

Vernon Dickson

Florida International University

Vernon.dickson@fiu.edu

Shakespeare's Defense in Coriolanus

In "Who does the wolf love?" Stanley Cavell suggests that Shakespeare may have written *Coriolanus*, in part, in competition with Sidney's *Defence of Poesy*, purposefully retelling the story of Menenius's use of the Fable of Belly in a way that destabilizes some of Sidney's claims about poetry (and drama). Cavell also suggests the idea of seeing *Coriolanus* as Shakespeare's own "defense of poetry (more particularly of plays)" and, more broadly, of writing. However, seeing *Coriolanus* as an attempt to argue for the role and value of language within a civil state offers distinct challenges. The role of orators as civilizers and language as the key civilizing element, nearly commonplace notions in the early modern period, are questioned sharply as socially-shaping language becomes deflated and blurred with flattery, sophism, and markers of class difference. Volumnia's instruction to Coriolanus to "perform a part" before the plebeians speaks to the central issues of drama within this work, but is also complicated by Coriolanus's repeated rejection of many aspects of language as he engages in asymmetric language use while seeking for honor in deeds rather than words, trying to separate himself from society even as he looks to others, like Aufidius, as models in defining himself. Discourse shapes the action of the play, even as Coriolanus attempts to reject the power and significance of words.

Michael D. Friedman
University of Scranton
Michael.friedman@scranton.edu

“Let me twine / Mine arms about that body”:
Homoeroticism and Homosexuality in Three Stage Productions of *Coriolanus*

I recently completed a study of Ralph Fiennes’ film version of *Coriolanus* (2011) that focused on the director’s representation of the title character’s relationship with his enemy Aufidius as a homoerotic, but not homosexual, bond. This project made me curious about how the same distinction might have been handled in modern stage versions of the play. One intriguing avenue for exploring this topic involves three British productions from the past half century that are connected by their casts, as well as by their treatments of homoeroticism and homosexuality. Tyrone Guthrie’s staging at the Nottingham Playhouse in 1963 has been generally acknowledged as the first major production to incorporate a homoerotic bond between Coriolanus, played by John Neville, and Aufidius, depicted by a young Ian McKellen in his breakthrough role. Two decades later, McKellen graduated to the title role in Peter Hall’s 1984 production at the National Theatre, which featured Greg Hicks as Aufidius. In 2002, Hicks then ascended to the part of the Roman general opposite Chuk Iwuji as his Volscian nemesis in David Farr’s RSC production. I plan to examine the depiction of homoeroticism and homosexuality in these stagings with special reference to their performance choices in several key moments in the play, including the hand-to-hand combat between the soldiers in 1.8, their embrace at their reunion in Antium in 4.5, and the assassination of Coriolanus in the final scene of the play.

David George
Urbana University
dgeorge@urbana.edu

Coriolanus: Hermeneutics, Ellipses, Obsolete Words, and Exegesis.

A hermeneutical edition of Shakespeare is defined, including (for *Coriolanus*) a definition of tragedy as understood in the early 1600s, and the play's original venue is suggested. The frequent use of ellipsis is weighed either as a literary device or a bad habit, and a selection of elliptical lines is provided to illustrate the obscurities that they cause. Obsolete words and semantically changed words are next exemplified and tentatively explained. Some of these obsolescences are the result of Shakespeare using a minor source very glancingly, as with Volumnia's "breasts of Hecuba" speech and Aufidius' "tomb so evident as a chair" line. The final section, on exegesis, summarizes one recent Italian critic's essay and two recent French critics' essays for their high degree of originality. These writers evidently did not receive the 1960s Brechtian adaptation of the play, a tradition that overwhelmed British *Coriolanus* productions and strongly influenced American criticisms for many decades. The essay ends with a brief passage reminding readers of *Coriolanus*'s occasional humor.

Lianne Habinek

Bard College

lhabinék@bard.edu

“Th’unaching scars which I should hide”: Bodily proof in Fiennes’ *Coriolanus*

Though, for complex reasons, Coriolanus balks at showing his scars to the public, these very scars are what the audience must first mark of Ralph Fiennes’ treatment of the character in his 2012 film: a tight close up shows us Coriolanus’ face and the damage wrought by earlier “hurts i’t’h’body.” How can we read Coriolanus’ body, on page and on screen, as both the agent and object of damage to himself and to the state? This essay seeks to examine the ways in which wounds and scars function in *Coriolanus*, both in play-text and in film, and how external and interior damage makes and unmakes the figure of the soldier. Of chief concern are the means by which bodily scars are meant to function as testament and testimony, but by which they actually fail to do – and how this failure enables the future revelation of interior (or *psychological* in the early sense of springing from the psyche) wounds and scars which then both drive the purported revenge plot and authorize Coriolanus’ eventual death.

Sean Lawrence

University of British Columbia, Okanagan

Sean.lawrence@ubc.ca

The Dragon and the Chiefest Virtue: Anti-Social and Pro-Social Identities in *Coriolanus*

Perhaps no Shakespearean title character defines himself by war as fully as does Coriolanus, who indeed wins his name in war. His belligerence, however, places him in a paradoxical position, both admired and despised by the city of his birth which, initially at least, he serves. He moves from being Rome's most honoured citizen to an exile and then its most feared enemy within a few scenes. My paper will show how Marcius's relationship with Rome illustrates a distinction between two definitions of society itself.

Martius is, of course, pro-social in the sense that he embraces and even embodies the values of his martial society. On the other hand, his martial prowess expresses itself in singularity and even solipsism. While Coriolanus shows himself pro-social by embracing and indeed incarnating Roman *Virtus*, he shows himself anti-social by rejecting the company of other men. In the first case, a society is defined by a collection of beliefs and practices; in the second, it is defined more basically by human community, by being-with-the-Other. The society which praises Coriolanus as the very incarnation of martial valour can nevertheless enjoy a limited domestic peace by fighting external foes, a process which the servants to Aufidius explain. What makes Coriolanus dangerous in his and every other society is that he views human relations as fundamentally relationships of war. Coriolanus may incarnate the views of his society, but he remains fundamentally antisocial because belligerent. Shakespeare's play therefore illuminates the distance between the conventions of a belligerent society and the peacefulness of sociality as such.

Rebecca Muich

University of North Carolina, Greensboro

rmmuich@uncg.edu

Epic Wives and Mothers: Reading the *Iliad* in *Coriolanus*

Following Chikako Kumamoto's argument that the characterization of Coriolanus and Volumnia in *Coriolanus* suggests Shakespeare's textual contamination of Chapman's *Iliad*, this paper explores further Shakespeare's engagement with that epic poem, particularly in the characterization of the hero's family and their role in the articulation of *Coriolanus*' heroic ethos. Shakespeare's sensitive reading is evident in Virgilia's and Volumnia's reactions to the hero's valor: the epic wife typically acts as a blocking character, but is expected to survive her husband and keep his personal fame (*kleos*) alive (cf. Andromache in *Il.6*, 22, 24); the mother is envisioned as taking pleasure in her son's military exploits and recalling his duty to the state (cf. *Il.6*; Hecuba in *Il.22*). Shakespeare addresses this traditional feminine dichotomy by mostly stifling the potentially critical voice (Virgilia) and amplifying the one that promotes a more military-friendly outlook (Volumnia). Shakespeare's close reading of the familial relationships in the *Iliad* is especially evident in 3.2 and 5.3 when the hero must be supplicated to bury his anger and place the welfare of this state above his own personal glory, directly mirroring, as Brower and Kumamoto have observed, the embassies to Achilles. Interestingly, Shakespeare converges the strategies of various male supplicants (Odysseus, Ajax, Phoenix in *Il.9*, Priam in *Il.24*) in the person of Volumnia. In epic poetry, women's supplication of heroes resembles lament in formula and gesture; male supplication follows its own pattern. By concentrating these traditional roles in one woman, Shakespeare not only shrinks the epic scope of the *Iliad* to suit the more intimate world of the tragedy, but also elevates character of Volumnia beyond the *Iliad*'s circumscription of feminine influence.

Curtis Perry

University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign

cperry@uiuc.edu

Senecan *Coriolanus* and the Uses of Rome

Coriolanus lacks the kind of direct quotation of Senecan *sententiae* that has often been a staple of source study, but I don't think it should be all that controversial to assert (as does Lee Bliss, in her New Cambridge Shakespeare edition of the play) that Senecan drama's distinctive modes of characterization lie "somewhere in the background" of Shakespeare's play (12-13). As Bliss suggests, Shakespeare's characterization of Coriolanus—especially where the play departs from Plutarch or Livy—seems an almost perfect instantiation of the Senecan tradition's emphasis upon radical autonomy and its limits. I will probably want to say a few more words than Bliss does about what it means to say that Senecan characterization lies behind *Coriolanus*—particularly with regard to the way Coriolanus's relationship to Volumnia is conceptualized in the play—but mostly what I'll want to explore here is the way that the imperial provenance of these traces of Senecan tragedy operate in a play about early republican Rome.

Part of what this entails is imagining that, instead of being an inert body of source material to be picked from or disdained, the Senecan dramatic tradition carries its own set of potentially live cultural meanings for Shakespeare and his audiences: Senecan drama in Elizabethan England is often associated with the specter of royal tyranny and with an unhappy Roman history of lost republican liberty, constitutional mutability, and decline. Here, I want to suggest that this larger perspective on Rome is evoked even within a play that is ostensibly about the early Republic, and also that this evocation is in keeping with a (loosely speaking) Machiavellian political perspective which sees the moment of the play as simultaneously the catalyst for Rome's greatness and the germ of its eventual fall into imperial tyranny.

Amy Sattler

Washington University in St. Louis

absattler@gmail.com

“The Play-House is the Nation’s Weather-Glass”: Popular Politics and the Restoration
Coriolanus

My paper places Nahum Tate’s 1681 adaptation of *Coriolanus*, *The Ingratitude of a Common-wealth* in conversation with Restoration theories of the effects of drama on spectators and examines the relationship between these theories and dramatic practices. Anxieties about the aesthetic force of plays, I claim, parallel anxieties about the political efficacy of spectacle. Within prologues and epilogues and the narratives themselves, Restoration dramatists play out the dangers inherent to a political culture invested in public display. Tate, I argue, selects *Coriolanus* for adaptation in the midst of the Exclusion Crisis because it is a play exceptionally occupied with the relationship between spectacle and political power. While he retains much of the play intact, he significantly alters the final scene by replacing the quick assassination of Coriolanus with a drawn out and horrific murder. Coriolanus suffers a stabbing, witnesses his wife kill herself to avoid being raped by his ally, Aufidius, and finally sees his mother, mad with grief, enter carrying his tortured, dying son. While Tate claims in his dedication that his rendition of *Coriolanus* serves as a warning against those “popular Misleaders” who would entice the crowd, his play indulges in the sorts of spectacle to entice the playgoers that Coriolanus rejects. For Tate, Coriolanus is a hero, and the crowds who banish him because he will not display his wounds are an ungrateful multitude. Yet, Tate offers the playgoers the spectacle of violence that Coriolanus so resolutely denies the crowds in the play. Even as he rails against popular movements and republican politics, Tate accedes to the political necessity of popular spectacle in his aesthetic choices. Spectator desire conditions aesthetic production just as popular desires shape the political landscape. Aesthetic practices of Restoration dramatists like Tate reveal a nascent sense of what we have come to call democratic politics.

John D. Staines

John Jay College, City University of New York

jdstaines@gmail.com

The Law of Treason and Fictions of Intention
in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and the Trial of the Earl of Essex

This paper looks at what audiences and critics often see as the enigma of Shakespeare's most inaccessible, least self-reflective tragic hero by examining the play as a meditation on the problem of intention. So much depends upon the secret intentions behind the character's motives, and yet that is what the play denies us access to. In this way, the play puts us in the position of a jury at a legal trial, who struggles to weigh the evidence of *mens rea*, the essential part of any guilty verdict yet the one that can only be known by inferences drawn from incomplete information. Treason in particular is a powerful case since it is technically a crime of pure intention, existing only in the thoughts revealed by the evidence of words and deeds. The paper will demonstrate the importance of the problem of intention to the play by drawing parallels to the case of the Earl of Essex. Critics have long seen the earl as one model for Coriolanus, and I will show how the legal and polemical debate over Essex's intentions echoes through the play as Coriolanus moves from honorable Roman soldier to traitor. Characters, and audience members, must create fictions of intention from the signs of his words and deeds.

Mary K. Steible

Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville

marysteible@me.com

Boying his Manhood in the Posture of a Soldier: Shakespeare's Caius Martius Coriolanus

Aufidius's mocking of Caius Martius Coriolanus—"Thou boy of tears"—launches Shakespeare's last and best tragic hero into a verbal "scold[ing]" of Aufidius, refuting that he is a "boy" by repeating the term "boy" three times, thereby refuting his own refutation. Because I see personal responsibility as the key trait that separates boys from men, girls from women, I tend to agree with Aufidius's use of the term boy to describe our young hero. Caius Martius cannot control his speech, volleying insults at Romans and Volscians alike. He is the schoolyard bully, the intemperate loud mouth who does not care how his tantrums or cursing leads others into harm, mortal or otherwise, including himself. Thus, in *Coriolanus*, a critical problem shown us by Shakespeare is that although Volumnia grooms her "boy" to be a war hero, she fails to groom him for manhood. An inherent contradiction in Volumnia's assertion that her boy had become "a man" in the "cruel war" to which she sent him is that there is no clear relationship between fighting in cruel wars and growing into a man, at least not in the sense of a human growing into an individual capable of responsible behavior. War, as I understand Giorgio Agamben, is a space that exists outside the law or *ius*, where the human body is no longer bounded—it can be killed or kill. A violent and angry disposition feeds Caius Martius's desire to war, not a desire for manhood, nor does violence a man make. Caius Martius's mother joys in counting the scars on her son's body, as evidence of his manhood, but Caius fails to show those off to the plebeians when he stands in the forum, complaining instead that their "brethren" "ran from the noise of [their] own drums." Martius's frequent remarking on the plebeians as cowards in contrast to his courage is significant: the plebeians, according to Caius, have not participated in the experience of the unbounded body and by default, are bounded. Yet what becomes of the unbounded body once it attempts to re-enter the established order?

James W. Stone

American University

jameswstone@aol.com

The Antithetical “Coriolanus”: The Naming and Abnihilization of Caius Martius Coriolanus

The wounds of Coriolanus are the ostentatious sign of what he fears to show and the self-licensing source of his claim to be beyond the fear of indebtedness to his mother and to the commons. Wounds signal both his masculinity and his self-authoring, on the one hand, and his vulnerability and potential feminization, as feminist critics from Janet Adelman onwards have argued, on the other hand. Caius Martius excels and re-authorizes himself under the surname Coriolanus, an honorific title that acknowledges and celebrates the warrior’s superhuman powers of conquest and lifts him out of the nexus of the family that gave him his birth name; and a title that, he claims, circumvents his indebtedness to the corporate body politic as well. The labor wounds of Volumnia in giving birth to her son and her labors in nurturing him are sublimated and effaced, Coriolanus fantasizes, in the wounds that he takes upon himself in battle and that win him a new name and status.

Coriolanus insists on the ideological claim of being a unique individual, one whose genesis and telos alike reside in himself alone. He cultivates a name and an agnomen for himself as a famous Roman warrior who imitates no model. Can the superhero escape the web of what René Girard calls mimetic desire, i.e. the imitation of the conduct of others as the model for one’s own actions? The enemies of Coriolanus, unlike him, imitate each other in delivering him the coup de grâce. Their mimeticism manifests a spiraling sacrificial crisis. Men bond together en masse, homosocially, anonymously, in order to do what no one man alone, under his proper name, is capable of doing. The anonymous mob that kills the father in the primal scene is Freud’s principal subject in *Totem and Taboo*, and fratricidal violence (the primal eldest curse), as it manifests itself in the climax of the emulous rivalry of the two warriors, imitates patricide in attempting to efface itself under cover of anonymity.

Coriolanus is doomed whether he turns towards the heterosexual nexus of the Roman women in his life or to the homoerotic bonds that Aufidius seems to offer him. Whether in Rome or Corioli, Coriolanus cannot stand alone as author of himself. His honorific title cannot save him, and it comes to mean the antithetical opposite of itself: the conqueror of Corioli, the defender of Corioli . . . and its sacrificial victim.

Steven Syrek

Rutgers University

Steven.syrek@gmail.com

“He did it to please his mother”: Self and Historical Abnegation in Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*

Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* suggests that in order for history to perform its work, heroic or exemplary individuals must be absorbed into a narrative that is greater than themselves, into the story of the people on whose behalf they act. Caius Martius, however, rejects the role that history would make for him. He wants neither his name nor his wounds to be common property, to be symbolically transferred from his body to the body of the state. Rejecting the metaphor of the body politic trumpeted by Menenius, he chooses to restrict the legibility of his person to the private domain dominated by his mother, thereby rejecting the public body of the historical person publicly dubbed “Coriolanus.” What Martius is stubborn to acknowledge is that the “deeds” for which he is celebrated have no meaning outside the Roman public that sanctions them, delineates their normative value, and rewards them with the name that fixes his achievement within time, place, and language. To give them a public significance, he fears, is also to make their significance contestable. Thinking them mute facts that speak to no one, Martius resists their reduction to language. Preferring to be the authored product of his mother’s private inscription rather than the ideological token of public memory, he is loathe to make any part of himself available to the public’s divergent opinions. The tragic irony of Martius’s situation is that the history he wants unwritten is itself the subject of a history play written long since his historical fate had been determined. The historical material he violently refuses to become thus violently makes material out of him. What Shakespeare ultimately depicts in *Coriolanus* is history’s subjection of private lives to public mediation and the impossibility of escaping either the multitude or their multitudes of historical interpretations.

Robert N. Watson

University of California, Los Angeles

rnwatson@ucla.edu

Coriolanus and Common Life

Caius Martius Coriolanus's disdain for the plebeians' animality and interchangeability (expressing their appetite for individual and collective survival) seems valid but proves fatal. The tragic dilemma is Hegelian. Its fulcrum is the transition from the classical values of its setting to the Christian values of its audience. The particular historical moment of the play's action, when Rome was moving from monarchy to republic, is homologous to the protagonist's struggle to maintain a self-dominion that subjugates his own potential commonness. That the play was written at a political moment when King James was testing the limits of his sovereignty over the House of Commons is probably no mere coincidence. Scholars link the play to the food shortages driving the 1607 Midlands uprisings, but Shakespeare may have associated Coriolanus's destructive self-enclosure, which excludes food and community as the loci of mingled life, more specifically with the agro-economic tragedy then called enclosure. This paper will offer a close if sporadic reading of this play's ambivalence about the Senecan insularity of its title character. Menenius's belly-fable implies, and the rest of the play uneasily explores, a continuity between communities of bread and communities of blood. The idea of shared bread remains remarkably persistent: "com-pan" words turn up nine times. If "trans-" is the Latin prefix that haunts the body-blending *Midsummer Night's Dream*, in *Coriolanus* it is surely "com-" or "con-" (abetted by "part," in tension with "sole," "lone," and – five times each – "whole" and "wholesome"). The protagonist refuses to be implicated in "the appetite and affection common / Of the whole body," and the word "common" appears more often here than in any of Shakespeare's other works. It is the unnamed antagonist of the plot, and a cause of all the debates.