

INTERPRETATION

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CORIOLANUS AND ARISTOTLE'S MAGNANIMOUS MAN
RECONSIDERED

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Caius Marcius Coriolanus has proved the most belittled of Shakespeare's tragic creations. Shaw's and Bradley's disparaging appraisals of his intellect have seldom been seriously challenged, and for most readers his harshness, arrogance, and overbearing contentiousness discourage sympathy.¹ Yet, if one seeks to understand the play that he so effectively dominates, one must try to see what may have been Shakespeare's purpose in constructing a tragedy around this truculent, austere, and half-repellent Roman warrior. For Marcius does stand forth from the rather colorless context of his society as the one personage in Shakespeare's version of republican Rome who possesses sufficient stature to enlist the wonder, and even in some degree the reverence, that one accords to a tragic protagonist. The nobility Coriolanus possesses may be of a narrower sort than that displayed by superabundantly reflective minds such as Hamlet, Macbeth, and Lear; but his courage, energy, and, above all, his high-minded devotion to honor establish his pre-eminence over his fellow citizens. His aspirations are more high-pitched than those of his associates and his spirit more capacious. Moreover, his uncompromising pride and godlike presence point to a certain kinship with the classical ideal of the superlatively honorable man developed by Aristotle in Book IV of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Coriolanus' affinities with this ideal are so strongly marked that the play appears designed to solicit a thoughtful comparison of its protagonist with the Aristotelian standard. I suggest that such a scrutiny provides an approach to the most important issue in the drama—indeed, that when once we have grasped Coriolanus' relation to Aristotle's description of great-souledness we are in a position to account for the grandeur of his character as well as for his equally remarkable limitations.

The relevance of Aristotle has not gone unnoticed in recent criticism of the play. Rodney Poisson and R. W. Battenhouse have each considered the problem of Coriolanus' resemblance to the great-souled man of the *Ethics*. However, although their treatments of this

question are helpfully provocative, their conclusions, I think, are incorrect. Poisson maintains that Shakespeare portrays in his protagonist an unqualified exemplar of magnanimity:

the distinguishing traits of the hero, including certain features which have seemed most objectionable or even repellent to some modern readers, do, in fact, belong to Aristotle's character of the high-minded or magnanimous man.²

On this ground Poisson seeks to justify Coriolanus' exaggerated disdain for praise, his invariable harshness in his dealings with the plebs and tribunes, his vitriolic anger, and his vengeance against his country. Poisson also finds that the hero's more attractive qualities—his courage and noble self-respect, his contempt for riches, his honesty and directness—are consistent with the Aristotelian description of magnanimity. Hence he views Coriolanus' tragedy as a dramatic rendition of the "mature irony" that "the shoddy and the second rate . . . inherit the earth precisely because the magnanimous man cannot be shifty or ruthless, and that noble anger is helpless against the calculation of the base." Similarly, Battenhouse stresses the resemblance of Coriolanus to Aristotle's great-souled man, although he contends the play develops Christian premises and is intended to demonstrate the limitations of a pagan ethic. For Battenhouse the moral norm of the play should be found in Virgilia and Cominius, who, he says, prefigure Christian virtues that stand as correctives to a predominantly pagan world Shakespeare means to criticize:

I would not claim that Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* has in its cast of characters any unequivocal representatives of Christian magnanimity. Virgilia and Cominius, who approximate the Christian sense of this virtue, are yet caught within a Roman ethos which defeats their better instincts . . . [Shakespeare's] historical insight permits him, however, to suggest a foreshadowing of Christian magnanimity in these best of the Romans, and to place it in contrast to two other versions of magnanimity, both classically pagan: the Roman one in Menenius and a predominantly Greek one in Coriolanus.³

Contrasting Coriolanus with the ideal of Christian nobility approached by Virgilia and Cominius, Battenhouse concludes that the pagan version of magnanimity contains fatal limitations. Ultimately, he argues that: "Coriolanus is tragic in Shakespeare's view on two

counts: by aspiring originally to a Grecian excellence, and by accommodating to a Roman one, its philosophical cousin.”⁴

Despite their differences in evaluating the classical measure, both Poisson and Battenhouse agree that Coriolanus embodies Aristotelian magnanimity. However, I would argue to the contrary that Coriolanus’ tragedy resides precisely in his failure to encompass the elusive ideal of the *Ethics*. As I see it, the play does enforce the relevance of the Aristotelian measure, though not, as Battenhouse says, in order to criticize it nor, as Poisson believes, in order to show Coriolanus in admirable conformity with it. Rather, I think Shakespeare intends us to understand his protagonist as a tragically defective imitation of Aristotle’s magnanimous man. His actions quite frequently recall those ascribed to the Aristotelian model, but his character and fate suggest an imperfect, and typically Roman, misunderstanding of what it means to be great-souled.

One’s initial impression is that Shakespeare constructs the character of his protagonist in strict accord with Aristotle’s description of *megalopsychia*. For Coriolanus certainly behaves in the manner of Aristotle’s exemplar with respect to his response to great dangers and in his performance of heroic deeds. The philosopher remarks that the great-souled man displays his courage only when the issue is momentous:

He does not run into trifling dangers, nor is he fond of danger, because he honours few things; but he will face great dangers, and when he is in danger he is unsparing of his life, knowing that there are conditions on which life is not worth having.⁵

The impressive catalogue of martial exploits recited by Cominius before the Senate amply attests Coriolanus’ habitual self-expenditure in the service of heroic ambition. Furthermore, the deed for which he receives his surname must be exactly the sort of thing Aristotle has in mind in distinguishing great from trifling danger. Cut off from his comrades within the walls of a hostile town Marcius earns by his display of solitary valor the awed tribute of Titus Lartius, “A carbuncle entire, as big as thou are,/Were no so rich a jewel” (I, iv, 55-56).⁶ The jewel-like rarity of the exploit answers to the singularity of the hero’s courage as does the name which commemorates it. We are reminded of the name and the deed in the play’s final scene where Shakespeare departs from his Plutarchian source to

make the place of Coriolanus' greatest triumph the setting for his death. Here in his last fatal outburst, when he speaks of fluttering the enemy "like an eagle in a dovecote," Marcius gives witness to his belief that life is not worth preserving at the cost of dishonor.

The hero of Corioles also manifests the disdain for material possessions that Aristotle attributes to the magnanimous (1124a). In contrast to his common followers, who begin plundering before the battle has been concluded, Coriolanus is coolly indifferent to the spoils of victory even when these are offered to him as tokens of gratitude, for he "cannot make my heart consent to take/ A bribe to pay my sword" (I, ix, 38-39). In the manner of the great-souled man, he values "beautiful and profitless things rather than profitable and useful ones" (1125a). That is, Coriolanus relishes honor, most especially, the honor of a great name, more than any of the common and tangible rewards that are put in his way. His disregard of profit proceeds not from a painful effort of self-control but rather from his high-minded contempt for anything that seeks to compete with the splendor of glory. In his aloofness he displays the native liberty of mind that Aristotle associates with *megalopsychia*. Likewise this freedom from demeaning considerations appears in Marcius' inveterate frankness which, again according to Aristotle, is one of the derivative qualities of the magnanimous man:

He must also be open in his hate and in his love (for to conceal one's feelings, i.e., to care less for truth than for what people think, is a coward's part), and must speak and act openly; for he is free of speech because he is contemptuous, and he is given to telling the truth, except when he speaks in irony to the vulgar (1124b).

If he is anything Coriolanus is prodigiously explicit in his hates and loves, excessively so his mother and friends complain, certainly too much so for his own safety, as evidenced in the expulsion and assassination scenes. But prudence is decidedly a secondary consideration for the magnanimous man who will not bridle his spiritedness simply for safety's sake. Although his mother urges him to gloss over his hatred for the commoners when he must make a speech petitioning their favor, Coriolanus refuses:

I will not do't
Lest I surcease to honour my own truth,

And by my body's action teach my mind
 A most inherent baseness. (III, ii, 120-123)

His subsequent outburst against the tribunes and populace, "The fires i'th' lowest hell fold in the people" (III, iii, 68), honors his own truth at the risk of his life. Indeed, on every occasion when one might expect him to temper true feeling with a politic tactfulness, Marcius instead allows free scope to his irrepressible frankness. He can be heedless in his utterances because, like Aristotle's magnanimous man, he is big enough to contemn calculations of personal security. Nevertheless, we shall see that Marcius cannot afford to be high-mindedly indifferent to what other men think when it is his reputation rather than merely his life which is threatened.

Aristotle says the great-souled man can be distinguished from the pusillanimous by the greatness of his claims. The former puts forward the highest claims for his virtue, whereas the poor-spirited man claims less than his due (1123b). In view of his intense consciousness of his merit, Marcius cannot be charged with pusillanimity. If one gives literal weight to Menenius' description of the regalia of state he enjoys in the Voscian camp, it appears that Coriolanus will accept even divine perquisites (V, iv, 22-25). However that may be, he aspires to the highest honor Rome can offer when he seeks to be consul in reward for his military services. Here, though, his claim obviously exceeds his merit, for if it is true, as Poisson asserts, that Coriolanus displays greatness of spirit by disdaining to beg what he thinks he deserves (II, iii, 120-121), it is also true that he gravely over-estimates his political desert. The city does not owe him the office of consul merely because he has proved a splendid soldier, but Marcius mistakenly thinks his prowess as warrior should earn him the honor of chief executive. In this overbidding of his deserts he more closely resembles another Aristotelian character opposed to both the pusillanimous and the magnanimous man. Aristotle says of this type: "On the other hand he who thinks himself worthy of great things, being unworthy of them, is vain" (1123b). The hero's pride, at first reminiscent of magnanimous integrity, begins to reveal itself as something less attractive when we see how it leads him to exaggerate his qualities and angrily to resent those who will not approve his inflated claims.

The aspect of Marcius' conduct that most immediately calls to mind the great-souled paradigm is his monolithic pursuit of distinc-

tions, and this trait is in fact the chief evidence of similarity urged by critics who see him as an exemplification of the Aristotelian model. Certainly Aristotle begins his description by observing that the magnanimous man values honor above all other external goods:

Desert is relative to external goods; and the greatest of these, we should say, is that which is the prize appointed for the noblest deeds; and this is honor; that is surely the greatest of external goods. Honor and dishonors, therefore, are the objects with respect to which the magnanimous man is as he should be. And even apart from argument it is with honor that magnanimous men appear to be concerned; for it is honor that they chiefly claim. . . (1123b).

In his obsession with honor Marcius continually exhibits a passion so intense that it crowds out all other feelings—this ambitiousness is the essence of his character. However, it is crucial to note that for Aristotle the magnanimous man's concern for honors is a relative, rather than an absolute, disposition. He values tokens of recognition more than other external goods such as wealth or power; but, finally, he does not value greatly *even* honor. Praise is by no means indispensable for Aristotle's great-souled ideal, "For not even towards honor does he bear himself as if it were a very great thing. . . . Power and wealth are desirable for the sake of honor . . . and for him to whom even honor is a little thing the others must be so too" (1124a). The reason for the magnanimous man's contempt even of "that which we render to the gods" derives from his very essence. He is as nearly autonomous in his virtue and happiness as a human being can be. This, and not the concern for honor, is ultimately the distinguishing mark of his character. Thus, Aristotle finally locates magnanimity in the self-sufficient man who has no indispensable needs which he must depend on others to supply. Because he has no such needs, he is free, courageous, generous, and open in all his actions; and because he is independent, he can despise those things which other men need, *including* honor. He does not need praise because he is already supremely certain of his own worth. This confidence is in itself the unfailing source of his contentment. If it is true that he accepts praise generously, he does so in the spirit of one who rates not the gift but the kindly intent of the giver, "since they have nothing greater to bestow on him" (1124a). Similarly, he will not be greatly disturbed by imputations of dishonor "since in his case they cannot be just" (1124a). And, for the same reason, he will not be mindful of wrongs "for it is not the part of the magnanimous man to have a long memory" (1125a).

From these considerations one can see that for Aristotle *megalopsychia* is essentially an attitude, a distinct moral outlook, rather than a particular sort of action, although it is an attitude that informs all the actions of the man who displays it, even down to the stately tempo of his walking gait (1125a). This outlook might be characterized as the consciousness of great merit based on solid claims to excellence. Aristotle makes it clear that magnanimity stands as "a sort of crown of the virtues" because it rests upon the basis of "perfect virtue" (1124a). Hence we could say that magnanimity equates with the self-knowledge of the morally excellent man. The mention of perfect virtue raises further questions about the kind of excellence that might support noble self-esteem. At this point in the *Ethics* Aristotle has dealt only with the moral virtues; his formal discussion of the speculative life begins considerably later with Book VI. Therefore, it seems likely that the perfection of which he speaks has reference to the fullness of moral virtue only, rather than moral and intellectual excellence at once. *Megalopsychia* may point toward the life of philosophy as a yet higher kind of independence, for in Book X Aristotle concludes "the self-sufficiency that is spoken of as most conducive to happiness must belong most to the contemplative activity" (1177a). However, moral virtue alone would appear to suffice for at least a sort of self-sufficiency, and therefore one should not simply identify the magnanimous man with the philosopher. From his discussion in Book IV it is obvious that Aristotle has in mind a moral type which, though rare, is not so singularly rare as the man who devotes himself unreservedly to an all-consuming pursuit of wisdom.⁷

Although the great-souled man need not possess pre-eminent wisdom, it would appear he must be at least basically just if perfect virtue refers, as I suppose it does, to the entire moral range. He is certainly just in his estimate of his deserts since this, according to Aristotle, is the first criterion of magnanimity. Moreover, his claims to the greatest rewards could hardly be warranted were he himself habitually unjust. Presumably, justice in this instance depends more on a sort of connatural moral taste than upon speculative wisdom.

However, the fact that Aristotle discusses magnanimity prior to his formally comprehensive treatment of justice in Book V may indicate that he does not consider the great-souled character to be just in the fullest possible sense. For to be so one would assume he must possess a high degree of intellectual ability. Complete justice

would require the profound discrimination necessary for understanding what is just in terms of equity beyond or beneath questions of mere legality; or, put in another way, the perfectly just man would need to comprehend what is right by nature as distinguished from what may be held right by convention. The discussion of justice in Book V appears to provide an introduction for a new beginning developing a complete reconsideration of virtue. One might say that from this point onward Aristotle conducts his inquiry from a different vantage, a perspective centering upon intellectual rather than moral excellence. But this change of perspective begins to place us at some distance from the magnanimous man, since nothing in Aristotle's description in Book IV establishes any ground for believing that the man of proper pride possesses supreme intelligence. Obviously a figure who deserves substantial honors and grasps his proper worth could not be simply vacuous, but at the same time one notes that this sort of aristocrat devotes himself to conspicuous deeds rather than to a life of intellectual activity. He lives in and for public pursuits although he does not seem to cultivate the strictly political activities of a statesman whose chief concern would be justice. I do not want to oversimplify an extremely complicated problem of interpretation by giving the impression that the *Ethics* conveniently catalogues all the attainments and corresponding limitations of its several ethical models. The question of the interrelatedness of moral and intellectual excellence is probably the central problem raised by the *Ethics*, and it is by no means clear that the problem is definitively resolved. The extent to which Thomas Aquinas is obliged to impose upon the text in his *Commentary* in order to force an answer out of Aristotle's reserve serves as a fair indication of the resistance encountered in the original. Aquinas' attempted solution of the difficulty has been received coldly by some Aristotelian purists,⁸ and his attempt to synthesize moral and intellectual virtue has been properly questioned. Perhaps for our purposes it will suffice to remark that the *Ethics* apparently presents three peaks of virtue. Aristotle commences with the portrait of the magnanimous man, moves then to a second height in his consideration of justice, and surpasses the first two types of nobility with his final inquiry into speculative excellence. It also seems clear that the final stage of virtue enjoys pre-eminence because the contemplative act promises a more complete realization of the *eudaimonia*

which from the beginning Aristotle says is the end towards which all human activity is directed. The extent to which each of the three peaks participates in the others is a long question of doubtful determination. However, it appears most probable that Aristotle understands the great-souled man as a distinct moral type standing apart from the philosopher, certainly, and presumably distinguished from the exemplar of justice as well.

This raises the further question of the relation between the magnanimous soul and that other well-known Aristotelian figure, the tragic protagonist. Is the good but not pre-eminently virtuous tragic hero described in chapter 13 of the *Poetics* identical with the magnanimous man of the *Ethics*? Again as with the general problem just discussed of determining continuity between the various ethical models, the connection between tragic grandeur and *megalopsychia* presents difficulties. The two conditions seem related but not finally the same. The fact that the great-souled man does not enjoy complete intellectual virtue may leave room for the *hamartia* spoken of in the *Poetics*, since we customarily translate the term by equivalents that imply some cognitive error. That particular blindness, frailty, or intellectual deflection of the tragic protagonist which leads to his fall very likely has reference to some deficiency in prudence rather than moral turpitude; and, consequently, noble-minded yet imprudent heroes such as Oedipus, Creon, Prometheus, or Hippolytus would seem to exemplify Aristotle's idea.⁹ The Aristotelian tragic formula might then be said to look towards both the splendor and the limitation of *megalopsychia*. The magnanimous man stands between the surpassingly virtuous figure whose fall, Aristotle says, would merely arouse indignation, and the morally defective character whose change from felicity to its opposite would merely flatter our moral expectations without exciting the pity and terror proper to tragedy. The magnanimous man, essentially just and high-minded yet exposed to catastrophe because of intellectual shortcomings, fits some of the requirements Aristotle lays down for his noble, yet flawed, protagonist of tragedy.

However, Aristotle appears to stop well short of a simple identification. The tragic hero may fall somewhat below the level of moral competence associated with magnanimity. Perhaps it should be added that the imprudence which impairs tragic characters seems to be connected in Aristotle's thought with some substantial, even if

unmalicious, injustice for which the hero is himself in some way responsible. Otherwise, the fall of such a man might strike us as incomprehensible or disgustingly capricious as would the spectacle of catastrophe overcoming an absolutely virtuous man. It seems likely that Aristotle's concept of the tragic hero only *looks toward* the magnanimous man as a sort of upper limit while allowing for types of lesser nobility who yet suggest great-souledness in some decisive way. Within that larger range we might place such acknowledged tragic figures as Macbeth, Hamlet, Othello, Lear, Brutus, and in fact all Shakespearean protagonists, men who are all to varying degrees implicated in an injustice but who nevertheless attest to a certain spiritual elevation quite beyond the ordinary. Coriolanus answers to this description in both his positive and negative aspects. He is undeniably greater than anyone else in his city, yet we have seen that he is also something less than the great-souled man of Aristotle inasmuch as his claims exceed his just deserts. A more decisive difference between the character exhibited by Coriolanus and that of the magnanimous man comes to sight when we appreciate Shakespeare's portrayal of Coriolanus' dependency upon the opinions of others.

Aristotle speaks of characters which "imitate the magnanimous man without being like him" (1124b). When we look deeper into the action of Shakespeare's play we see that Coriolanus imitates but does not realize the independence of the great-souled. He reveres his own honorific surname because he believes it memorializes a moment of self-sufficiency, and he seeks to perpetuate this condition of autonomous nobility. But from his relationship with the various personages of his world as also from the excesses to which he is driven by his hunger for fame, one can conclude that Coriolanus is, in fact, far from self-sufficing. His conception of nobility requires that his worth be recognized by others, either directly in the form of praise or indirectly through submission to his superior power. Thus, despite his occasional exhibitions of contempt for popular favor, Coriolanus reveals his compulsive need for recognition. He must have friends to praise him voluntarily or, better yet, enemies to attest his superiority against their will. A particularly telling indication of his compulsion is his early tribute to his arch-enemy, Aufidius:

Were half to half the world by th'ears, and he
Upon my party, I'd revolt, to make
Only my wars with him. (I, i, 228-230)¹⁰

Although Coriolanus desires to be independent and divinely aloof, he interprets this condition relatively. That is, he aspires to excel others in terms that everyone can recognize, the terms of Rome being military or political power. Yet the play shows that transcending others by such means involves Marcius in an unending contradiction. He must constantly reassert his superiority by eliciting some sort of recognition from those whom he seeks to excel. Hence he becomes, in a way, dependent upon everyone with whom he is connected, not only because by withholding approval they can force him to undertake further proofs, but because even in granting him recognition they assert their prerogative to approve, and thus to judge, his worth. Coriolanus' concern for honor exceeds that of the magnanimous man because he lacks the latter's autonomous confidence in himself. The genuinely great-souled man identifies his virtue and happiness with an activity that is its own reward, valuable quite apart from whatever praise its exercise might secure for him. Moreover, he needs neither friends nor enemies to sustain his self-esteem. By contrast, Coriolanus must at least assure himself of a steady supply of enemies, and he does so by making enemies of those (the commoners, for example) who are prepared to be his friends. But the compulsive activity of making enemies undermines his independence as much as would playing the role of sycophant that he so indignantly rejects.

Because he is not really self-sufficient, Coriolanus displays other qualities opposed to those Aristotle attributes to the great-souled man. His rancor and contentiousness in all his commerce with the plebians are precisely the opposite of what we should expect from a man who is genuinely self-confident. Aristotle remarks that it is vulgar to make a display of strength among humble people and that the magnanimous man is "unassuming towards those of the middle class" (1124b). Perhaps the people do not deserve Marcius' praise, and perhaps he is right in saying that they should be loved "as they weigh" (II, ii, 72). But if they do not merit the favor of a noble man, much less should they be able to inspire in him unseemly exhibitions of spleen.¹¹ By his constant self-assertiveness against the lowly plebs, Marcius reveals that they have a certain power over him. He seems actually dependent on their enmity to define his superiority. Similarly, because he is not really detached from human standards, Marcius cannot be oblivious to wrongs inflicted upon him. Unlike Aristotle's ideal he continually reminds himself of the injuries he

has suffered, and once he has become the self-proclaimed "lonely dragon" Marcius lives *only* to redress his grievance and to fashion himself a new name from that vengeance. In his gestures of spite and revenge, Marcius acts contrary to the spirit of the magnanimous man in that here also he allows his life to revolve around others.

Coriolanus' tragedy proceeds from the fact that he becomes completely isolated without becoming self-sufficient. His progressive isolation drives forward inexorably to its bitter and pathetic conclusion without even the compensation of a self-recognition. In a general way this dilemma calls to mind Achilles. Both the Homeric and the Shakespearean warrior desire honor but do not acknowledge dependence on others for the praise that publicly ratifies their worth. Achilles, however, is deepened and apparently ennobled through tragic realizations brought home to him by the death of Patroclus and the appeal of Priam, so that he eventually becomes magnanimous almost in the strictest Aristotelian sense. At the end of his brief life he has lost all personal ties, yet he has achieved a sort of godlike calm and detachment in the midst of his desolation. In his grief Achilles can display generosity, and in his final gestures he appears at last self-possessed and no longer feverish for glory. By contrast, the culminating moment of Coriolanus' isolation coincides with his final, pathetic attempt to reassert his former glory when he recalls the feat of solitary bravery which earned him his surname: "Alone I did it," he boasts before his Volscian executioners on the site of his lonely triumph. In addition to the significance earlier noted, Shakespeare's return to the setting of Corioles enforces an irony which Coriolanus does not perceive and which connotes the distressing circularity of the hero's career. Marcius ends where he began. He cannot break free from the spiritual confinement that derives from his need to elicit from others repeated assurances of his unconditional pre-eminence. By his taunt "boy of tears" Aufidius not only withholds such an assurance but charges its opposite. Aufidius thus insults the hero with a charge of juvenile dependence that forces Marcius once again to enter the round of boasting and insult which has brought him to this deadlock. With almost his last breath Marcius seeks to force an admission of his singular transcendence at the same time that he reveals a pitiable dependence upon those who have now become, as were the Romans, both friends and enemies. He is given sufficient opportunity here and in the crisis of his mother's intercession to

grasp the nature of his dilemma and his flaw. But his failure to avail himself of the chance for self-knowledge leaves to the audience the experience of *anagnorisis* which should have been his.

The extent of Marcius' ignorance may be appreciated by considering Plutarch's description of contrasting attitudes toward honor in his *Comparison of Alcibiades with Coriolanus*. Shakespeare may have read the *Comparison* together with the *Life*, but, however that may be, Plutarch's observations point to a similar course of thought developed in the play. Plutarch speaks of three public men—Metellus, Aristides, and Epaminondas—who, like Coriolanus, were driven into exile, rejected in elections, and condemned in courts of justice but who, unlike Coriolanus, showed no resentment against their cities when they were later asked to return. These men, says Plutarch, not only professed their indifference to public honors but were in fact genuinely independent of such signs of approval and therefore neither valued honors bestowed nor became angry when they were refused. On the other hand, Alcibiades openly professed his pleasure in being honored and his hurt in being overlooked. His love of distinctions caused him to court favor and "to place himself upon good terms with all that he met."^{1 2} Even during his second exile he could resume friendly relations with the Athenian commanders. Alcibiades' frank pursuit of honors suggests the sort of man Aristotle first discusses in his remarks on *megalopsychia*—the man who delights in honor above all else—whereas the three Greeks Plutarch contrasts to him suggest the more elevated version of Aristotelian magnanimity exhibited in characters who by virtue of their supreme self-confidence can transcend the desire for praise. Beneath the contrast we observe that Alcibiades resembles Metellus, Aristides, and Epaminondas in at least one important respect. Like them he is comfortable in the position he adopts toward honors. Coriolanus, however, never can find a comfortable stance either in regard to the praise he receives or in response to adverse opinion. His invariably contentious language and his continually abrasive dealings with commoners indicate a fundamental discordancy in his soul. Plutarch makes this tension explicit in his comment that "Coriolanus's pride forbade him to pay attentions to those who could have promoted his advancement, and yet his love of distinction made him feel hurt and angry when he was disregarded."^{1 3} In the light of Plutarch's comparison we can describe Coriolanus' tragedy more precisely. His

unique predicament seems to be that he can neither achieve the detached self-sufficiency of an Aristides nor be happy with the unabashed delight in praise of an Alcibiades. That is, Marcius cannot rise to the higher version of Aristotelian magnanimity, and he will not accept the lower by acknowledging his need for the good opinion of others. Once again we are reminded of Aristotle's reference to the vain man who seeks to imitate *megalopsychia* yet fails in the essentials.

Coriolanus' failure in tragic recognition is the most conspicuous evidence of the limited reach of his interior life, and this lack of self-awareness comprises part of the price he pays for his exclusive identification of nobility with direct heroic action displayed through strife. It is hardly possible to conceive a peaceable Coriolanus. For how would he spend his time were he not constantly engaged in the heady rigors of war? Aufidius' servant associates peace with sexual adventures, asserting that peaceful interludes are great breeders of adulterers. He affects the soldier's scorn of tranquility:

Peace is a very apoplexy,
lethargy; mulled, deaf, sleepy, insensible; a getter of
more bastard children than war's a destroyer of men. (IV, v, 226-229)

His sentiments are not far off those expressed less vulgarly by Titus Lartius, Volumnia, and Coriolanus himself. Except that Marcius really feels what Aufidius' henchman only pretends to feel. It is not possible to imagine him in the peacetime role envisioned by the servant. Like Brutus he lacks the gamesomeness of an Antony who loves when he can and fights when he must. Coriolanus must fight or he is nothing. His intimate enemy Aufidius cannot recognize him when he is not painted in that suit of blood which his mother also thinks becomes him best. Aufidius must demand no less than six times that Marcius reveal his name when he appears out of armor at Aufidius' home in Antium. On the same occasion the disguised Coriolanus tries to make a small joke about cuckoldry:

Third Servingman How sir? Do you meddle with
my master?
Coriolanus Ay, 'tis an honest service than to meddle
with thy mistress. (IV, v, 46-49)

Besides its being forcible-feeble and derivative, like his only other

essay in levity (III, iii, 15-19), one notes that it seems the most uncharacteristic speech of the play. Marcius' jesting lightly about sexual matters sounds utterly anomalous, as though his disguise has changed his speech along with his appearance. More in tune with his character is his subsequent praise of the chaste Valeria as an "icicle/ That's curded by the frost from purest snow" (V, iii, 65-66). His use of erotic figures of speech reveals a spirit enamored with austerity. When he meets his fellow warrior on a battlefield that promises them still another opportunity to engage the enemy, Marcius experiences a rare moment of ebullience:

O, let me clip ye
 In arms as sound as when I wooed, in heart
 As merry as when our nuptial day was done,
 And tapers burned to bedward! (I, v, 29-32)

His simile finds an echo in a declaration of camaraderie pronounced by his kindred spirit, Aufidius, "more dances my rapt heart/Than when I first my wedded mistress saw/Bestride my threshold" (IV, v, 117-19). Volumnia had earlier boasted that were her son her husband she would delight more in his warfaring than in his lovemaking (I, iii, 2-5). The martial-marital comparisons are most appropriate to the three bellicose spokesmen and especially indicative of Marcius' temperament. In this the least erotic of Shakespearean tragedies sexual passion is subsumed by martial ardor so that it does not seem incongruous that the soldier should embrace his comrade as he would his wife, or look forward to another battle as though it were a second honeymoon. Coriolanus transfers the energies of eros and of *philia* to the field of glory where he finds the rewards lesser men may locate in the bed and hearth.

Coriolanus' education disposes him to underrate habits of civil accommodation. Apparently he has had no opportunity to grow up among domestic proprieties since he seems to know nothing of his father (whom the play never mentions). If he has not been bred to appreciate marital affection neither has he had the benefit of observing fundamental examples of political rule (in the Aristotelian sense of alternately ruling and being ruled) within the household. This has obvious consequences for his own despotic political behavior. Instead of the customary training of the child in household affairs, the ordinary primer of education in politics, Marcius has been

“bred in the wars.” Again parallels with Achilles come to mind. Like Achilles, Marcius knows little else but the life of the camp. We are told that he fought against Tarquin when he was sixteen and engaged in seventeen subsequent battles since this youthful debut (II, ii, 85-99). Hence it is not surprising that his friends appeal to his constant war experience when they seek to excuse his excesses (III, i, 319-322; III, iii, 52-57), that his mother explains statecraft to him in terms of military strategy (III, ii, 47-51), that his son should seek to emulate his father by ignoring his schoolmaster in favor of predatory games (I, iii, 53-64), or that Marcius should think a drum the most reliable and least corruptible form of human communication (I, ix, 41-44). Titus Lartius believes that Marcius’ own voice has acquired the percussive qualities of the kettle drums he so admires (I, iv, 56-61).¹⁴

Coriolanus’ conspicuous diplomatic liabilities derive from this narrow education. He knows no other way to treat people than as simple superiors or simple subordinates. The life of the city is too evasive in its demands and too complicated in its relatedness to allow for the pleasant collegiality of war comrades. Coriolanus has supporters in the city, of course, but he is most often at odds with his friends and can feel at one with them only when they are facing a common intramural enemy, as we see, for instance, at the beginning when he and Menenius face down the unruly plebs, or in the later crisis when civil war again threatens to break out. He is not completely despotic in his desires since he can be comfortable in a clearly subordinate position, as when he occupies the second place under Cominius in the Volscian wars. But Marcius seems incapable of understanding the requirements of political as distinguished from despotic rule, or of political rule in the Aristotelian sense. That is, he does not know how to conduct himself in a setting that requires a man both to rule and to be ruled in turn. Put in still another way, he seems not to grasp how political decisions may result from harmonizing divergent positions through deliberative discourse. In this regard we may see that Aristotle’s thought bears upon the play from another vantage rather different from the one we have been focusing upon and that the *Politics* as well as *Ethics* may help us understand the larger issues with which Shakespeare is concerned.

An important foundation of Roman jurisprudence was its distinction between two fields of the law, *domi* (at home) and *militiae*

(on campaign).¹⁵ When in Rome the citizen lived beneath the protection of the civil liberties afforded by *ius domi* which considerably hedged in the powers of consuls in particular and of the magistrates generally. Outside the walls, and especially while on military service, he was subject to the more extended scope of the consuls as commanders-in-chief under law *militiae*. In principle, at least, the legal distinction enabled the regime to manage more effectively and flexibly both internal and external affairs. It made possible fluent transitions between a more or less despotic rule in the field, where the tribunician power of intercession was suspended, and a political rule, a balancing of civic right, in the city. But Coriolanus seems not to appreciate the value of the distinction. It may be no great exaggeration to say that he would like to see civil usages absorbed into *ius militiae*, or that he attempts to bring the rule appropriate for an army into the city. Aufidius may speak more fully than he knows when he refers to hazards which beset warriors who attempt the transition "from the casque to the cushion" (IV, iii, 39-46). Marcius has great difficulties in thinking of the mean-spirited plebians as fellow Romans. He prefers to view them in camp terms as lowly subordinates or even as his collective enemy. His political pronouncements and his public bearing are colored by his devotion to the noble simplicities of life in the field. For Marcius a world without war would be not merely dull but a sensible emptiness, a void completely deprived of interest and color. When he is not contentious (the moments are infrequent) Marcius is himself dull and indeed almost a spiritual vacuum. His manner of address is consistently disputatious, and in the absence of dispute he is grudging or altogether silent. The play records no instance of Marcius participating in what could properly be called a conversation. He defines himself through the shock of military and verbal contests and seems to lack both the capacity and the desire for discussion or for solitary contemplation. Thus it is not surprising that he fails to reflect upon his fate. The crucial truth about his nature, unextracted by himself, remains latent in the reversal that brings about his personal catastrophe. That truth needs to be further specified in order to appreciate the difference between his obsession with glory and the more solid self-assurance of Aristotelian magnanimity.

A recent critic has discerned in Coriolanus' career a contradiction that leads necessarily to his destruction. Michael MacCanles

locates the cause of Marcius' fall in a self-defeating "dialectic of transcendence":

[which] allows him neither complete harmony with those he seeks to transcend nor complete detachment. Inasmuch as his superiority depends precisely on his measuring himself against those whom he seeks to rise above, he is constantly at war against the various relations he successively creates with others, no matter what they be.¹⁶

The futility MacCanles ascribes to Coriolanus' "dialectic of transcendence" Aristotle perceived as a dilemma bound up with the very nature of honor-seeking. This is evident from two remarks of the *Ethics*:

A consideration of the prominent types of life shows that people of superior refinement and of active disposition identify happiness with honor, for this is, roughly speaking, the end of the political life. But it seems too superficial to be what we are looking for, since it is thought to depend on those who bestow honor rather than on him who receives it, but the good we divine to be something proper to a man and not easily taken from him. (1095b)

A steady sense of self-worth based upon confident self-knowledge seems to answer to the "good we divine" rather than the more tenuous self-regard that must be supported by tokens of acclaim. The anxious soliciting of honors implies the absence of certainty on the part of the man who seeks them out. For Aristotle observes in his subsequent discussion of friendship that "those who desire honor from good men, and men who know, are aiming at confirming their own opinion of themselves; they delight in honor, therefore, because they believe in their own goodness *on the strength of the judgement of those who speak about them*" (1159a, italics added). Aristotle's insight into the dependence upon public opinion of men who are avid for honor points us to the source of Marcius' disequilibrium. He desires noble autarchy, yet he must force attestations of his uniqueness from everyone he encounters. This bondage to opinion underlies the frustrating dialectic that MacCanles detects throughout the play. However, I cannot agree with his view of the play's resolution which rests upon his claim that the embassy scene dramatizes a decisive change of relationship between Volumnia and her son. For MacCanles the embassy reveals Volumnia to be a person who "serenely cares for no one." She is, he says, "the topmost rung on

the scale of transcendence," and she uses her persuasive power to victimize her son as he has hitherto used his power to transcend others:

Her "love" for Coriolanus translates explicitly Coriolanus' own implicit "love" of the commoners and of Aufidius: it is the "love" of the master for the slave, of the snob for his inferiors, and as such it is really an assertion of power and dominance. . . . Volumnia's appeal to Coriolanus' subservience in the last act, which brings about his immolation in fact, repeats analogically the dialectic of transcendence with Coriolanus as victim, which Coriolanus had been himself enacting throughout the play as master. In short, Coriolanus dies as the result of a power play to which his own drive to power on the scale of transcendence has left him particularly vulnerable.¹⁷

On this interpretation, the recognition available to Coriolanus in the final dramatic reversal is simply that he can be dominated as he has sought to dominate other people. According to MacCanles, we see him catastrophically subjugated by the one attachment in his life that has not been based on his own desire to subjugate, namely, his affection for his mother. Though this hypothesis is suggestive I think it somewhat misleading, since it is difficult to accept the contention that Volumnia betrays a monstrous resolve to dominate her son which makes her willing to satisfy her pride at his expense. The truth seems to be rather that Marcius is not victimized so much by his mother as by his own ignorance. Critics tend to overlook the significance of Volumnia's appeal to her son's desire for fame. She says her son's honor can *only* be maintained if he spares the city (V, iii, 132-48); and Coriolanus relents *only* after she has made this point. He thinks that he will earn a greater and more lasting glory by sparing the city than by destroying it. In fact he believes he has so effectively affirmed his nobility by showing mercy that he can look back on his action as another conspicuous triumph. Upon his return to Corioles he insouciantly invites the Volscians to rejoice with him over what he considers a glorious victory (V, vi, 71-81). Marcius does not feel that he has been exploited; nor, I think, does the play suggest that he has. He achieves the revenge he has desired simply by demonstrating his power to destroy Rome. In terms of winning glory, he could gain nothing more by going on to level the city. The clear demonstration of his capacity to do so is altogether sufficient. His act of mercy therefore does not constitute a renunciation of his supreme motive but a furtherance of it consistent with his essential

character. The recognition latent in the last act is that Coriolanus, rather than becoming the victim of Volumnia, has finally destroyed himself through a misjudgment prompted by his characteristic disability. He fails to realize at the conclusion of his life what he has failed to realize all along: That the end of self-sufficiency and the end of honor are not identical and that his pursuit of acclaim prevents his becoming genuinely self-sufficient. His mercy is merely another way of asserting his superiority, just as his wrath had been before; and, in changing his means he does not change his purpose which is still a desire for fame. By virtue of his display Marcius assures himself of a notable place in the chronicles, but he fails to rise above his native infirmity. Yet to the end he remains unaware of his failure because he knows his goal and measure only imperfectly.

Coriolanus' tragedy derives from his characteristic inability to understand the necessary conditions that would enable him to fulfill the quest for nobility he has embraced. However, although he suffers most by it, he is not alone in his ignorance, for we can see that his intellectual failure derives from the defective ethos which debilitates Shakespeare's Roman world. He desires the highest sort of excellence—the absolute self-possessedness of the pre-eminently noble. However, he identifies his quest with the exercise of *virtú*, the Roman ideal of manly valor which, according to Cominius, is revered by the regime as the epitome of human excellence (“It is held/That valour is the chiefest virtue, and/Most dignifies the haver” [II, ii, 81-82]). But, as Machiavelli understood, *virtú* is essentially transitive.¹⁸ Without an object and audience power is mute. It must be exercised upon other men so that it may be duly recognized and admired. Therefore, the display of manliness necessarily involves the valorous man in relationships with others and makes him to some degree dependent on these relationships. The desire for honored distinctions through whatever means must entail much the same consequence, but the pursuit of glory through *virtú* compounds the dependence of the hero on his associates. This awareness of a bondage which cannot be surmounted underlies Marcius' contentiousness and proves the cause of his destruction. His need to be approved prevents his becoming in truth the great-souled man he partially resembles. Coriolanus' Roman version of magnanimity therefore turns out to be imperfect and even self-defeating precisely because it falls short of the standard described by Aristotle.

In one sense the story of Coriolanus suggests the tragedy of any city that identifies ultimate human excellence with martial virtue. The community encourages unbounded spiritedness in the soldier so that he may expend himself without stint in defense of the city. The soldier must learn to relish the delights of contention more than the usages of peace if he is to be serviceable to the community. The city rewards such dedication with the wages of godlike honors. Yet to the extent that the warrior is bred in the wars, he is weaned away from the habits of civil accommodation, from the oblique manners, self-effacements, and mutual concessions which constitute civility. In the hero's eyes the city itself becomes mean in its impurity, and his activity which began in patriotism comes to be pursued for its own sake as a noble alternative to an enervating and demeaning political existence. The warrior then changes from a docile watchdog at the gate to a lion in the streets, and the city finds that by extolling valor as the chiefest virtue it has produced a man larger than itself. It cannot live peaceably with him, but it may not be able to live at all without him. The warrior is equally the casualty of this dilemma since he is denied, first by training then by inclination, the complete life natural to the human being. Coriolanus' fate suggests this perennial tension between the city and the manly arm of the body politic.

Apart from this universal dimension, Coriolanus' tragedy reveals a more distinctively Roman problem. Shakespeare's Romans tend to identify their worth with the impression they make upon other men. Shakespeare had already portrayed their zealous cultivation of fame in the thrasonical careers of both Caesars, Brutus, Antony, and the Roman convert, Cleopatra. Roman heroic personages display a remarkable avidity for seeking the approval of a society they profess to transcend. They lead lives of calculated celebrity so that they may insure public acknowledgment of their singularity. It appears that one of Shakespeare's purposes in the three plays based on Plutarch's biographies is to consider the high costs to the spirit exacted by a life given over to self-glorifying performances. Machiavelli admires the Romans for being "full of the desire for worldly glory," whereas Shakespeare's Roman tragedies remind us of what can be lost by measuring nobility by the standard of fame. His Roman heroes characteristically fail to discriminate between noble self-confidence and vainglory. They cannot conceive a greatness of spirit that suffices of itself with or without the sanction of public approbation. Yet

they are all dimly aware of some image of unconditional purity which beckons them beyond the comparatively petty ends of their fellow Romans. Coriolanus can glimpse "a world elsewhere" beyond the confinements of Rome, yet he cannot discover an access to it because he knows no other end for his virtue than the rewards of renown. His tragedy thus defines the limits of an ethos which confuses great-souledness with the power to enforce admiration.

¹ Shaw facetiously called *Coriolanus* "Shakespeare's greatest comedy," and Bradley remarked of the title character that were he subjected to Lear's storm he would merely set his teeth. Subsequent critics have continued to question the status of Coriolanus as a tragic figure, usually on the grounds that he lacks the requisite intellectual presence. John Palmer finds him "the splendid oaf who has never come to maturity" *Political and Comic Characters of Shakespeare*. (London: MacMillan & Co., 1965), p. 297. Similarly, if more temperately, D. J. Enright has complained "if only, we may feel, he could be rather more introspective—in the way that Macbeth is. . . . If only we were persuaded that there is more to him than is reflected in his armor." ("*Coriolanus*: Tragedy or Debate?" *Essays in Criticism*, IV, 1954), p. 7. O. J. Campbell argues that "the play can be understood only if it be recognized as perhaps the most successful of Shakespeare's satiric plays," *Shakespeare's Satire* (London: Oxford University Press, 1943), p. 199. See also Willard Farnham, *Shakespeare's Tragic Frontier* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1950), p. 217.

More recently an attempt to redeem Coriolanus has sought to establish his kinship with a tradition of non-intellectual though heroic figures in the mould of Heracles. See the comments by Eugene M. Waith, *The Herculean Hero in Marlow, Chapman, Shakespeare and Dryden* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1962), pp. 121-43 and Reuben Brower, *Hero and Saint* (New York and Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 354-81. See also the endorsement of Marcius in Hardin Craig's "Coriolanus: Interpretation" in *Pacific Coast Studies in Shakespeare*, eds. Waldo F. McNeir and Thelma N. Greenfield (Eugene,

Two new studies of the place of *Coriolanus* in Shakespeare's understanding of the Roman regime indicate thoughtful reassessments of the hero in terms similar to those I propose. Both Paul Cantor's *Shakespeare's Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1976) and Michael Platt's *Rome and Romans According to Shakespeare* (Salzburg Studies in English Literature, *Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur*, 1976) should be considered by anyone who attempts to understand the philosophical implications latent in Shakespeare's portrayal of Roman politics. Neither Cantor nor Platt treat systematically the theme of Aristotelian magnanimity, but their remarks upon Coriolanus' tragic devotion to honor suggest that each understands the difference between the self-sufficient

magnanimous man of Aristotle and the dependent Roman of Shakespeare.

I believe critics have rightly emphasized the intellectual limitations of Coriolanus but wrongly denied him the dignity of a tragic hero. Although his tragedy is perhaps of a minimal sort, since he understands his fate less fully than more introspective Shakespearean protagonists, his largeness of spirit and his uncompromising fidelity to himself go a considerable way towards making up the deficit. I should think his positive qualities place him in the rank of tragic figures occupied by Ajax, Philoctetes, Heracles, and Shakespeare's Timon.

²Rodney Poisson, "Coriolanus as Aristotle's Magnanimous Man," *Pacific Coast Studies in Shakespeare*, p. 210. Poisson provides ample evidence for his contention that Shakespeare could have been acquainted with the *Nicomachean Ethics* either through contemporary translations or through the numerous Renaissance ethical treatises and conduct books which refer to Aristotle or derive from his *Ethics*. On the question of Shakespeare's knowledge of Aristotle see also F. N. Lees, "Coriolanus, Aristotle and Bacon," *Review of English Studies*, I (n.s.) (1950), 114-25.

³Roy W. Battenhouse, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Its Art and Its Christian Premises*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana Univ. Press, 1969), p. 363.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 372.

⁵Nicomachean Ethics, 1124b, W. C. Ross translation, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Richard McKeon ed. (New York: Random House, 1941). All subsequent references are to this edition, though I have taken the liberty of reading "magnanimity" and "magnanimous" where Ross translates "pride" and "proud."

⁶All references to Coriolanus are to the Penguin edition (Harry Levin, ed.), in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Alfred Harbage (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969).

⁷For an example of the kind of character who possesses self-sufficiency without being particularly devoted to the speculative life see Ishmael's description of Queequeg in Chap. X of *Moby-Dick*. Although Aristotle mentions no specific examples it seems he has in mind characters more like Achilles than Socrates. However, there is something about the unbounded heroic eros of Achilles which resembles the unbounded dedication of Socrates just as Ishmael explicitly notes in the "calm self-collectedness" of Queequeg a "Socratic" resemblance (*Moby-Dick*, ch. X, p. 58, Riverside Edition). That Aristotle intends self-sufficiency in something less than an absolute sense is evident from his remark that: "by self-sufficient we do not mean that which is sufficient for a man by himself, for one who leads a solitary life, but with parents, children, wife, and in general friends and fellow citizens, since man is born for citizenship." (*Ethics*, Bk. X, ch. 7, 1177b).

⁸See Harry V. Jaffa's *Thomism and Aristotelianism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1952). The problem of synthesizing the two perspectives of the *Ethics* might be profitably considered from the vantage of certain moderns, notably Nietzsche and Whitehead. A provocative beginning in this endeavor has been worked out by Paul Eidelberg, *A Discourse on Statesmanship: The Design and Transformation of the American Polity* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1974), pp. 241-276.

⁹Aristotle says the cause of the hero's change from felicity to misery "must lie not in any depravity, but in some great error on his part" (*Poetics*, 13, 1453a, Bywater trans.). On the character of the tragic protagonist and its relationship to the Aristotelian plot see Laurence Berns "Aristotle's Poetics" in *Ancients and Moderns: Essays on the Tradition of Political Philosophy in Honor of Leo Strauss*, ed. Joseph Cropsey (New York: 1964), pp. 76-79, and compare James M. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in The Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 52-98.

¹⁰Aristotle would apparently deem such a sentiment merely perverse for he says, "no one chooses to be at war, or provokes war, for the sake of being at war; anyone would seem absolutely murderous if he were to make enemies of his friends in order to bring about battle and slaughter" (*Ethics*, Bk. X, ch. 7, 1177b).

¹¹Exactly how much the people do "weigh" could be debated. Shakespeare's portrayal of the populace does not seem as favorable as that of Plutarch since he makes their initial rebellion more questionable and casts doubt upon the citizens' ability as soldiers (I, v, 4-8; I, vi, 43-45). Yet on several occasions the commoners show good judgment and at least a willingness to be persuaded by convincing speech (I, i; II, iii; III, iii). We also note that Cominius appears to have a higher estimate of their soldiering than Coriolanus (I, vi, 1-3), and at one point even Marcius is obliged to praise their manliness (I, vi, 76-78). On the whole Shakespeare's commoners appear good-hearted but extraordinarily malleable—which makes them about as good as their leadership at any given moment. Coriolanus may under-estimate the degree to which the common file can be improved by good leaders and especially by effective speech. But then Coriolanus characteristically deprecates the importance of persuasive speech tending, as he habitually does, to identify rhetoric with flattery (I, i, 162-72; I, i, 205-09; II, ii, 73-75; II, ii, 144-47; III, ii, 7-16).

¹²*Plutarch's Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, trans. John Dryden (New York: Modern Library, n. d.), p. 293.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 293.

¹⁴Marcius' entire demeanor states that he is intransigently a-music. His voice is harsh, his movements mechanical and meteoric, and he enjoys only one sort of tune, the exaggeratedly Doric rhythms of battle marches. He reveres the simple musical instruments of the camp as though they were sacramentals (I, ix, 41). This reverence depends upon his belief that drums and trumpets cannot prevaricate or flatter. Unlike human speech they must convey the true state of mind of those who employ them. The final speech of the play and the accompanying stage direction comment upon this belief. Aufidius, whose conspirators have just killed Coriolanus following the long-plotted strategem of their leader, commands a mournful thumping of drums in honor of his dead enemy. Hence the death march with which the play concludes is noble flattery commemorating Coriolanus' acknowledged worth yet obscuring the envy of the assassin who has ordered them to sound. All forms of human communication are subject to the complexities and ambiguities attendant upon spoken words. An understanding of the mixed nature of speech enables a thoughtful man to work good through

the art of intelligent rhetoric in the service of justice, whereas ignorance of the character of language or even a high-minded contempt for rhetorical self-consciousness may leave a man vulnerable to the linguistic devices he despises. On two occasions—when he is banished and when he is killed—Coriolanus proves the incoherent victim of a linguistic ambush. After the *Ethics* and the *Politics* Aristotle's *Rhetoric* provides the understanding which Coriolanus lacks.

The ending of the play with the brief obsequy and burial honors suggests a final link to *The Iliad* since it reflects upon Coriolanus in much the same way that the concluding events of the epic reflect upon Achilles. Homer's hero comes to learn that the desire for a noble grave barrow imposes a limit upon his desire to be self-sufficient. As Seth Benardete has pointed out, one lesson Achilles learns from the ghost of Patroclus is that although "one can be brave all by oneself one cannot bury oneself [and that] burial lies at the heart of the human" ("The *Aristeia* of Diomedes and the Plot of *The Iliad*," *ΑΓΩΝ* [no. 2, 1968, 10-38], pp. 33-34.). The play's final words note the ultimate dependence of the warrior upon some society even though it be not necessarily his native country. Coriolanus' pathos is deeper and sadder, if that is possible, than the pathos of Achilles' final condition because, unlike Achilles, Coriolanus dies without coming to realize this truth.

¹⁵See Kurt Von Fritz, *The Theory of the Mixed Constitution in Antiquity: A Critical Analysis of Polybius' Political Ideas* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1954), pp. 210-12. Of course these legal terms do not appear in the play nor do they occur in Plutarch. Scholars are not even certain when these usages first became current in the ancient Republic. I am not suggesting that the two forms of law are formally noted in Shakespeare's play or even that Shakespeare knew the historical fact of their existence. What Shakespeare obviously does understand is the political principle that underlies the distinction, and the consequences of failing in this understanding. Marcius' inability to come to terms with his country arises largely from his inability to approach Shakespeare's understanding.

¹⁶Michael MacCanles, "The Dialectic of Transcendence in *Coriolanus*," *PMLA*, LXXXII (1967), 49.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁸For Machiavelli, who attempts to restore the dignity of antique *virtú* against Christian prejudice, the greatest glory attaches to the man who can most effectively enforce his power of personality upon others. See *The Discourses passim*; see also Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, (Seattle, Wash.: Univ. of Washington Press, 1958), pp. 177-78, 189-90, 274-77, 286-89. *Coriolanus*, and possibly the Roman plays as a group, may be read as a Shakespearean questioning of Machiavellian premises.