as its plural form and its past-tense) appear so often. In a play so profoundly attached to visual corporal presentation, the body's actions must be carefully scrutinized. Coriolanus's body



is, indeed, the text that offers a more reliable language to understanding his deeds and gestures. Shakespeare focuses the limelight on his hero's wounded body to highlight Coriolanus's masculine anxiety; and, in Coriolanus's body, he places his tragic hero's psychological depth and turmoil to present to us not the tragedy of a cold metallic sword, but the greatest tragedy of the wounded man.

In Shakespeare's Roman play *Coriolanus*, the eponymous warrior seeks to "exceed the common" (4.1.37); in other words, he seeks to transcend his humanity by denying that he possesses a vulnerable and dependent body. The common people's constant nagging for food and their inability to live up to Coriolanus's heroic ideal that "brave death outweighs bad life" (1.7.90) makes him despise them because they live the common life of the body rather than the stoical life of being indifferent to physical pain and death. Throughout the play, Shakespeare presents us with a paradoxical image of a warrior who is a "thing of blood" (2.2.125), much like his sword, covered with the blood of others, that is senseless to pain and unsusceptible to death, and as "the man in blood" (4.5.233) who shares a common, mortal body with his fellow citizens. Despising the "common muck of the world" (2.2.144), however, he continually endeavors through his martial deeds to transcend his human condition, in the hopes of achieving an exceptional martial masculinity.

Shakespeare, as many critics have noted, is indebted to Thomas North's 1579 translation of Plutarch's *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and the Romans*. The primary source, North's translation of Plutarch's *The Life of Caius Martius Coriolanus*, plays a significant role in the reinvention of Shakespeare's play. Professor and critic M. W. MacCallum notes that "nowhere has Shakespeare borrowed so much through so great a number of lines as in Volumnia's appeal to her son" and "Coriolanus' announcement of himself to Aufidius" (484). Even though my aim

is not to read *Coriolanus* solely as a play set in Rome, it is important for my study to point out what Shakespeare borrows from Plutarch and more importantly, where he deviates from him in order to reshape the legend and make *Coriolanus* his own work of art.

Shakespeare's most drastic turn from Plutarch is having his hero refuse the Roman custom of displaying his wounds to the common people in order to be elected consul. In Plutarch's account, Coriolanus willingly shows his wounds since, as Plutarch comments, warriors' wounds were seen as "markes and testemonie of their valiantness" (242); whereas, for Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* this Roman custom proves to be psychologically and physically tormenting, leading to his downfall. In Rome, to show one's wounds was to display one's heroic valor (Dittmann) and thus the means for the Roman warrior to be considered a virtuous man. Coriolanus deploys his martial prowess in order to "play / The man I am" (3.2.17-18). In his tautological assertion, he claims to his mother, after he refuses to show his wounds to the common people, that by not yielding to the Roman custom he is being his inherent and true self: an unrelenting soldier, not a pragmatic, political official. However, in order to complete the rite of passage from boyhood to manhood and achieve his highest potential as a man, Rome requires him to display his wounds, his "marks of merit, wounds received for's country" (2.3.180), which serve for the Romans as ocular proof of his valor and patriotism.

Shakespeare endows Coriolanus with the most important Roman virtue: valor. Plutarch explains that during the life of Caius Martius "valiantnes was honoured in Rome above all other vertues" (242). In the play, Cominius, Coriolanus's commander-in-chief, praises Coriolanus's martial valor. Cominius's panegyric speech illustrates the Roman idea—"It is held / That valor is the chiefest virtue" (2.2.100)—and Coriolanus, he explains to the patricians, is the walking epitome of this honorable virtue. In fact, *virtus* (virtue), derives from the Latin root *vir*, meaning

*man* (McDonnell 2). Consequently, virtue is, from an etymological perspective, a gender-specific masculine ideal, prescribing what it entails to be a man. In Republican Latin, the primary meaning of *virtus* is martial courage (McDonnell 33). Myles McDonnell explains that “in Rome, serving the Republic was the only way many Roman males could lay claim to being a man” (11). Therefore, to be born male did not grant the male subject supremacy in his society; he was considered to be as powerless as a woman or child, until he “could escape the private world of the *familia* (family) by assuming a public identity as a Roman citizen” (McDonnell 180). The way to achieve this was to serve Rome by becoming its soldier and demonstrating courage in battle, so that he could be honored as a virtuous man. This rite of passage that transitions the Roman boy to manhood is demonstrated in Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*. It is a bloody ritual that requires Caius Martius to leave the domestic sphere and care of his mother to venture into the battlefield in order to leave his “pupil age” (2.2.114) and thus enter manhood (2.2.115); and with his courageous martial deeds, win for himself a new name as Coriolanus and a powerful position in the public sphere as consul, the highest political office in Rome.

Why does Coriolanus decline to show his wounds to the common people, when doing so could easily establish him with the highest virtue Rome and he himself consider essential to manhood? In answering this question, I argue, in part, that Coriolanus is not acting like the conventional Roman warrior but like the early modern man—anxious about showing his wounds because he sees them as debasing his masculinity and thus threatening to reveal that underneath the metallic armor of the great Roman warrior also resides a grotesque body susceptible to violation. Mikhail Bakhtin’s opposing ideas of embodiment—the classical body and the grotesque body—nicely articulate this tension that is prevalent in Coriolanus’s wounded body.

Bakhtin defines the classical body as an “entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something individual...All orifices of the body are closed. The basis of the image is the individual, strictly limited mass, the impenetrable façade” (320). In other words, it represents the individual as a body that is closed and completely self-sufficient. It is similar to what the sociologist Norbert Elias refers to and criticizes as society’s myth of the individual as *homo clausus*: “as an entirely self-sufficient entity independent and cut off from other people and things” (211). Elias notes that this type of “closed personality” or sense of absolute independence is impossible because the individual is, by nature, “interdependent” with the natural world throughout his life, and thus should be seen as an “open personality,” holding a relative degree of independence but never entirely cut off from others and his society (213). This open personality is illustrated with what Bakhtin refers to as the grotesque body, which displays “not only the outward but also the inner features of the body: blood, bowels, heart and other organs (318). Unlike the classical body, the grotesque is “never finished, never completed” (Bakhtin 317). The body’s orifices such as the mouth and the sexual organs are sites of human dependency that allow for the procreation and sustainability of life and as such, the grotesque body is always dependent on the natural world and in a perpetual process of creation that links people together.

Although neither Bakhtin nor Elias assign the classical body to the male subject and the grotesque body to the female subject, critics have noted that in these opposing bodily canons exists not only issues of social stratification but also bodily gender differences. Valerie Traub, for example, explains that the early modern male body was linked with the classical body, which was associated with “male powers of agency, rationality, and impermeability”; whereas, the female body was represented as being naturally grotesque: “permeable, transgressive, always in

need of enclosure and containment” (54). Shakespeare implies that Coriolanus’s masculine anxiety originates from his wounded body, a body that he wishes to isolate and privatize but which continually haunts him with the reminder of his dependency and vulnerability. As Traub suggests, aside from the cultural association that the grotesque body belongs to the vulnerable, violated, female body, the grotesque body is the human condition of all, regardless of one’s gender and, is for men and women alike, the “cultural reservoir of anxiety about the body’s openness—to dissection, to disease, to death” (54). My contention is that Coriolanus seeks to construct for himself a classical body, in which he can remain impenetrable and independent while inhabiting a naturally grotesque body—a wounded bleeding body—that paradoxically makes his heroic masculinity and continually threatens to emasculate him.

Even though Shakespeare retells the story of *Coriolanus* in a Roman setting, this play is preoccupied with the masculine anxieties of his own time period. Coppélia Kahn explains that “Englishness appears in Roman settings, and Romanness is anglicized” in a “kind of cross pollination” (4). In fact, Rome was for Renaissance England a “cultural parent” (Kahn 4) to emulate for their classical virtues of honor, valor, and integrity (Dittmann). The Renaissance culture embraced these virtues as their own and, as such, these virtues continued to influence an ideal masculinity. Aside from these virtues, the Romans were also highly admired for their military success. In the Elizabethan and Jacobean period, there was unease with peace because this term was associated with “disease, sloth, softness, and effeminacy” (Woodbridge xiv)—attributes that we see Coriolanus attach to the common people and the reason why he despises them. Both Elizabeth and James, however, sought to establish a foreign policy of peace rather than warfare. Masculinity, in late sixteenth and early seventeenth century England, was a challengeable term because the ideals of manhood were shifting. Masculinity was no longer

restricted to the primitive idea that a man had to commit violence in order to prove his masculinity. Men were being praised for their education, civility, and pragmatism. Elizabethan humanists have been famously quoted with this axiom: “What the sword may do in war, [rhetoric] may perform in peace” (Wells 15). Nevertheless, in a period of transition, previous values and ideas do not simply go away; rather, they remain in the midst with the emerging ones and create, as in the case of Coriolanus’ masculinity, commotion and anxiety. Renaissance England like the Rome of *Coriolanus*, was experiencing a similar dilemma: How to raise good soldiers with necessary aggressive traits for the battlefield while making sure that they remained civilized and controlled, without disrupting the welfare of the state. The difficulty that Coriolanus experiences, in his militaristic society, is transitioning from the battlefield to the city. Hence, ironically, the city, not the battlefield, proves to be the most dangerous arena for Coriolanus, who is not willing to capitulate his power as a soldier in order to perform Rome’s sociopolitical customs, which he insists go against his essential masculine self.

### **The Paradoxical Nature of Coriolanus’s Wounded Body**

It is important to note that the text uses scars and wounds interchangeably. We do not know if Coriolanus’s wounds have had sufficient time to heal to become scars, or if some of his wounds are still tender and open when he must appear in the marketplace to display his wounds to the common people in order to become consul. Menenius raves about Coriolanus’s wounds and repeatedly asks Volumnia where Coriolanus was wounded (2.1.151). She, enthusiastically, replies, “I th’ shoulder and i th’ left arm. There will be large *cicatrices* to show the people when

he shall stand for his place” (2.1.152-54, my italics). The *Oxford English Dictionary Online*<sup>2</sup> defines “cicatrice” as “the scar of a healed wound.” Volumnia uses scars and wounds interchangeably to refer to her son’s punctured body. The non-existing temporality expressed in the interchangeability of language that indistinguishably refers to Coriolanus’s body as containing scars, wounds, and perhaps scars that have been re-wounded, illustrates the paradoxical duality of Coriolanus’s martial body that contains simultaneously closed and open wounds. Shakespeare reveals that Coriolanus’s body is always in the natural process of being healed through scarring and also of being reopened due to continual penetration, hence depicting in his wounds both a defensive hardening and a renewed vulnerability.

This paradoxical image of his wounded body as both a hard scab and tender wound is best expressed by Lartius, a comrade of Coriolanus, who calls Coriolanus “a carbuncle entire” (1.5.73). A “carbuncle” is “a large precious stone of a red or fiery colour,” but in medical terms, this word also refers to “any of various inflammatory or infective lesions of the skin” (*OED*). Shakespeare, by using this metaphor, simultaneously allows the reader to imagine Coriolanus’s body as a classical stone-like body and as a grotesque body full of inflamed punctures and boils. This contradictory image of his body, exposed as a hard impenetrable substance and permeable flesh, recalls to mind the dissected cadaver armored in military armor of Juan de Valverde de Hamusco’s *Anatomia del corpo humano* (1560), in which we see the frame of the classical male body enmeshed with the grotesque:

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2. All subsequent use of the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* will be abbreviated as *OED*.



Fig. 1. Juan de Valverde de Hamusco, *Anatomia del corpo humano* (1560)

In this engraved illustration, we can visualize the anxiety produced by the “simultaneous destruction and preservation of the classical body, taken to its most defensive extreme” (Traub 54). Rather than revealing the total disintegration of the open human stomach, it contains the grotesque body within the classical frame of male integrity. The wounded soldier on the brink of a complete disintegration is contained, partially, in his classical immortal armor that shields his organs from completely coming apart. The mutilated warrior here depicted, as in the case of Coriolanus, exhibits the confluence of steel and skin in his outer surface, which become nearly indistinguishable. Nevertheless, the metallic armor, like his skin, proves to be vulnerable to the powerful dissecting sword that strips him off his fragile armor.

As result of Coriolanus’s anxiety about being perceived as a wounded man, he often speaks of his bleeding wounds in ambiguous terms. The reader is incapable of knowing for sure whether the blood that Coriolanus is covered with belongs to him or to his enemies, or whether it is a mixture of his blood and the blood of his enemies. When he victoriously comes out of the gates of Corioles, covered in blood, as the city’s vanquisher, he quickly approaches Cominius to



aid him in the battle in the fields against the Volscians. Coriolanus begs Cominius to allow him to continue fighting against Aufidius, even though he has been horrifically wounded from his previous battle. He persuades him by saying, “By all the battles wherein we have fought, / By th’ blood we have *shed* together” (1.6.72-73, my italics). The ambiguity of the verb “shed” perplexes the reader because he or she does not know whether it indicates the blood that both Coriolanus and Cominius shed together from their injured bodies, or the blood that they made their enemies shed, or if it includes a combination of both their own blood and their enemies’ blood. Thus, Coriolanus with his ambiguous language, is constantly complicating the way that we should perceive his bleeding body.

Furthermore, Coriolanus uses the blood that he carries externally as the emblem of his immortality in order to shield his own susceptible body. It is as if the blood that he carries becomes his protective self-renewing scab, a scab that nonetheless remains vulnerable, and which continues to remind us of the carbuncle image. He, indeed, becomes the scabrous carbuncle. He wants the blood that he is covered with to be seen in a positive light, adding to his masculinity rather than undermining it. For instance, after Coriolanus fights his victorious battle all by himself in Corioles and soon afterwards seeks his second battle with his archenemy Aufidius, he says to him, “Alone I fought in your Corioles’ walls / And made what work I pleased. ’Tis not my blood / Wherein thou seest me masked” (1.8.12-14). In saying that the blood is not his own but rather the blood of Aufidius’s people, Coriolanus seeks to display his own impenetrability and masculine superiority. The fact that he denies his wounds several times comes to show how desperate he is to deny his vulnerability. Gail Paster explains that the bleeding body created in the early modern man great anxiety: “The bleeding body signifies as a shameful token of uncontrol, as a failure of physical self-mastery particularly associated with a

woman in her monthly ‘courses’” (Paster 92). A woman’s body during her menstrual cycle bleeds involuntarily and this suggested that the female body lacked continence and as a result integrity. This sheds light on the question of why Coriolanus undergoes tremendous anxiety over his wounded body, and consequently tries to portray his bleeding body as a voluntary state of existence to signify, as Kahn correctly puts it, “not his vulnerability but rather his success as a fighter (151). Indeed, his martial preeminence makes him appear as if he were “death itself” (Starks-Estes 93) who kills all; as a consequence of “being angry, does forget that ever / He heard the name of death” (3.1.331-32). Thus, he is often easily driven to use violence because he imagines himself to be immortal, forgetting that he, like any other man, is susceptible to death.

Not willing to tear down the “impenetrable façade” (Bakhtin 320) that covers his body’s vulnerability, Coriolanus disregards and ridicules his lacerations to make them appear insignificant. He attempts to make the reader, like the plebeians, “forget” (2.3.63) his vulnerability by constantly undermining and negating his wounds in order to appear as the victorious perpetrator and not as the wounded victim. In Latin the word for “wound” is “vulnus”, the root of “vulnerability” (Kahn 17). If there is one thing that Coriolanus fears the most, it is to be seen inhabiting a defenseless body because vulnerability reveals that he occupies a grotesque body—what he seeks most to avoid. Therefore, he is continually undermining his wounds by calling them mere “scratches” (3.3.67), “scars to move laughter only” (3.3.69), “nothings” (2.2.91), and “unaching scars”(2.3.176), which he believes he should “hide” (2.3.176) rather than publicize, because to him they are shameful symbols signifying that his body is penetrable. Indeed, this fear of vulnerability is best expressed by the hero when he prays that his son, who Volumnia says is his “epitome” (5.3.78), will “prove / To shame invulnerable and stick i’ th’ wars / Like a great sear-mark standing every flaw” (5.3.83-85). As the exemplar of Romanitas,

Coriolanus wants his son to prove invulnerable to the wars in order to win glory. According to him, the heroic warrior must transform his human body into a “great seamount” in order to endure every earthly injury with indifference and win honor. Coriolanus wants for his son what he aspires for himself: to become impenetrable in order to never experience shame.

Although war exposes Coriolanus’s fragile body, it is in the hazards of the battlefield where his hyper-masculinity thrives. In the battleground, he exceeds all other men with his superior martial prowess. James Kuzner argues that Coriolanus seeks “self-undoing,” and suggests that he desires to become indistinguishable from others by being “exposed to the outside-of-self, mixed with the blood of others” (99). However, for Coriolanus the act of self-undoing, an act in which he is constantly pursuing danger, is not so much a desire for self-destruction as it is for self-aggrandizement. The dangers of the battlefield give him the opportunity to prove his exceptional martial powers and thereby to differentiate himself from the cowardly common people who, Coriolanus says, have “souls of geese” (1.4.46).

Before his banishment from Rome, Coriolanus recalls to his mother all the things she used to tell him about enduring life’s “inevitable strokes” (4.1.31):

You were used

To say extremities was the trier of spirit;

That common chances common men could bear;

That when the sea was calm, all boats alike

Showed mastership in floating; fortune’s blows

When most struck home, being gentle wounded craves

A noble cunning. You were used to load me

With precepts that would make invincible

The heart that conned them. (4.1.3-12)

Coriolanus enjoys putting himself in danger because it is in such situations where he can prove that he is “invincible” by transcending the pain of his ordinary body. Unlike the common man, who can only endure ordinary mishaps, the heroic man, Coriolanus and Volumnia argue, is able to show his superiority by enduring the greatest adversities. Coriolanus sees danger as life’s test in which he, like the Greek god, Hercules, must endure extreme labors in order to reveal his heroic masculinity by constructing a heart that is invincible to “fortune’s blows.” In *Venus and Adonis*,<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare expresses the same idea: “For where a heart is hard they make no *batt’ry*” (426, my italics). The *OED* defines “battery” as “a mark of beating; a wound or bruise.” Coriolanus obeys his own similar admonition that the heroic warrior must “put [his] shield[ ] before [his] heart[ ], and fight / With heart[ ] more proof than shield[ ]” (1.4.33-34), so that life’s blows will leave him “unbruised” (4.1.56). Thus, through his self-hardening, which is a form of self-denial, he attempts to cover his body’s vulnerability. Coriolanus withstands great bodily injuries in order to create a heroic masculine identity that exemplifies an exceptional body.

### **Coriolanus’s Theatrical and Anatomical Body**

Coriolanus rearticulates the puritan anti-theatrical prejudice of the Renaissance period, in which many argued that boy actors were effeminized by playing women’s parts. Anti-theatrical

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3. With the exception of Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*, all other works by Shakespeare are based on the *Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G.B. Evans et alia, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.

prejudice was first articulated by Plato, whose theory of personality argues that man has been given, by nature, “one chief talent which must form the basis for his role in society” (Barish 18). The one chief talent that Coriolanus insists he was endowed with is that of an unbending soldier. For Plato and for the Puritans in the Renaissance, imitation was formative, meaning that to imitate another is to become that imitation and thus to corrupt and debase one’s essential self. As Laura Levine depicts, however, the anti-theatrical anxiety of playing a woman’s part reveals the fear that “[t]here is no such thing as a masculine self” (24). The valiant man’s identity slips away from him once he takes off his designated male clothes or wears women’s clothes. Masculinity, therefore, is shown to be only a costume, an outer façade that shreds to pieces once it is cross-dressed or stripped off its armor.

The Roman custom proves to be extremely debilitating to Coriolanus because it obliges him to “fit [himself] to the custom” (2.2.168). Shakespeare’s pun is an evident one: the Roman custom requires him to wear a costume to “perform a part” (3.2.135) that is “false to [his] nature” (3.2.17). As Aufidius suggests, Coriolanus’s nature is “Not to be other than one thing, not moving / From th’ casque to th’ cushion” (4.7.44-45). By which he means that Coriolanus is not willing to unstrap himself from his armor to follow the cross-dressing politics of Rome, which require him to replace his armor with the humble “gown” (2.3.42)—what must appear to Coriolanus to be in the shape of a woman’s dress. Although in Rome the toga was worn by men, Coriolanus as the anachronistic Renaissance man fears that the custom/costume requires him to impersonate the part of a boy playing a woman, which to the valiant soldier is an act that would make him “blush” (2.3.172) with shame. In early modern England, boys and girls until about the age of seven were dressed alike. Once the boy was put into breeches, he left the feminized sphere and entered the masculine realm (Kahn 158). This change of clothing that requires Coriolanus to

replace his armor with the common gown threatens to retrieve him back to a feminized and powerless childhood. Furthermore, Shakespeare's audience would have been aware that playing a woman's part feminized the Renaissance boy actor. By having to perform the part of a boy actor imitating a woman, Coriolanus anxiously anticipates the moment when he will have to remove his garment to expose his wounds and prove that the feminine costume is not after all a costume but his innate condition as a vulnerable body.

Coriolanus fears removing his clothes and exposing an open, vulnerable body that can be easily attacked by others. He anxiously pleads to Menenius:

I do beseech you,

Let me o'erleap that custom, for I cannot

Put on the gown, stand naked, and entreat them

For my wounds' sake to give their suffrage. Please you

That I may pass this doing. (2.2.158-62)

For Plutarch's Coriolanus, showing his wounds proves to be no problem because "outward he esteemed armour to no purpose, unless one were naturally armed within" (Plutarch 236).

Impenetrability, in Plutarch's account, is shown to be innate in Coriolanus's body. In contrast, for Shakespeare's Coriolanus, to expose his wounds is like standing naked and revealing a defenseless body, no longer under the protection of his impermeable armor. For the Roman soldier, to be a man is to be full of martial wounds signifying his heroic masculinity. On the other hand, for the early modern man, to be wounded is to lack control over his body and thus lack masculine integrity and strength. Coriolanus's wounded body, although it establishes him as

a heroic man, also threatens to shatter his illusion of impenetrability as a godlike warrior, by highlighting his common, vulnerable, and mortal body. Shakespeare, therefore, exposes that Coriolanus's masculinity is only an external façade embedded in his armor. On the inside, Coriolanus is on the verge of shattering once his armor is stripped off to reveal his vulnerable body.

In addition, Shakespeare, alongside Ben Jonson and other Jacobean playwrights, highlighted this cross-dressing to create erotic tension in their audiences, with the anxiety of what would happen if the genitals of a female character played by a boy actor were actually exposed. Coriolanus senses that by impersonating the cross-dressed boy actor he would be seen as an erotic object, stirring the sexual desire of his male spectators not only for women but for men as well. When Coriolanus reexamines what it would involve to go through with this performance, he imagines that "some harlot's spirit" (3.2.139) would penetrate his body. To perform the cross-dressing Roman custom is, to him, to become the most degraded subject of his society: a prostitute. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Cleopatra also expresses this sentiment that the boy actor becomes a whore when he performs a female role (4.2.220-21). The English theater was known to be frequented by female prostitutes, making it an arena of heterosexual economic exchange and entertainment. Several literary scholars have suggested, although there is no historical evidence, that men and boy actors participated in the sex market as homosexual prostitutes (Savvidis). Coriolanus, after imagining how this custom would transform him into a homosexual prostitute, exclaims with indignation that he will not go through with the Roman custom because it is "A most inherent baseness" (3.2.150) that threatens to corrupt his masculine honor by penetrating his body's integrity.

Furthermore, Coriolanus senses that performance threatens to emasculate him by converting him into a vivisected corpse. Cominius insists that Coriolanus should allow himself to be praised by his fellow Romans for his heroism in the battle of Corioles. Cominius, in this passage, foreshadows and makes it explicit why revealing his wounds is an important event: “Rome must know / The value of her own. ’Twere a concealment / Worse than a theft, no less than a traducement, / To hide your doings” (1.9. 23-27). Coriolanus’s “doings” are his wounds, which signify his heroism and patriotism. The only way to prove his heroic deeds and his love to the Romans is by revealing his wounds. Cominius argues that to conceal his wounds, and consequently his martial deeds, is to commit a crime against himself and the Romans. In Rome, wounds are not individual private experiences. Instead, wounds are to be exposed in a ceremonial setting, where others can give honor to the bearer of such valiant deeds. Notice how Coriolanus’s individual body is eradicated. His body, according to Cominius, is not his own but Rome’s and thus he has no right to hide it from public sight. Cominius also implicates that Coriolanus needs others to acknowledge his deeds in order to gain honor.

There is, in Cominius’s argument, a strong epistemological concern, specifically when he remarks that “Rome must *know* / The value of her own” (italics mine). The only way to solve this epistemological concern about the value of Coriolanus’s martial deeds, according to Cominius, is by providing visual evidence of his wounds. My suggestion is that Shakespeare implies that the English actors impersonating Romans want to make Coriolanus into an anatomical theatrical body that they can vivisect. In other words, they want to further penetrate Coriolanus’s wounded body to see if they can find some type of truth or significance beneath the surface of his steel-skin armor. Attila Kiss illuminates that the fixation of Tudor and Stuart playwrights with staging mutilated, tortured, raped, and anatomized bodies was not merely to



fulfill the demands of a culture obsessed with “gory entertainment” (226). Instead, he explains that, in the English Renaissance, there was an “obsession” with puncturing the skin that covered the individual, in “an epistemological attempt” to discover what resided within (Attila 227).

It might not, therefore, come as a surprise that in the early seventeenth century, the second most popular source of entertainment following the public playhouse was public autopsy and anatomical theater (Attila 229). The Renaissance theater was predominantly “a male preserve”—all actors were men and the audience seats were for the most part occupied by men (Zimmerman 46). Therefore, to be onstage was to be, principally, the object of the masculine gaze of both actors and audience members. Equally important, Shakespeare indicates that to be onstage is to position oneself as an autopsy, where the actor’s body becomes the passive object of the scrutinous masculine gaze. Jonathan Sawday explains that anatomical dissection feminizes the open body: “Once the body has been entered and gazed into, then it is constructed as a feminized landscape, whatever its biological sex may be” (162). With *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare merges the most popular sources of entertainment to highlight the desire of the English-Romans to vivisect Coriolanus’s wounds and the anxiety that this creates on the eponymous hero, who attempts to avoid, by all means, losing his masculine autonomy and anatomy.

The play supports Coriolanus’s paranoia of emasculation as a valid fear. One of the Romans tells his fellow citizens: “If [Coriolanus] shows us his wounds and tells us his deeds, we are to put our tongues into those wounds and speak for them” (2.3.5-8). If Coriolanus shows his wounds, the citizens will become his dissectors, using their tongues as scalpels to reopen his scars or to further penetrate his tender wounds. This grotesque and violent metaphor supports the idea that to display his wounds is indeed an intimate and vulnerable action, because doing so would mean that the common people could speak for his wounds and give them their own

significance. As a result, his wounds would become their wounds. The common people would feel entitled to speak for his wounds in the same manner that Mark Antony from *Julius Caesar* takes Caesar's wounded corpse and labels his wounds "poor, poor, dumb mouths" (3.2.224-225), to which he "put[s] [his] tongue / In every wound" (3.2.228-229) in order to speak and interpret them. Coriolanus dreads becoming this transgressed and immobilized corpse. He fears that if he shows his wounds, which symbolically represent mouths, like those of Julius Caesar, his tongue will be plucked out like Lavinia's from *Titus Andronicus* and replaced by the "multitudinous tongue" (3.1.198) of the plebeians, who would feel intimate enough with him to interpret his wounds and give them their own meaning.

Coriolanus is by no means willing to "mingle[]" (3.1.95) with the common people, as this threatens to pollute his body's purity. He demonstrates anxiety towards exhibiting a grotesque body because, as an open wound, his body can be inhibited by others. Bodily pollution arises from the idea that "impurity is mixture and sex is seen as mingling" (Lennon 49). Menenius tells the tribunes that Coriolanus "loves the people, / But tie him not to be their bedfellow" (2.2.72-73). For Coriolanus, the plebeians are "rats" (1.1.283) with "stinking breaths" (2.1.262). In fact, to him, they are "measles" (3.1.103): infectious diseases that threaten his body's well-being. In order to avoid losing his body's sovereignty and purity, he adamantly keeps his wounds sealed off from their piercing gazes and dissecting tongues.

At this point, it would be useful to explain in further detail how Coriolanus's wounded body is, indeed, a site of anxiety that ultimately leads to his demise. Ewan Fernie writes that for Shakespeare shame is "a form of not being, of not being one's ideal self, or else an experience of hideous deformity, of being something horrifically other, somebody else" (78). Furthermore, he adds that shame in Shakespeare is strongly gendered; he defines "masculine shame" as a "loss of

power or authority, position or self-command” and “feminine shame” as “unchastity or a reputation for unchastity” (Ferne 83-84). In *Coriolanus*, however, Shakespeare complicates this gender dichotomy of shame by merging them together. Shame, for Coriolanus, is becoming unchaste by allowing the force of another to violate his body and, in the process, losing his body’s agency and integrity. For Coriolanus, his body is the vehicle that he must protect at all cost; otherwise, it threatens to shatter the classical ideals of masculinity that he cherishes and which ultimately he believes empower him as a man. Therefore, he wants to avoid becoming what Rome wants him to become: his wounds (2.1.127), because his wounds threaten to enervate his masculine sovereignty by revealing a vulnerable body in the shape of a mutilated, raped, and tongue-less Lavinia. Shakespeare illuminates that what is at stake in the body of those who possess wounds, whether they be male or female, is that they become powerless subjects of the state as potential objects of display for the Roman people, who seek to dissect and speak for them in order to create their own meanings out of their wounded body.

Coriolanus reveals his anxiety of losing the ability to produce language. Prohibited from using his sword in the city—the symbolic phallic-weapon that has multiple times won him the acknowledgment of his extraordinary manhood—he perceives that his power is being enervated. Unable to use his sword against the people to defend himself from their accusations, Coriolanus replaces it with his tongue. He uses his tongue as his sword to defend and protect himself from the accusations of the common people. Thus, he replaces his sword with words, using rhetoric as a means to maintain his belligerent masculine self. When the common people take back their votes and thus deny Coriolanus the consulship, he has one of his temper tantrums. One of the senators tries to calm him down, asking him to refrain from using such darting words against the people. Coriolanus, rather than cooling down, becomes more furious and says that “[his] lungs”

will “Coin words till they decay against those measles” (3.1.102-103). As such, he attempts to make himself into a word war making machine, whose mouth seems to dart metallic s/words to harm the plebeians. For Coriolanus, to reveal his wounds, beg the common people for their votes, and ask for their forgiveness is to allow his sharp tongue to become “[s]mall as an eunuch or the virgin voice” (3.2.141). He explicitly exposes his fear of losing his powerful voice, with which he incites men to “[t]urn terror into sport” (2.2.121) in the battlefield, by having to replace it with the domesticated, soft, and melodious voice of a castrated man or the virgin voice that “lulls” babies to sleep (3.2.142).

Although Valeria only has a small role in the play, she is essential in illuminating Coriolanus’s desire for an integral body. In the last act, when his family begs him not to burn Rome, Valeria, who is a friend of the family, is also present. Her presence is somewhat of an oddity because she is not a family member and has only a small role in the play. But, we cannot ignore her. Coriolanus idolizes her for being “chaste as the icicle / That’s curdied by the frost from purest snow / And hangs on Dian’s temple!” (5.3.75-77). Sara Read explains that a chaste woman was “one who had never known desire” (123). Valeria can be seen as this type of woman who never experiences sexual desire due to her body’s lack of heat, which is instead congealed in ice. Her relation to Diana, the Greek goddess of chastity and of the hunt, makes her appear less of an oddity once we understand that she is a symbol of chastity and thus of impenetrability. Coriolanus admires Valeria because she is like Diana; Valeria has kept her body sexually impenetrable and thus achieves a celestial state of purity—what he unsuccessfully attempts to achieve. Coriolanus wants to be like Diana who penetrates her victims with her bow while also remaining impenetrable to others. Cominius in a rather comical and strange manner, when he sees Coriolanus covered in blood, refers to him as the “[f]lower of warriors!” (1.6.43). Read

explains that hymenal bleeding was often referred to as the “flower of virginity” (123).

Coriolanus’s bleeding wounds can be seen as his deflowering, which eliminates him from being perceived as occupying a chaste and impenetrable body.

Coriolanus suggests that the only honorable act of imitation is one that aspires to imitate the perfect and unchanging gods, for they ““remain[] absolutely and for ever in [their] own form”” (qtd. in Barish 18). This is, of course, a dangerous imitation that Shakespeare denounces with his ambitious hero who attempts to “imitate the graces of the gods” (5.3.172). Coriolanus’s desire for a god-like autarkic selfhood is what leads him to his demise. One may recall John Donne’s poem “No Man is an Island”, where he expresses the interconnectivity of the individual to the world and to other fellow human beings: “No man is an island / Entire of itself, / Every man is a piece of the continent, / A part of the main” (lines 1-4). In *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare condemns the fruitless desire for a god-like self-sufficiency as an impossible and dangerous ideal. However, he also reveals to us that the grotesque body—which exemplifies human interconnectivity with the macrocosm and microcosm—carries not only life, but perpetual violence and death which begins at the moment of creation.

### **Martial Fame**

Let us therefore begin at the starting point, when Caius Martius creates himself into Coriolanus in the battle of Corioles. In this scene, the imagery of birth is shown to be extremely violent. The gates, as Sean Benson claims, function as “both a metonym for the city and metaphor of the female genitalia” (Benson). Thus, as Coriolanus ventures into the gates of Corioles, he is metaphorically penetrating, with his phallic-sword, this female city in order to

create himself. He emerges from those same gates that he transgresses “mantled” (1.6.38) in blood, as a self-made man. However, this bizarre creation of himself as Coriolanus and his martial fame end up being problematic to his heroic masculinity from the beginning of the play. Unlike Plutarch’s Coriolanus who enters the gates of Corioles, the city of the enemy, with a couple of other soldiers, Shakespeare emphasizes his warrior’s daring and heroic courage as he ventures “alone, / [t]o answer all the city” (1.5.67-68). It is such a magnificent act of courage that when Cominius begins to praise him for his valor, he expresses to the patricians that his words will lack the strength to reveal Coriolanus’s marvelous martial deeds (2.2.98-99). Cominius points out that in Corioles, Coriolanus superseded all others by his “rare example” (2.2.120) of valor. By this he means that Coriolanus performed the ultimate heroic act of personal virtue: self-sacrifice.

In Rome, such an act of self-sacrifice, in which the soldier seeks a heroic death in order to ensure victory was called a *devotio* (devotion). McDonnell explains that in Rome such an act of devotion was, in fact, “very rare”, pointing out that it seems to have occurred only twice. He narrates:

In a crisis, when a Roman defeat seemed imminent, a general could ensure victory with a *devotio* whereby he vowed to sacrifice himself and the enemy army to the gods of the underworld in exchange for a Roman victory. With a pontiff assisting, the general performed the ritual, then, with the army looking on, mounted his horse and charged into the enemy ranks, buying victory with his death... More importantly, the general who had performed the *devotio* had to die. If by some chance a general who had devoted himself survived the battle, he was deemed impious, and was unable ever again to perform a religious sacrifice and thereby debarred from holding future public office. So any

political benefit the heroic *devotio* conferred was nullified. Dead heroes pose no threat.  
(McDonnell 200)

After the Romans are “beat back to their trenches” (41) by their enemies, the Volsces, Coriolanus rebukes the Romans when he realizes that they cowardly ran away from the enemy and consequently are “All hurt behind. Backs red, and faces pale / With flight and agued fear!” (1.4.49-50). Coriolanus, sensing a defeat, invokes the god of the underworld, shouting: “Pluto and hell!” (1.4.48) before he charges alone into the gates of the enemy, performing the rare act of *devotio*. But Coriolanus, by coming out of the gates alive, performs the self-sacrifice only halfway. His “flayed” (1.6.29) bloody body is not enough to fulfill the devotion, and thus his body becomes a major sociopolitical problem and anathema. His miraculous return, from what appear to have been the inescapable gates of death, becomes an anomaly that threatens the supremacy of the state. He acquires a supernatural aura which glorifies him as if he were indeed a resurrected god and as such, he cannot be ruled as a common man or soldier. He becomes a spectacle to see that disrupts society from their ordinary lives: even the priests are willing to appear in public and “win a vulgar station” to see him (2.1.235).

Thus, by disrupting the natural order of things, Coriolanus becomes a “disease that must be cut away” (3.1.378). The threat of the heroic soldier gaining great glory in combat by himself is that if he becomes too powerful, he is less likely to want to be ruled and thus might threaten the Republic and its liberties by attempting to seize regal power, as was the case with some reputable military heroes in Rome (McDonnell 200-205). In *Coriolanus*, we can sense this fear, specifically from the tribunes and the common people, of allowing such an outstanding and powerful soldier to take an influential political position after his glorious battle. The tribunes, fearing the loss of their own powerful positions, plot to bar Coriolanus from becoming consul by

inciting the people against him in order to banish him from Rome. Coriolanus's valiant deed is not, however, what leads him to his tragic end. It is important to recall that if he had participated in the Roman custom, he would have been honored for his achievements, thus saving himself from being banished and killed. His inability to share his wounds with his society, his inability to bear his deeds with humility, and his hubristic belief that he is, in fact, capable of relying solely on himself to sustain himself leads him towards his tragic demise. Nevertheless, Shakespeare makes Coriolanus's exceptional valiant deed, which wins him honor, the event that also frames his downfall. Even though Coriolanus is a victim of hubris, Shakespeare indicates that there are other forces at play that direct him to his tragic end.

Once "the whatsoever god"—which Brutus seems to insinuate is full of satanic pride that swirls "into [Coriolanus's] human powers / And g[ives] him graceful posture"—erects Coriolanus as a demigod (2.1.239-41), he is placed between the ideal cosmic world of the gods and the ordinary world of man, unable to fully fit in either realm. We can see this, specifically when Menenius, a father figure to Coriolanus, rejoices over Coriolanus's twenty-seven wounds, saying, that "Every gash was an enemy's grave" (2.1.160-61). In this powerful image lies Coriolanus's supernatural body that automatically inflicts death to those who wound him, but his supernatural body does not exempt him from being wounded. Menenius, therefore, simultaneously exposes Coriolanus's god-like body and frail flesh. Coriolanus is "[d]eath's stamp" (2.2.123), but as the walking embodiment of death who carries death to others, he also proves to carry this vulnerability within him. Menenius further associates Coriolanus's wounded body to a graveyard: "Upon the wounds his body bears, which show / Like graves i' th' holy churchyard" (3.3.65-66). Coriolanus cannot remain an integral body in his encapsulated bodily grave because, even in his confinement, there exist vulnerable open spaces where death crawls



and embraces him for what he is—a naturally grotesque body. He is bound to a powerful body that can carry death to others, but he is also bound to one that is vulnerable to the same mortal “infirmity” (3.1.108). Nonetheless, his desire to be impenetrable discloses his natural human condition that longs for a state of wholeness while inhabiting a hollow bodily confinement. This cognitive dissonance of Coriolanus’s ideal masculinity that seeks an impenetrable, godlike body alongside his reality as a wounded, mortal man is, as the play indicates, infused in his body through his mother’s breast.

### **The Breast of Rome**

In early modern England, there is a double bind about the function that the mother’s milk played in the formation of her son’s masculine character. In the Renaissance, mother’s milk became a center of discourse on masculine anxiety—an anxiety that Shakespeare brings to the spotlight in his plays. In *The Winter’s Tale*, Leontes is glad that his wife did not nurse their child because he believes she would have corrupted him (2.1.56), while in *King Lear*, Goneril effeminizes her husband by calling him a “[m]ilk-liver’d man!” (4.3.50) for not wanting to go to war. However, alongside the misogynistic notions of a mother’s milk feminizing and corrupting the male body, during Shakespeare’s time there was also the contradictory idea that mother’s milk transferred important mental and physical characteristics to the child (Fildes 73). As Valerie Fildes narrates, in 1579, the physician John Jones, wrote that the child “should sucke the breast rather than by anye means be brought up, unless ye meane for some singular cause to diminish the naturall growth, wisdom, and strength” (qtd. in Fildes 73). Renaissance humanists embraced the Roman belief that the child “sucks in virtues with his mother’s milk” (King 52). By using the specific term “virtues” that denotes, from an etymological and cultural perspective, masculine

valor in Rome and in the Renaissance, we can see the culturally pervasive paradox in both cultures about the function of a mother's breast milk in the formation of her son's masculinity. In *Coriolanus*, Volumnia claims that she nursed her son's masculinity by transferring to him through her breast milk the most important Roman virtue: valor (3.2.157). Shakespeare plays with the paradoxical and controversial notion of the influence that a mother's milk has on the man-child in order to emphasize their mutual interaction.

It is now pertinent to give a brief explanation of humoral theory. Humoral theory was fundamental to the way that early modern women and men perceived and understood their bodies. The classical theory of the four humors—blood, phlegm, choler or yellow bile, and black bile—was the dominant medical practice for understanding the body. Humoralism was influenced by Galenic physiology, which proposed that bodily fluids were all “reducible to blood” and “were entirely fungible” (Paster 9). The blood's protean nature was seen as capable of transforming itself into other substances such as milk, semen, sweat, and tears (Paster 9). In addition, the body's heat was held to be the primary factor that differentiated the way that women's and men's bodies functioned. It was believed that men were “hotter and drier” than women, and that heat was what “pushed the male sexual organs outside of the body, whereas women's lack of heat led to theirs remaining inside” (Wiesner 55). Furthermore, the “incorrect amount of heat” was what created “gender confusions” (Wiesner 55). Men who were thought to lactate were believed to be capable of doing so because they lacked normal masculine heat and as a result were seen as effeminate (Wiesner 55). Humoralism, therefore, played a key role in establishing gender differences and anxieties.

In a Bakhtinian sense, Volumnia's grotesque lactating breast is what breeds Coriolanus's classical martial masculinity. She compares her relationship with her son to that between the

classical figures of Hecuba and Hector. For Volumnia, to be a man is to bleed in battle. Thus, she rebukes her daughter-in-law, Virgilia, for praying that her son would not be wounded in war, in her often-quoted defense of the honorable beauty of a man's bleeding body:

Away, you fool! It more becomes a man  
 Than gilt his trophy. The breasts of Hecuba  
 When she did suckle Hector, look'd not lovelier  
 Than Hector's forehead when it spit forth blood  
 At Grecian sword, contemning. (1.3.42-46)

In order to emphasize that bleeding is an act worthy of a man, she compares it with the affectionate act of a mother breastfeeding her child. By juxtaposing these two images, which at first glance seem completely different from one another, Volumnia attempts to equalize in beauty and affection the nourishing breast of the mother with the bleeding forehead of the warrior-son, to suggest that mothering and war-making are one and the same. She implicates that a mother's breast functions like her son's sword, and that the blood that the son "spit[s] forth" in battle is the mother's blood-milk. A woman's breast milk was considered to be of the same substance as her blood. The mother's menstrual blood was thought to nourish the fetus, and during lactation her blood was believed to turn into milk (Wiesner 55). With these physiological notions in mind, it is much easier to understand Coriolanus's comment that his mother has the right to "extol" his blood because, after all, it is "her blood" (1.9.17). Her blood-milk is, therefore, to be understood as the liquid force that allows Coriolanus to be a great warrior. His mother's blood-milk is what binds Coriolanus to her, even after birth.

In addition, the play seems to pose the idea that it is as natural for the mouth of the child as it is for the breast of the mother to be in a constant dual war of affection/rejection and life/death, as both seek to have the upper hand in the relationship. The mouth of the vulnerable child is not only shown to be a passive orifice that is penetrated by his mother's breast-like sword that feeds him "white blood" (Trubowitz 91). The child's mouth is also illustrated as a sharp weapon that threatens to tear off his mother's teat. As Adelman suggests, "feeding, incorporating, is transformed into spitting out, an aggressive expelling" (110) of the mother's blood-milk. Consequently, the child's mouth functions like a destructive weapon, such as the mouth of Volumnia's young grandson who, in anger, "set his teeth" (1.3.67) and "*mammocked*" a butterfly (1.3.68, my italics). The word "mammock" means "to break, cut, or tear into fragments or shreds" (*OED*). Equally important, however, from an etymological and phonetic perspective the root "mam" is characteristic of "early infantile vocalization and regarded by some as a development sound sometimes made by a baby when breastfeeding" (*OED*). In addition, "mam" was used in the early seventeenth century to refer to a woman's breast (*OED*). I would like to suggest, therefore, that Shakespeare uses the word "mammock" to associate how the mouth of the suckling child is also a dangerous weapon that the child can use to attack his mother's breast.

When Volumnia claims that she transferred valor to her son through her breast milk, there resonates the presumption that Coriolanus's masculinity is dependent on her body. Kahn points out that "Volumnia claims to possess the phallus, the prime signifier of masculinity in Rome, but identifies it with a signifier of femininity: mother's milk" (149). In Volumnia's rather disturbing image, she replaces the phallic symbol that ejaculates semen with her feminine breast that smears milk. In so doing, her breast becomes the phallic symbol that transfers masculinity to

her ungendered child, whose mouth functions as a woman's vagina. As such, Volumnia turns the tender act of breastfeeding into a bizarre image of oral sex, where the mother is also the father transferring her semen to imbue her child with masculinity. Volumnia transforms her breast into a heterogeneous sex symbol, simultaneously working together in the procreative cycle. In fact, in the early modern period, milk and semen were not gender-specific fluids. As previously stated, effeminate men were thought to be capable of lactating. On the other hand, "virile" women were thought to have more heat in their bodies than normal and, as a result of this, capable of producing semen (Wiesner 55). Volumnia is this "virile" woman, whose exceptional nature makes her capable of producing with her breast both semen and milk to inseminate her son and nourish his masculinity. Thus, with these fungible and ungendered liquids, it becomes much easier to understand the strange image in which Volumnia entertains the idea that her son is the production of an immaculate conception, where a biological father has no participation. My suggestion is that the play insinuates that she implicitly impregnates herself with an injection of her blood-milk that also turns to semen.

Consider Volumnia's famous line: "Anger's my meat. I sup upon myself" (4.2.68), which indicates her cannibalistic self-sufficiency, a self-sufficiency that allows her to feed upon her own blood-milk-semen to impregnate herself. In a brief yet startling remark, when Volumnia sees that her son is not relenting from his plan of burning Rome, she dissociates herself, his wife and, more importantly, his son, saying that "his child / Like him by chance" (5.3.201-202). Thus, she negates that he had any part in the creation of his son, making it seem as if his son, like him, were also the conception of a miraculous birth: son of his mother only. One of the tribunes taunts Volumnia's virile nature, asking her, "Are you mankind?" (4.2.24). The play concedes with this idea, when she returns to Rome with victory over her son and is, indeed, acclaimed "the life of

Rome” (5.5.1). There is never mention of Coriolanus’s biological father, but there are several references that align him to be perhaps the son of the mythological god of war, Mars. His name “Martius” even phonetically implicates his filial connection to Mars. Menenius, a long-time friend of Coriolanus’s family, attempts to play a father figure for Coriolanus. He claims that Coriolanus called him “father” (5.1.3). However, Coriolanus disowns any filial relationship to him when he begs him not to burn Rome. After dismissing him, Coriolanus claims that Menenius loved him more than a father, stating, that he “godded [him] indeed” (5.3.13). Coriolanus rejects any substitute man-father in his failed attempt to imitate his mother’s self-sufficiency, as creator of himself. Inseminated solely in Volumnia’s androgynous body, Coriolanus is enmeshed in an Oedipal dilemma, seeking to replace his non-existing biological father in order to become “author of himself” (5.3.40). He loves his mother’s breast and despises it as well because it is the site where his sexual and ambitious desire to become his own creator as a god-like warrior is first aroused.

Volumnia’s breast milk is the mortal substance she transfers to her son and the liquid life force that she also embeds with notions of immortality. Hence, she places in Coriolanus’s bloodstream a double helix that binds him to the universal, grotesque body while alluring him with the notion that he can unwind himself from this essential human bond, to stand by himself as an unnatural mutilation. She incites him to pursue courageous acts in order to supersede the common lot and achieve a heroic existence. Shakespeare, nonetheless, implies that her blood-milk is also the “cautelous baits and practice” (4.1.39) that ultimately ensnares Coriolanus to his mother and to his own grotesque body, a body which Shakespeare demonstrates is intrinsically entwined. When Volumnia tells her son, “Thy valiantness was mine, thou suck’dst it from me” (3.2.157), she insists that her milk is what nourished and created his heroic masculinity. If so, it

is what ambitiously tempts him to achieve supernatural martial greatness, since it is his valor that makes him a heroic warrior. As Robert N. Watson puts forward, “Such immortalizing food, however, is always a forbidden fruit” (*Shakespeare and the Hazards* 153). The pureness of the mother’s milk is stained with her blood. Thus, her milk was seen as being capable of turning to “gall,” as Lady Macbeth wishes hers will (4.1.48). Although a mother’s blood-milk was considered the life-substance that nourished the child in the womb and then turned to milk during lactation to continue to feed him in infancy, it was also seen with misogynistic eyes. Cicero had long before pointed out that the breast was the site where the child “suck[s] in error with [his] nurse’s milk” (Cicero). Biblical Eve was held accountable for the fall of mankind and, as a form of punishment for her transgression, it was presupposed that the embryo fed upon his mother’s menstrual blood” (Read 20). This liquid life force was, therefore, also seen as the rotten food source that corrupted the pure child with sin and thus with mortal life.

The blood-milk plays a vital role in establishing in Coriolanus a sense of morality, which the play suggests is what ends up making him mortal. As a result of this linkage of morality to mortality, Volumnia’s blood-milk creates an ambivalent feeling about the function that her breast milk plays in establishing Coriolanus’s identity. With her life-poison, Volumnia ensnares her son, bringing him to his tragic death. Equally important, however, this life-poison also ends up being the antidote that allows him to forgive Rome. It may be argued that Macbeth becomes a monster that ravages Scotland because Lady Macbeth denies him the moral substance that she perceives will problematize his ambition: the “milk of human kindness” (4.1.16-19). In *Coriolanus*, on the other hand, his mother’s milk becomes the remembrance of the bond of kinship—the breast that fed him—that saves him morally from otherwise becoming a monster if he had gone through with razing Rome and burning his family. As the following paragraphs will

illuminate, Shakespeare makes Volumnia's milk Coriolanus' essential moral life source and mortal fruit.

Volumnia's blood-milk transfers to Coriolanus familial attachment and civic duties. However, the play complicates the idea that Volumnia's milk serves as the catalyst that grants Coriolanus life and morality because, paradoxically, it is also what seduces him to achieve an amoral god-like identity that kills him. His mother's milk becomes the life-poison that creates the tragic irony of the play. Coriolanus finds himself unable to accomplish a heroic masculinity because he cannot in the end commit the same act of violence that he performed when he "Dr[ew] tuns of blood out of [] [Volscian] breast" (4.5.109) against Rome, his motherland. In Shakespeare's Roman plays, the city is traditionally associated with the feminine. In *Coriolanus*, Volumnia is the maternal embodiment of Rome. As a result of this intermeshing of mother and country, Coriolanus cannot, in the final act, perform the "unnatural scene" (5.3.97) of shedding the blood-milk from the breast of Rome because to do so would be to commit the most inhuman and ungrateful act: puncture his mother's breast that fed him. In 5.3, Shakespeare might be alluding to the Greek myth of Menelaus's and Helen's encounter during the destruction of Troy, a story which is found in a fragment of the lost epic cycle poem called "The Little Iliad." When Menelaus sees Helen, he is ready to kill her, but once he sees her breast he drops his sword: "Menelaus at least, when he caught a glimpse somehow of the breast of Helen unclad, cast away his sword" ("The Little" 519). The remembrance of Volumnia's breast seems to have the same effect on Coriolanus, who is unable to use his sword to destroy his motherland.

Furthermore, Volumnia metaphorically links her womb to Rome. Her Roman womb, like her breast, is also the site where Coriolanus's body was "framed" (5.3.26) and nourished. Volumnia analogizes that to attack Rome would be to attack her womb (5.3.142); thus, she



implies to him that to do so would not only be a horrific act, but one full of incest. In 5.3, the gates of Rome represent his mother's vagina. Coriolanus cannot venture with his phallic-sword to penetrate the gates of Rome as a means to rename himself and come out as the child-born-man of his own penetration and birth. Shakespeare puts him in a bizarre and extreme case of childbirth, where the decision is often a choice out of two: either the life of the child or that of the mother. He must choose between either giving birth to his own ideal as autochthonic hero by killing his mother, or giving life to his mother by sacrificing himself. Coriolanus is placed in an "evident calamity" (5.3.130): either choice will prove devastating to him.

The play indicates that Coriolanus's mercy is due to his mother's milk. Aufidius associates Coriolanus's tears with his mother's breast milk, making Coriolanus's tears appear to be milk tears. He, sneeringly, says that Coriolanus at his "nurse's tears / ... whined and roared away" the Volscies' victory (5.6.115-116). Shakespeare seems to give Volumnia Hecuba's role as the emotional and powerful rhetorician that is able to move her god-like son to shed milky tears. One of the Players in *Hamlet* narrates of Hecuba as being capable of "milch[ing] the burning eyes of heaven, / And passion in the gods" (2.2.517-518). Notice, however, that, unlike Hecuba, Volumnia does not move the heavens nor the gods to drop milky tears. Instead, Coriolanus points out that "the heavens do ope, / The gods look down, and this unnatural scene / They laugh at" (5.3.206-208). The only clamor that the gods give here is one of contemptuous laughter. The gods in *Coriolanus* are not benevolent; they are cruel gods who entertain themselves with the misery of humanity. Titus, in *Titus Andronicus*, tells his young grandson, "thou art made of tears, / And tears will quickly *melt* thy life away" (3.2.50-51, my italics). Titus's comment can also be applied to Coriolanus, who also proclaims that he "melt[s]" (5.3.31) with the sight of his family, coming to beg him for mercy and stirring him to shed what appears to be burning tears.

Shakespeare counterclaims Menenius's assertion that "[t]here is no more mercy in [Coriolanus] than there is milk in a male tiger" (5.4.28-29). Coriolanus by roaring away a Volscian victory proves to be the "male tiger" that carries his mother's milk—the milk of human kindness—in his own breast.

Coriolanus becomes, as the play implies, the effeminate lactating man. This conversion brings him tremendous amounts of anxiety. Therefore, he attempts to make his tears the result of a great toil in order to masculinize his grotesque body, as he remarks, "it is no little thing to make / Mine eyes *sweat* compassion" (5.3.219-220, my italics). He tries to masculinize his tears by attributing them to be the result of physical rather than emotional exertion. In 5.6, although he is willing to sacrifice himself for his family, he still finds himself unable to let go of his impossible desire for a self-sufficient, heroic identity. The tragic irony of the play is due to the fact that he can neither relinquish his desire for a heroic masculinity nor separate himself from the grotesque body that links him to his motherland.

Aside from the masculine anxieties that the breast spurt forth with its feminine associations, the nursing breast in the Renaissance became a powerful political metaphor. For example, King James presented himself as an androgynous figure, as mother and father to his subjects. James embraced the queer idea of being like a lactating mother to indicate his generosity to England. He declared himself to be "a loving nourishing-father," who fed his subjects with "nourishing milk" (Orgel). Similarly, mothers who nursed their children were associated with the self-sacrificing image of Christ. The pelican which was seen as a symbol of Christ and the common lore that taught that the pelican mother fed her young with the blood she pecked from her breast, indicates, as Victoria Sparey suggests, the "intersection between the sacred and the maternal" (Sparey). Furthermore, the sacred and the maternal/paternal depend on

self-sacrifice as the mediating event that proves that familial love is kin to Christ's self-sacrifice for humanity. This hints to the idea that, although emulating the classical gods was seen as dangerous for the welfare of the state, emulating Christ as the loving parent who sacrifices himself or herself for his or her children was the only God that humans should attempt to imitate. The metaphor of the self-sacrificing lactating mother or father, therefore, became an extremely poignant way to merge the private sphere of the family with the public sphere of politics.

Coriolanus is portrayed as the breast of Rome. The eponymous masculine hero—after fighting two consecutive battles non-stop—is honored by his fellow soldier for never taking a moment “to ease his panting *breast*” (2.2.138, my italics). Cominius makes Coriolanus appear as a sacrificing heroic father. The play uses the word “breast” interchangeably, as possessed by both women and men. In fact, women's breasts were often called “paps”, but this phrase was also used to refer to men's breasts. For example, in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, Bottom who plays Pyramus, thrusts his sword into his “left pap” (4.1.297). Or, as Quince earlier relates in his prologue, Pyramus “bravely broach'd his *boiling bloody breast*” (4.1.147, italics mine). Notice, however, how the blood in Pyramus is said to be “boiling.” This reiterates the humoral conception that men, although they were believed to have breasts (Trubowitz 90), were differentiated from their female counterparts by their body's higher thermal heat.

There is also evidence that Shakespeare was interested in blurring the differences between the nursing breast and the bleeding breast in *Coriolanus*, as is made evident in Volumnia's earlier speech that intermeshes the mother's lactating breast with the warrior-son's bleeding body. Allison P. Coudert points out that “in the Renaissance nature appears in a new guise as a lactating or many breasted woman” (840). This so-called “many breasted” mother-nature is shown to be in constant danger of her children's attack. For example, in *A Midsummer's*

*Night Dream* the “western flower” is described as being “milky-white” (2.1.166-167). In other words, here we see an image of nature embodied as a mother’s breast. Cupid’s love arrow, Oberon narrates, happens to accidentally wound and stain this love-in-idleness flower (2.1.157-168). Within this same play, we have another image of how love stains nature’s milky whiteness in the play-within-the-play of *Pyramus and Thisbe*. In Ovid’s account of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, the lovers’ blood forever stains the once white mulberry in the tragic culmination of their love story (Godwin 214). Shakespeare seems to parallel Ovid’s nature image of the white mulberry to the “milk-white” love-in-idleness flower that also turns “purple with love’s wound” (2.1.167).

Although there is a lack of nature imagery in *Coriolanus*, the few references of nature are attached to Coriolanus. Shakespeare, therefore, indicates that Coriolanus is the embodiment of nature in the play. As is to be expected of Shakespeare, however, he complicates the pastoral image of nature as a nurturing breastfeeding mother and replaces it with the image of Coriolanus as the breast that feeds and protects his country with his blood-milk. Shakespeare makes Coriolanus the “[f]lower of warriors” (1.6.43) drenched in blood, as the grotesque representation of the milk-white flower in *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* and the white mulberry in the love story of *Pyramus and Thisbe*. He is presented, by the play’s finale, “as the ripest mulberry / That will not hold the handling” (3.2.98-99). Shakespeare displays him as the always already stained and crushed flower and mulberry. This flower and mulberry image of vulnerability also recalls the earlier reference made about him as a carbuncle that is, by the play’s end, finally burst open and stained with love’s wounds.

## Coriolanus's Masculinity Located in Classical Sites

Coriolanus's manhood resides in sites of the classical body that were considered essential to a man's vigor. The play suggests that Coriolanus is part of the grotesque body as the "arm our soldier" (1.1.119). Volumnia remarks that "Death that dark spirit, / in's nervy arm doth lie" (2.1.165). In his article, Eugene McCartney explains that in antiquity the word *nervi* was popularly use to denote *sinews* and it was believed that in the *nervi* resided strength (McCartney). Volumnia, likewise, seems to take this meaning of the word "nervy" by attributing her son's vitality as residing in his sinewy arm. His powerful death sword becomes an extension of his arm. According to Volumnia's description, Coriolanus's deathly sword is not prosthetic but entwined in the sinews of his arm and thus innate to his body.

In addition, the knees prove to be a crucial site of a man's masculinity. Consider Cominius's narration about Coriolanus's fight against Tarquin, the tyrannical king of Rome. Coriolanus, at the young age of sixteen, fought "[b]eyond" what was expected of him (2.2.103-105). When he met Tarquin, he "struck him on his knee" (2.2.111), and with this action he "proved best man i' th' field" (2.2.113). The reason that this proves to be such an important victory can be explained by Pliny who writes that suppliants embrace the knees "perhaps because the knees are the seats of vitality. For exactly at the front of either knee, right as well as left, there is a kind of opening like that of a mouth. From this, if pierced, the vital spirit escapes as from the throat" (qtd. in McCartney). Pliny's observation that the knees resemble the opening of the mouth from which if pierced, a man's vitality escapes, illuminates several passages in *Coriolanus*, where the knees play an important role. By wounding Tarquin on the knee, Coriolanus takes away his masculinity. In another scene, Volumnia says that her son will "beat

Aufidius' head below his knee" (1.3.49). She positions her son as the superior man because of his strength to disgrace another man by lowering him below his knees, to a kneeling position.

For Coriolanus, to kneel is to become a common beggar. Hence, he considers kneeling to be emasculating and shameful. Although his mother attempts to persuade him to put on a performance by kneeling before the plebeians in order to appear humble, he refuses, due to his anxiety that this action would enervate his strength. He contemplates that "A beggar's tongue / [will] Make motion through [his] lips, and [his] armed knees, / Who bowed but in [his] stirrup, bend like his / That had received an alms" (3.2.144-47). Shakespeare puts side-by-side the image of Coriolanus's mouth being penetrated by the beggar's tongue with the image of his knees bending to receive an alms, thus highlighting his mouth and his knees mutual imagery of opening itself for penetration. For Coriolanus, the act of kneeling has a palatine reflex that opens the mouth. The knees which, according to Pliny, resemble the opening orifice of the mouth prove to be like Coriolanus's wounds, which he is afraid of exposing because he fears that he would be opening himself to the penetration of the common people's tongue. Coriolanus imagines that by kneeling and consequently opening his mouth to beg for the common people's votes that he would become their subject, since his tongue would be plucked away and replaced with the tongue of the plebeians' voices. In this way, Coriolanus fears that he could end up like a vanquish Tarquin, without his masculine sovereignty.

In the final act, it all comes literally to the knees. After his wife greets him with a kiss, Coriolanus says that he will leave his mother "unsaluted" (5.3.57). But, he performs this salutation metaphorically with his body by "sink[ing] [his] knee, i' th' earth" (5.3.57). Coriolanus demonstrates his "deep duty" and with "more impression show[s]" his greater love "[t]han that of common sons" (5.3.58-59). Notice how, here, he attempts to make the act of

kneeling into a heroic act. When his son kneels before him, he says, “That’s my brave boy” (5.3.87). Coriolanus attempts to convert his son’s and his own kneeling into a grandiose masculine move. He performs for his mother what he refused to do for the plebeians, when she prompted him to have his “knee bussing the stones” (3.2.94). The word “buss” means “a kiss, especially a loud or vigorous one” (*OED*). He symbolically kisses his mother by placing his knee on the earth. Livy makes the explicit connection that to kiss the earth is to kiss the common mother of mankind (82), a role that Volumnia gladly accepts and, in the end, is actually given. Notice how this kiss follows the kiss he gives his wife, a kiss which he describes as “Long as my exile, sweet as my revenge!” (5.3.52). Likewise, the metaphorical kiss he gives his mother is full of love and hate. He seeks to press his knee—his mouth—with greater force than that of ordinary sons, making this affectionate act one that carries with it the threat of sexual attack. Volumnia responds to his kneeling by telling him to rise and she kneels before him (5.3.60-64). She reverses the roles, transferring the authoritative power of the parent over to the child. By kneeling before him, his mother acknowledges how much Rome needs him. In this sense, Coriolanus gets what he wants throughout the play: to become an indispensable god to his motherland.

Nevertheless, to complete this deified position, Coriolanus must also become disposable. The tension that we experience in this final act is one between Christian and Classical views of piety, converging in the glory of self-sacrifice. Like the Christian God, and the exceptional, devoted Roman warrior, Coriolanus must sacrifice himself in order to be considered both sacred and safe. This proves to be his only means to regain an honorable Roman identity as “[t]he son, the husband, and the father” (5.3.120). He must win the greatest victory for Rome with his death, by completing the act of devotion that he left undone in Corioles. Thus, he returns to Corioles

and gives himself up in a heroic, yet terribly tragic way: “Cut me to pieces, Volsces. Men and lads, / Stain all your edges on me” (5.6.133-134). One may recall from these lines, John Donne’s first verses of one of his Holy Sonnets: “Spit in my face you Jewes, and pierce my side, / Buffet, and scoff, scourge, and crucify me” (lines 1-2). In both Shakespeare’s and Donne’s lines there resonates not the piety of the self-giving Christian God, but the hubristic challenge of the satanic hero. As Aufidius rightly seems to put it, within these lines and those that follow, there remains in Coriolanus the sneer of the “unholy braggart” (5.6.141). Yet, we must also attune to the fact that Aufidius, who is full of jealousy and treachery, is saying this to incite the Volsces to kill Coriolanus.

Although Coriolanus wants to be part of the Roman family unit, he cannot let go of his heroic identity as Coriolanus. Consequently, rather than going back to Rome, he returns to Corioles where he made himself. He wills to die a hero to save his family, but also hopes to keep his heroic identity as the great Coriolanus. When Aufidius calls him “Martius” (5.6.104), Coriolanus answers with contempt: “Martius?” (5.6.105), questioning his matronymic name as if that were not his name. Coriolanus knows that by calling him by his matronymic name, Aufidius is regressing him to a state of boyhood, as his mother’s son, and not as the “deed-achieving” (2.1.181) self-made man, Coriolanus. Aufidius strikes Coriolanus deeply when he calls him “a boy of tears” (5.6.120), to which Coriolanus quickly responds with fury:

“Boy”? False hound!

If you have writ your annals true, ’tis there

That like an *eagle* in a dovecote, I

Fluttered your Volscians in Corioles,



Alone I did it. “Boy”! (5.6.134-138, my italics)

Lisa S. Starks-Estes explains that the term “boy” in the early modern context suggests “not only a youth but also a womanly man or a sexually submissive sodomite—terms associated with femininity and vulnerability in both ancient Roman and early modern contexts, therefore highly charged insults to Coriolanus’s manhood” (98). Coriolanus becomes livid at Aufidius’s remark because not only is he calling him a youth, but a sensitive woman who at his “nurse’s tears” (5.6.115) gives in to his mother’s plea for mercy. This taunt also recalls the boy actor that he earlier refused to play, fearing that in the process of acting, he would be overwhelmed with “schoolboys’ tears” (3.2.143). Not willing to let go of his heroic masculinity, Coriolanus finds it essential to remind Aufidius of his glorious achievements. He acts like the cannibal who, before his imminent death, reminds his enemies who are about to eat him, that he is superior to them because he has eaten their ancestors (Sawday 24). Likewise, Coriolanus reminds Aufidius and the Volscians of his superiority by recalling that he “alone” killed a whole city full of Volscians. This assertion of his self-sufficiency and masculine superiority is his last heroic breath. The grotesque body of Coriolanus is shown to “swallow the world and is itself swallowed by the world” (Bakhtin 317). In this final scene, we, like Coriolanus, can imagine the gods laughing at his dismembered body, for his futile attempt to become one of them. The Volscians revenge their ancestors by cutting him to pieces, leaving him in Corioles, the place where he achieved his heroic masculine identity, as a nameless, kinless, and most importantly, genderless corpse.

With his “boy” taunt, Aufidius counterpoises Coriolanus’s desire to be the embodiment of the eagle, a key symbol of Roman triumphs, honoring heroic masculinity. As Erasmus sets forth in his essay “*Scarabeus aquilam quaerit*” (“The beetle searches for the eagle”), this proverb applies to a weaker man, the beetle, who defeats the stronger man, the eagle, by using “malicious

plots and secret wiles” (47). In the case of *Coriolanus*, the beetles would be the Roman tribunes, the common people and Aufidius, and the eagle would be Coriolanus: the beetles defeat the eagle. In the specific context of *Coriolanus* the “crows [] peck the eagle[]” (3.1.177). There remains a great paradox, as Erasmus points out, with the Romans who extol the eagle for exemplifying heroic masculinity while also emasculating it. The Romans, he writes, “far from showing gratitude—repay[] [the Eagle] with an intolerable insult. For they make it feminine! Not being so very masculine themselves, they unsex and castrate that bird, of all birds the most vigorous and the most male, and turn it into a sort of Tiresias” (Erasmus 49). Instead of being the eagle masculinized who flutters the Volscians, Coriolanus becomes an inhabitant of the dovecot. He becomes a symbol of the common crow, the eagle, and even the holy dove, whose heroic wings are tragically plucked. As a result of Rome’s banishment, his mother’s pleading, and Aufidius’s treachery, Coriolanus’s heroic masculinity is finally deflated.

### **Banishment**

Coriolanus undergoes a character transformation once he is banished from Rome. Due to his anxiety of displaying his wounds, he ends up being expelled from Rome. He is accused of being a traitor for not wanting to submit to the common people. However, before he is harassed out of the gates of Rome by the plebeians, Shakespeare presents him as a loving son, husband, and friend, who encourages those who love him not to despair because of his banishment (4.1.24-30). The last time he speaks to them, he is endearing, saying to them, “Come, my sweet wife, my dearest mother, and / My friends of noble touch. When I am forth, / Bid me farewell, and smile” (4.2.57-59). In 4.5, Coriolanus allies with his archenemy Aufidius to raze Rome and his family. We are left to wonder, like Sicinius, whether it is “possible that so short a time can

alter the condition of a man” (5.4.9-10) who loved his family and Rome so dearly. Shakespeare gives us no explicit information about what happens to him within the elapsed time of his exile. Nonetheless, the playwright implies that Coriolanus suffers during his “wild exposure” (4.1.43) as a vagabond, without shelter, food, family, or friends. When he enters Aufidius’ house, he says, “A goodly house. The feast smells well” (4.5.5). This is Coriolanus’s first acknowledgement of his desire for food and for the company of other fellow human beings. Coriolanus finds himself in an extreme situation, suffering from starvation. He is ready to destroy his country and like the common people “resolved rather to die than to famish” (1.1.4-5) at the hands of his enemy. His vulnerable condition as a banished man forces him in Antium to become all those personalities he feared becoming in Rome: beggar, traitor, and, worst of all, a boy.

Coriolanus not only has a change of heart, but a change of clothes as well. In Antium, he is forced by his vagabond condition to wear a humble custom by necessity. He disguises himself as a means of protection in the enemy’s country. The stage directions read: “Enter Coriolanus in mean apparel, disguised, and muffled” (193). He has no other recourse but to reveal the “painful service” (4.5.76) that his body bears for his “thankless country” (4.5.78) to win Aufidius’ sympathy and be able to take revenge against Rome. He performs the Roman custom/costume in Antium. Aufidius can either penetrate him to fulfill his homoerotic dream of “fisting” his throat (4.5.138), or use him as the “anvil of his sword” (4.5.122) to sharpen his own spear and destroy Rome. Aufidius chooses the latter, only to eventually fulfill the former. He refers to Coriolanus as the “moon” that he has “scarred ... with splinters” (4.5.121) in order to acknowledge Coriolanus’s chastity and superior martial prowess. He continues flattering Coriolanus’s ego by calling him “Mars” (4.5.131), a “noble thing” (4.5.129), and a “most absolute sir” (4.5.150). Aufidius, unlike Coriolanus, is a strategist who, with his “craft” (1.10.16) rather than with his

strength, is able to conspire to finally destroy Coriolanus. Early in the play, Coriolanus tells Cominius that he does not need the flattery bestowed upon him after his victory in Corioles. He indicts that flattery makes “steel grow[] soft as the parasite’s silk” (1.9.50-51). In this statement, Coriolanus articulates his belief that whoever is won over with flattery will “be made / [a]n *overture* for th’ wars!” (1.9.46, my italics).<sup>4</sup> An “overture” is “an aperture, a hole, an opening; an orifice” (*OED*). Coriolanus indicates that to be won over with flattery is to replace the impenetrable metallic armor of the soldier with a permeable garb. Nevertheless, in the end, Shakespeare signals that Coriolanus falls for Aufidius’s flattery, and thus exchanges his immortal armor for the silkworm’s delicate garb of silk. In the words of Aufidius, Coriolanus not only tears his oath to raze Rome as if it had been a “twist of rotten silk” (5.6.114), but he also becomes the fragile silk, which leads to his body’s permeability that is shred to pieces.

The only time that Coriolanus acknowledges the pain of his wounds is when he realizes “The cruelty and envy of the people, / Permitted by [the] dastard nobles, who / Have all forsook [him]” (4.5.83-85). In this sense, Shakespeare remains with Plutarch who acknowledges that Coriolanus’s desire for revenge is not simply a result of anger, but one accompanied with tremendous amounts of sorrow. Plutarch writes:

For when sorrow (as you would say) is set a fire, then it is converted into spite and malice, and driveth away for the time all faintnesse of heart and natural feare. And this is the cause why the cholericke man is so altered and mad in his actions, as a man set on fire

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4. This line is based on the *Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G.B. Evans et alia, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. I prefer the Riverside edition that uses the word *overture* rather than the Folger’s emendation of this word to *ovator*. Many editors have had difficulties with the interpretation of this word and line.

with a burning agew: for when a mans heart is troubled within, his pulse will beate  
marvellous strongly. (247)

Coriolanus's natural response, as a prideful and short-tempered man, is to consider Rome's banishment as an act of ingratitude. Aside from all the wounds he carries for the sake of Rome's protection, he is cruelly expelled from his country as the "enemy of the people" (1.1.8). Coriolanus, in his fury for being called a "traitor" (3.3.86) by the tribunes, asks for the most horrible type of death. However, what proves to be the most painful punishment is the expulsion from the country he so ardently fought for. In the late Roman republic, the exiled man was denied water and fire (Kingsley-Smith 153). Cleverly, Aufidius provides him with fire to incite his scalding fury against Rome. Thus, Coriolanus is given the opportunity to regain martial honor in Antium and establish for himself a new name as the destroyer of Rome, an act that the critic Jane Kingsley-Smith convincingly suggests would, as the custom usually goes, rename him after the city he conquers: "Romanus" (148).

In the end, however, Coriolanus's family provides him with the water of their tears that also inspire his own. Notice how fire, the symbol of a man's heat and dryness that differentiates him from a woman's colder and wetter humoral nature, is being appeased with water. His mother, alongside with his family, moves him to tears and quenches the conflagration with which he threatens to purge Rome. Volumnia satiates his "rages and revenges with / [Her] *colder* reason" (5.3.98-99, my emphasis). Ultimately, she asks her son to sacrifice himself for Rome in order to achieve both a heroic death and regain his Roman identity. By forgiving Rome, Coriolanus accepts to complete the act of devotion. It is an act of forgiveness that he knows will prove "most mortal to him" (5.3.212), but which he accepts with resignation. He says right after his attestation of his upcoming death: "But, let it come" (5.3.212). Coriolanus knows that by

forgiving Rome, he will become what he hates: a “promise-breaker” (1.8.2). Indeed, he betrays the “blood and labor” (5.6.55) of the Volsces to whom he promised a victory. He prefers to become a traitor to his adoptive parents, the Volsces, than to betray the blood of his kinship. Thus, through his last heroic deed, he confesses that his devotion primarily remains with his *matria*.

### **Conclusion**

Coriolanus’s wounds are in a constant paradoxical war as they both empower and disempower his heroic masculinity. However, in the end, his wounds finally destroy him, leaving him genderless. Marshall states that Coriolanus depends on his wounds “to validate his identity as warrior, but the wounds prove unstable and appropriable as signifiers. Rather than guaranteeing his identity, the wounds disenfranchise it” (103). If Coriolanus had not denied the people his wounds, Volumnia cruelly tells him, “You might have been enough the man you are” (3.2.23). To be a man in Rome is to have a powerful political position, an opportunity which Coriolanus mars due to his anxiety of losing his masculinity. Ironically, his mother argues that he would have become a man if he had exposed his wounds, but the concealment of his wounds destroys his opportunity to achieve a powerful masculinity. The fact that Coriolanus has to “put [his] power well on” (3.2.20) by performing the Roman custom, before he can gain political power to fulfill his masculinity, suggests to him that political masculine power is theatrical. As such, Coriolanus has no interest in being part of this cross-dressing theatrical politics that requires him to play a woman’s part in order to become a man. Coriolanus considers his masculine power to be innate to his being. Shakespeare, on the other hand, exposes that the only essential thing of Coriolanus’s body is its natural susceptibility to violence and death, which

ultimately ends up effacing his gender. By the play's finale, Coriolanus becomes a "noble corse" (5.6.172). His nobility remains, but death eradicates his ideal masculinity by converting him into an ungendered and powerless corpse. Ultimately, he becomes the open wound that he was so afraid of becoming.

Even though Coriolanus attempts to cover himself in his steel-skin armor, his family melt his Icarian wings and, in doing so, melt his immortal armor. This destruction reveals to him that he is "not / Of stronger earth than others" (5.3.31-32). Coriolanus cannot cauterize the umbilical cord that recalls and ties him back to his family in order to achieve an integral and independent masculinity. In his psychological turmoil to cut "out affection! / All bond and privilege of nature, break!" (5.3.26-27), he discovers that he cannot break apart from those he loves. In the beginning of the play, he attempts to save the life of a Volscian man who treated him kindly, but he forgets his name, most likely because to recall his name would mean to remember that he depended on this man. However, in the end, he is incapable of forgetting the most important name in his life: "mother" (5.3.205). His most vulnerable site is not one located in his body alone. Rather, it is shared with his mother's womb: the place where he was created. In the womb resides both the life and death of Coriolanus. It is as if the amniotic fluid that once protected him and gave him life in his mother's womb were now tearing him apart. Coriolanus is won over by his grotesque body that sheds a continuum of blood-milk-tears to save his family. *Coriolanus*, ultimately, is a tragedy of familial love. Love, the desire for wholeness that reinstitutes his Roman identity as son, father, and husband does not, however, lead him to wholeness. Instead, it leaves him more fractured than ever before. His limbs are scattered and buried in the earth of his adoptive motherland in Corioles. Coriolanus is torn to pieces in the name of familial love by the revengeful Volsces (5.6.144-46) and for the sake of his own kinship. Kinship proves to be the

death of Caius Martius (Watson “Coriolanus”). The mortal son, father, and husband dies, but the immortal hero lives because of his devotion to his family. Kinship, therefore, also proves to be the life of Coriolanus, the hero, who with his gruesome devotion reveals his nobility and his greatest vulnerability: love.



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## Image

Juan de Valverde de Hamusco, *Anatomia del corpo humano* (1560); rpt. in Valerie Traub,

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