

# Interpretation

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William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*. Edited by Jeffrey Kahan. Newburyport, MA: Focus, 2012, xvii + 148 pp., \$8.95 (paper).

William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*. Edited by Jan Blits. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2020, xx + 284 pp., \$16.00 (paper).

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Plays display. Most obviously, they do so in telling a story. The best stories, however, do more. They display important truths about human nature and history, about love and justice. On these matters, no plays display with the completeness achieved by William Shakespeare. In his characters, one finds every human type; in his stories, every human community. Through them, then, we see something of ourselves.

One Shakespeare play pertinent to us is *Coriolanus*. Set in ancient Rome, it focuses on a city, Rome, and a man, Caius Martius Coriolanus. Rome suffers from internal division based on class and external fears from the nearby Volscians. Caius Martius, through astounding feats, leads Rome's army to victory outside the Volscian city of Corioles. Given the name Coriolanus and the office of consul, Caius Martius then is banished by the people at the instigation of the newly created tribunes, who play up Coriolanus's well-known disdain for the commoners. Coriolanus then joins forces with the Volscians against Rome, only to be stopped at the latter's gates through the appeals of his mother, wife, and son, a decision that costs him his life.

Two recent editions help readers consider this work, one edited by Jeffrey Kahan, an English professor at the University of La Verne, the other by Jan H. Blits, a professor emeritus at the University of Delaware. These versions also offer distinct aids for the reader. Kahan adds a separate set of notes describing past productions' staging and setting decisions. Pictures from various stage

and screen versions also accompany the text. These notes and images are a welcome addition. We must never forget, even while reading, that *Coriolanus* is a play. It is intended to be performed. In addition, since Shakespeare gave minimal stage directions, interpretations by directors and actors take on great importance. Kahan thus helps the reader to think about the play as a performed work and therefore closer to how Shakespeare intended its consumption.

Blits also offers unique assistance. One is addition by omission. In his preface, Blits declares that his edition “avoids forcing any literary theory on the text and offers the reader guidance in understanding what Shakespeare thought and wrote” (Blits, vi). In letting the text speak more for itself, Blits holds an advantage over Kahan, who at times places ethical judgments on Shakespeare’s thinking among footnotes seemingly dedicated to defining terms and phrases.

Blits’s restraint certainly could have gone too far, leaving readers without helpful insight. However, he does not. Instead, his posture veers more toward moderation than excess. For one, Blits focuses on the Roman history underlying the play to a greater extent than do other editors. Blits wishes to dispel claims that Shakespeare did not understand Rome on its own terms, instead transplanting Englishmen of his time into a foreign locale. In his preface, he rightly diagnoses why other Shakespeare scholars make these mistaken claims. These scholars assume “historicism,” which “presumes that any writing, no matter how great, is imbedded in and embodies the author’s own cultural tradition.” Blits sees Shakespeare’s brilliance in his capacity to “understand the Romans as they understood themselves” as well as to see in Rome perpetual political and social questions that transcend cultural context (Blits, ix).

While both editions provide aid, the play’s the thing. Turning to it, we see how Shakespeare presents important political questions. As a city, Rome suffers from severe political instability. In the course of only a generation, it goes from the rule of one, to the rule of few, to that of many. Blits helpfully notes that this Rome exists not too long after the expulsion of its tyrant kings in 509 BC (Blits, x), circumstances Shakespeare wrote about in the narrative poem *The Rape of Lucrece*. Rome at the play’s beginning includes the many and the few in the choosing of officeholders; but it is aristocratic in the exercise of those offices—in the senate and consulship.

The play opens with a brewing sedition by the common plebeians against the aristocratic patricians. The question concerns distribution of corn in a famine. This tense debate over policy leads to a change in structure. We learn

that the Senate concedes to instituting the office of tribune, chosen by the people. This reform moves the exercise of rule from aristocracy to a mixed republic. Later, we see the structure modified again. The people's banishment of Coriolanus, accomplished through mob pressure, tilts Rome toward a popular state.

The many, the few, and the one all possess claims to rule and purposes they focus on in exercising that rule. The many claim to rule by their numbers and the humanity they share with all. The plebeians declare at one point that "the people are the city" (3.1.199). Moreover, their political program, to the degree it achieves focus, concerns material needs and wants based on necessity. They riot in the opening scene to obtain more grain from government stores. They unite with the patricians and revolt from the tribunes when the fear of Volscian invasion (and thus of death) takes hold. In battle, they stop fighting to greedily loot from the enemy (1.5).

The nobles' claim to rule stems from their alleged superiority. They disdain equality, with one senator abhorring democratic attempts "to unbuild the city and to lay all flat" (3.1.248). The nobles' claim to superiority rests on their pursuit of superior ends: honor and glory, not material needs. Coriolanus himself articulates these points, in battle calling to follow him those who "fear / Lesser his person than an ill report; / If any think brave death outweigh bad life / And that his country's dearer than himself" (1.6.69–73). These purposes define the noble in the nobles, giving them a claim to command.

Finally, an argument for the rule of one lurks in the person of Caius Martius. *Julius Caesar* focuses on the one's claims directly. However, here we see Caius Martius at times set above all other men in stature, compared at several places to a god (2.2.246–49; 3.1.106–8) or to one proud enough to "not spare to gird the gods" (1.1.292). Like Caesar, Coriolanus declares "I am constant" (1.1.222), a virtue for ruling among a polity so inconstant. The claim for his rule is aristocracy constricted to one. If he indeed is the best, far above all others, then why should any but he command?

Kahan sees here Shakespeare's opposition to democracy (Kahan, xiv). He gives an explanation grounded in genre. The play is a tragedy and Shakespeare wants some audience sympathy with the protagonist. But he draws the wrong inference. *Coriolanus* indeed is a tragedy. Yet the tragedy arises, in large part, from the failures and follies of its characters. Popular rule does receive a vigorous critique. But so does aristocracy and monarchy. Rome's

messy instability results from the inadequacy of any of its parts to command the whole.

The plebeians' focus on material goods pushes them toward low political purposes. The focus on maintaining physical life engenders cowardice, making them "hares" where they should be "lions" (1.1.183). Their love of the low leads to the looting that Coriolanus attacks. Moreover, they show a capriciousness and the capacity to be easily misled. This lack of intellectual ability and moral fortitude leaves them prey to the manipulations of demagoguing tribunes.

The nobles do not come off so well, either. Cominius, the consul preceding Coriolanus, declares "that valor is the chiefest virtue and most dignifies the haver" (2.2.80–81). Yet we see the same fear of pain and death overtake the nobles, indeed unite them to the plebeians, at certain points in the play. They cannot forget that they have bodies. Nor should they entirely; Volumnia, Caius Martius's mother, desires glory so much as to wish her son injured in combat, if not killed. She tells Virgilia, Coriolanus's worried wife, that in death Caius's "good report should have been my son" and that "I had rather had eleven [sons] die nobly for their country than one voluptuously surfeit out of action" (1.3.16–21). This more consistent posture shows an excess that dehumanizes, not in its seeking of glory but in its denial that humans have bodies, that life itself is a good worth maintaining, even if not at all costs. This belief grounds the nobles treating the plebeians as subhuman, making common citizenship impossible.

Finally, Coriolanus proves as inadequate to rule in politics as he seems godlike on the battlefield. Gods rule natural inferiors. Politics involves, as Aristotle says, some sharing in rule. To take the consulship, Coriolanus must ask for the approval of the people in addition to the nobles. The people are willing to give that approval because they recognize the great benefits he has given Rome. One might even say they recognize noble goods here, not just the material. "Ingratitude is monstrous" (2.3.10), one says, and the people would be monstrous, individually and collectively, did they not bestow this honor on Coriolanus. They add to their votes a wish, one that past experience should have given little hope for: that he respect, even love the people. This Coriolanus refuses to do, for it would require recognizing in them some commonality with and power over him. His hatred does not bode well for an office intended to rule all of Rome, plebeians included. It presents the threat of tyranny, a point which the tribunes stoke into the fires of the mob. And Coriolanus's hatred displays what the tyrant presumes about the tyrannized, namely, that they are subjects, not citizens.

*Coriolanus* can say much about us to us. Our class divide seems to grow ever more acute, the warring sides increasingly segregated from each other in the principles they believe, the information they consume, even the facts they affirm. Moreover, COVID-19 displayed a problem similar to *Coriolanus*, one related to political choice. One often must decide, not simply between right and wrong, but by weighing distinct goods that circumstances place in tension. This weighing seeks a common good out of disparate parts, thus affirming and encouraging common citizenship. Warriors like Coriolanus and medical experts today may contribute to these decisions. But their narrow focus and purpose often make them inadequate to exercising political wisdom.

Only two characters in the play show some capacity for exercising this wisdom: Menenius and Cominius. Menenius tells a story about internal cooperation and dependence of the body as a picture of a cooperative commonwealth. We hear Cominius, extolling his troops after retreating in a battle, saying, very unlike Coriolanus, that they were “neither foolish in our stands nor cowardly in retire.” This moderation by both men shows a principle and approach that could make a Rome out of its parts.

As *Coriolanus* is a tragedy, so in it these men never truly ruled. Our own story may ultimately turn tragic or comic, based on our capacity to pursue a wise common good. Shakespeare has displayed for us folly and failure to avoid. Whether we listen is up to us.