



Anthropoetics: the Journal of Generative Anthropology

UCLA's first Open Access journal. Published continuously since 1995.



Anthropoetics XXIX, no. 2 Spring 2024 (<https://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/category/ap2902/>)

Fate vs. Election in Shakespearean Drama: The Example of 'Coriolanus'

Peter Goldman

pgoldman@westminsteru.edu

Abstract

In Shakespeare's tragedies, the protagonist is typically called to a new role in the world of the play, as when Hamlet is called to be a revenger by the appearance of his father's ghost. Such moments of calling are the legacy of the Judeo-Christian tradition of election as found in the Bible and medieval literature, although it finds secular expression in Shakespearean drama. Election functions in many of the same ways as tragic fate, responding to a disorder in nature and leading to the protagonist's downfall. Election, however, also includes certain purely human elements that can work against tragic pathos, as we find in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Coriolanus, fate, election, tragedy, catharsis, Bible, ritual, Eric Gans

* * *

A greater power than we can contradict

Hath thwarted our intents.

~Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be.

~Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Shakespearean tragedy is informed by two different models of identity, fate and election, which are related closely to each other but need to be distinguished. As we'll see, in many cases, fate and election are perfectly compatible, and election can serve to reinforce and amplify the action of fate. But ultimately, I argue, they are distinct paradigms that contradict each other. Election, taken to its logical conclusion, can actually serve to weaken fate, as we see in some of Shakespeare's late tragedies and Romances. The latter part of this essay will take up the example of *Coriolanus*.

1. Tragic Fate

In Homer's time, the word "Moirā" or fate was associated with natural order, and so, "Moirā keeps order and assigns limits" (Greene 14). When the cosmic order is threatened, then fate works to bring agents back into their proper relationship. But fate can be indifferent to nice considerations of moral reciprocity. In ancient Greek drama, destiny or Moira was usually tragic in effect, and the justness of its action was sometimes difficult to fathom. The requirements of cosmic order are not always in harmony with human concepts of justice.

Classical fate is a divine causation that may actually precede birth, as with Oedipus; although in some cases, fate is contingent upon an individual's actions. King Laius is told by the oracle that *if* he fathers a child, the child will murder him and marry his wife. But in any case, something destined by the gods or fate cannot be escaped, and Oedipus's efforts to avoid his fate actually serve to bring it about. Even Zeus finds himself forced to submit to fate when his son Sarpedon is marked for death in *The Iliad*. In Homer's epics, the word "fate" is sometimes used as a synonym for death. Fate may be questioned and resisted, but ultimately it must be accepted.

Aristotle argued that in the most effective tragedies, the unintended results of the protagonist's actions, his *hamartia*, help bring about his downfall (16). A random person suffering ruin for no reason is merely horrific, not cathartic. Now, in the case of Sophocles' Oedipus, fate and *hamartia* act together to determine his end; but at the same time, fate operates independently of human will and intentions. The greatest tragedies work to create the feeling that the protagonist's downfall is inevitable. Literary fate can be defined in terms of causes and effects, but it finds its functional meaning as an aesthetic effect. Catharsis depends upon the recognition and acceptance of *ananke*, the necessity of the hero's downfall. The denouement of an effective tragedy produces a sense of sorrow but also healing and relief. The tragic hero's submission to fate models the individual's reconciliation to their community in shared mourning.

It's true of course that *Oedipus Rex*, *pace* Aristotle, is not a typical Greek tragedy, which usually allows a large scope for human choices and their consequences, however unintentional. Nevertheless, the chorus and characters in the tragedies often refer to the inescapable power of fate and the gods, and divine prophecy may determine events. Curses are often proven to be effective. The god Atē is the personification of blind folly: an action temporarily beyond human control. When

a character like Phaedra (in Euripides' *Hippolytus*) acts contrary to her own best knowledge, overcome by *at e* or passion, it's rather different from, say, Brutus's decision to kill Caesar or Macbeth's decision to murder Duncan. Brutus and Macbeth act contrary to their own best knowledge, but they also reason out their decision quite consciously and intentionally. Of course, we do see characters act impetuously and passionately in Shakespeare, as when King Lear banishes Cordelia, but he is convinced that he is justified in his actions.

The fact that chance events play a role in the hero's downfall does not contradict fate but just the opposite. Desdemona's loss of the handkerchief given her by Othello is purely accidental, and the sense of contingency here adds to the pathos of her fate, since all of us are subject to such accidents. At the same time, precisely because such events are contingent, they actually help create the sense that the final resolution is inevitable. In tragedy, what seems contingent turns out to be fated. Contingency is in tension with fate, but they finally work together to create the catharsis of the ending.

There's some controversy about to what extent Shakespearean tragedy is informed by the classical concept of fate.[1] In Shakespeare, because of Judeo-Christian influence, fate is sometimes assimilated to divine Providence, which can be beneficial in effect. In the fifth-act dialogue with Horatio, Hamlet attributes his discovery of the letter commanding his execution to Providence, and Providence presumably allows for his sojourn with the pirates and his return to Denmark. But after hearing the challenge to a trial of arms from Laertes, Hamlet anticipates his approaching death with a sense of doom. He recognizes and accepts his fate, and thus models for the audience the same. However innocent or guilty, he has participated in the larger crisis afflicting Denmark, and so he must suffer the consequences of its correction. Hamlet inhabits a fundamentally tragic cosmos. By the same token, the world of Shakespeare's *Richard the Third* is both providential, allowing for the victory of Richmond, the future King Henry the Seventh, and tragic for Richard the Third; although, unlike Hamlet's fate, there is little ambivalence about Richard the Third's death.

2. Tragic Election

Election, on the other hand, is a Judeo-Christian model of identity that is similar in some ways but ultimately quite distinct from fate. I'm working with Eric Gans's concept of election as he finds it in Renaissance literature. Election is fundamentally concerned with the status of the protagonist in relationship to their audience, on- and offstage. Gans writes,

Centrality is no longer a given [in Renaissance drama]; its conferral must itself be represented. Only a sign of election can distinguish the central figure from the spectator who would otherwise be a rival. (*OT* 151-2)

Because Christianity rejects the hierarchical separation of different worlds (including the esthetic) within the world, from an external model the central figure becomes an internal rival. The center becomes the object of generalized resentment or "suspicion." The inhabitant of the center is required to furnish a guarantee of election. The stage is no longer the structural equivalent of the scenic center; centrality is represented separately from the central figure. (*OT* 153)

The time of neoclassical art is not merely a moment of crisis; it is a moment of election, the original model of which was provided by the second person of the Christian Trinity. (*OT* 155)

Marlowe's or Shakespeare's heroes do not merely struggle for the center; they understand centrality as a role to be played. . . . The source of this role, the sign of their election, remains outside them, and they are aware of their submission to it as well as of their essential detachment from it. (*OT* 152-53)

It's always been recognized that there is something novel about Renaissance protagonists like Tamburlaine, Hamlet, and Macbeth. There's a vast literature on the emergence of secular drama in the sixteenth century. Gans's thesis doesn't contradict the existing scholarship on Renaissance protagonists but rather constitutes an essential addition. All the existing research on this issue has failed to recognize the potential rivalry of the audience and the resulting problem of theatrical authority. Election is a necessary response to the larger crisis of authority during the Early Modern period, a crisis related to a variety of developments—religious, economic, and political—which together unleash rivalry and make the authority of centralized figures problematic.[2]

Election is originally a Judeo-Christian paradigm, but it finds more or less independent expression in Renaissance drama. Macbeth, for example, is called to a new identity as king by the prophecies of the weird sisters. So while election in the Bible called an individual to fulfill God's purpose, theatrical election can actually endanger one's soul, or rather, express one's damnation. King Richard the Third, like Macbeth, is actually elected to his identity as a villain.

In secular drama, election is independent from the question of whether one is saved or damned.[3] Election in Renaissance tragedy should be distinguished from Calvinist predestination, although they are derived from the same root. [4] In Renaissance drama, election has to do with a character's identity and purpose, but first of all it concerns the individual's worthiness for occupying the public stage. Gans explains that election emerges as a defining feature of drama during the Reformation as a result of Protestant egalitarianism and the concomitant release of social rivalry and competition. Whereas classical protagonists enjoyed a mythic or historical sanction for their centralized status, a Renaissance protagonist needs to be authorized by an onstage event—"a sign of election," as Gans puts it—during the time of performance; and as such election becomes a major plot concern of Renaissance drama. Election goes to the core of the identity of the chosen individual, their relationship with others, and the whole action of the play—all driven by the need to compel and reward the attention of the audience. Gans's concept of election raises an important question: how exactly is election different from fate?

3. Fate vs. Election

Election is similar to fate in that the sign of election is sometimes supernatural in origin, expressing the power of larger forces. In any case, it is perceived as coming from outside oneself, and it determines one's identity and role in life. In tragedy, both fate and election lead up to and prepare the spectators for the protagonist's downfall. But election doesn't

precede birth; rather it is an *event* in a character's onstage life, an event that takes place on a scene with an audience, even if that audience is only the person himself being called. Furthermore, insofar as the event of calling is dramatized, as it must be, the spectators constitute an audience.

Another difference from fate is that, even though election is experienced as a calling by an external agent or event, the individual who is called actually seeks out or finds their election, and they are required to actively affirm it. In Jesus's parable of the wedding feast, he concludes that "many are called but few are chosen" (Matt. 22.14, ESV). The parable makes clear that what distinguishes being called from being chosen is the individual's response to their calling. An individual's affirmation of their calling is intentional and thus distinct from what Aristotle calls *hamartia*, an action resulting from an error in judgment. Now, it's true that the affirmation of one's calling may, and often does, involve an error in judgment, as when Macbeth decides to murder king Duncan. (Macbeth errs in believing that he would not be recognized as Duncan's murderer, as his wife proposed.) In the case of Oedipus, however, his fate precedes his *hamartia*, which plays, in a peculiar sense, an accidental role in the fulfillment of his fate. In contrast, an individual is never a purely passive recipient of election. Moses is called to be the prophet and liberator of the Hebrews by the unexpected voice from the burning bush, but at the same time, he in effect seeks out his election by killing a fellow Egyptian, which makes necessary his desert sojourn. Although Moses resists his calling initially, he is soon persuaded to affirm it and to play an active role. When Abraham is called by God to leave his home and go to a land that He would show him, Abraham believed God, and God counted his faith to him for righteousness (Genesis 15.6). In the New Testament, Paul is called to be an Apostle by a voice from heaven on the road to Damascus, an election that he definitely seeks and finds by persecuting Christians. Christ says to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9.4, ESV).

Hamlet is called to take revenge by the appearance of his father's ghost. When his father reveals that he was murdered by his brother, what does Hamlet say? He says, "Oh my prophetic soul!" (1.5.40).^[5] In effect, it is his "prophetic soul" that finds the ghost and his election to be a revenger. He is not an unknowing, passive receiver of his election. Like many others, Hamlet is ambivalent about his calling. He says, "The time is out of joint. Oh, cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!" (1.5.197-8). But ultimately he affirms his election and kills Claudius.^[6] Macbeth's startled reaction to the witches' prophecy, and the following dialogue with his wife, demonstrate that he and his wife were already scheming about how he could become king. Richard the Third's birth deformity is in effect a "sign of election," but the actual event of his calling happens before us onstage, when he describes himself as "Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature" (1.1.19). Since he cannot be a lover, he is "determined to prove a villain" (1.1.30). He understands his calling explicitly as a role to be played, one that involves deceiving and manipulating others. By the same token, Hamlet finds himself compelled to "put an antic disposition on," a theatrical role within the world of the play (1.5.181). The essential point here is that election is always a dialogical relationship, while fate is pointedly not so. It's true that an individual subject to fate may (knowingly or unknowingly) play a role in its fulfillment; and he may be forced to recognize and accept his fate; but these are distinct from an individual's more active role in election. In certain cases, as with Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, we can say that the character himself is the main agent of his calling, although his new identity still subjects him to powers beyond his control.

Election is an event on a scene, unlike fate, which usually originates rather obscurely among the gods, although there is often an oracular pronouncement. Fate is about endings, but election is about a new beginning. Furthermore, election is an ongoing process, which can be repeated and reaffirmed. Hamlet tests the ghost's revelation with the staging of *The Murder of Gonzago*, and the ghost reappears and repeats his calling in the closet scene with Gertrude. Macbeth decides to revisit the three weird sisters and receives a vision that reaffirms his election. Robert McCutcheon notes, "From one perspective, vocation seems instantaneous—a turning point, a choice. From another perspective it is protracted into a livelihood. It inhabits the already-but-not-yet" (342). Election is a continued process that goes well beyond Aristotelian *hamartia*. Gans comments, "the literary performance is from the beginning a variety of initiation rite. . . . the neoclassical era focuses on initiation as the transition between peripheral and scenic existence" (*OT* 158). Election can be compared (and contrasted) to initiation rites, as the passage to a new social role. Gans notes that fate, on the other hand, contradicts initiation:

The classical initiation of the spectator into the communal deferral of resentment operates chiefly by counterexample. Classical tragedy negates the success of initiation: Oedipus deludes himself when he leaves Corinth in search of an adult masculine role and a feminine love-object. (*OT* 158)

Oedipus leaves his home and parents only to find them again.

In the case of Hamlet, his election to his role as theatrical revenger serves to reinforce and amplify the catharsis of his fate. The play assimilates election to fate as an external power that determines his identity and final end. Hamlet, and all the leading characters, are forced to submit to larger forces that are indifferent to modern ideas of moral responsibility. The innocent must suffer along with the guilty. Fate and election, in many cases, are perfectly compatible with each other. Both may serve to create tragic irony, disrupting carefully laid plans, and enabling the catharsis of the ending. Because Hamlet is elected to be a revenger, we accept, with some ambivalence, the necessity of his death.

Even though election distinguishes the person chosen, the underlying idea is leveling. In the Bible the elect are found among the lowest (and sometimes despised) social roles. In the New Testament election is available to all including prostitutes, tax collectors, the blind and the lame. In a sense, one needs election in order to be equal. Renaissance drama, however, is still influenced by the ideal of divine hierarchy, so the protagonists usually have gentle status. Marlowe's Tamburlaine is an exception; he starts as a shepherd, like King David, although we never see him in that role during the time of performance. Tamburlaine begins the play as a highway robber. It's true that classical literature emphasizes that everyone is subject to fate, but in practice it is usually legendary characters who are its victims. And ultimately fate functions to reassert the cosmic order, especially the stark distinction between the divine and the human. Shakespearean drama manages to combine fate and election, so that election often, but not always, works together with fate to affirm the imperative of social order.

Biblical election, however, is opposed to divine hierarchy. The ancient Hebrew's identity as God's chosen people meant rejecting idolatry and, by extension, the political theology of Egypt and surrounding nations. The monotheistic God does not support any independent political hierarchy. In the Old Testament, the institution of kingship is allowed, initially, only as a concession to Hebrew weakness. In the New Testament, the authority of Caesar is granted as a temporary but necessary evil. The absolute distinction between God and his creatures trumps any earthly hierarchy.

The elect are often reformers, in one way or another. Abraham is called to found a new nation that will be a light to the Gentiles. The apostle Paul is elected to preach the gospel to the Gentiles and inaugurate the Kingdom of Heaven. Shakespeare's Richard the Third is often interpreted as the "scourge of God," serving God's purpose in punishing the sinful and making way for King Henry the Seventh. Hamlet is called to set right a "time . . . out of joint." In some cases, the imperative for reform is inverted and demonized. Othello believes his murder of Desdemona will serve justice. He says, "she must die, else she'll betray more men" (5.2.6). By the same token, he kills himself when the true nature of his actions is revealed. Oedipus starts out his play as a reformer, but his efforts at reform are finally turned upon himself. The action of fate is directed to re-establishing traditional order rather than reform as such. Fate is a fundamentally conservative force; while biblical election is iconoclastic and directed to new forms of social order. Renaissance drama incorporates and combines both impulses. Hamlet passionately condemns the hypocrisy and corruption of courtly ceremony, but the final scene serves to reestablish the traditional ceremonial order, albeit with some ambivalence. King Lear, on the heath, makes a devastating critique of social injustice prevalent at all levels of society; the ending of *King Lear* offers us relief but faint hope for the future. In Shakespeare's tragicomic Romances, the imperative for reform finally contradicts tragedy, and social order is re-established on a new, utopian basis that forgoes any claim to realism.

We should remember, however, that for Shakespeare election is first of all a dramatic technique to authorize the central characters and compel our attention. Shakespeare is indifferent to any overtly religious agenda. The development of his dramatic oeuvre expresses different ways of addressing the problem of authority, the declining respect for traditional hierarchy. The Romances represent an aesthetic solution to an aesthetic problem.[7]

Both fate and election are ways of making sacred. But election includes elements that are human and social in nature and thus potentially desacralizing. Election is originally egalitarian, and we've noted the presence of an audience and the important role of individual choice. When election is freed from fate or any sacred powers, then these desacralizing elements come to the fore, and they can work against traditional tragic catharsis.

Fate is fundamentally sacralizing, while election is at least potentially split against itself. Election can be both sacralizing and desacralizing at the same time. Christ's "fate" is to be crucified, but as René Girard points out, we can read the Passion story as the demystification of sacrifice, revealed as scapegoating (*Things Hidden* 180-223).

4. Tragedy and Suffering

We can see the action of fate as a way of understanding the necessity of suffering. It's generally agreed that at least one function of tragedy is the attempt to make sense of human suffering, both emotionally and cognitively. How exactly does catharsis function in this regard?

Aristotle argues that the "finest tragedy" should not show

a thoroughly villainous person falling from good fortune into misfortune: such a structure can contain moral satisfaction, but not pity and terror, for the former is felt for a person undeserving of his misfortune, and the latter for a person like ourselves. Consequently the outcome will be neither pitiable nor terrifying. (16)

I find this passage extremely interesting for several reasons. It's debatable whether there are any "thoroughly villainous" characters in classical Greek tragedy, but we clearly find such in the tragedies of Marlowe and Shakespeare. One could argue that a villain tragedy such as *Richard the Third* or *Macbeth* is actually more "cathartic" (i.e., emotionally satisfying) than a play like *Julius Caesar*, where we feel ambivalent about the death of Brutus, and there are no real villains as such. [8] We can certainly identify with a revenger; but only the revenger's downfall is properly tragic, not the villain who suffers his revenge. So for Aristotle, there are proper and improper forms of "catharsis," and the proper form includes the pity and fear we feel for someone "like ourselves." In other words, we can identify with the tragic hero: we feel pity for his mistakes because we realize we too are subject to such mistakes; and we fear his fate because we understand that the same thing could happen to us. The hero's *hamartia* and fate serve to warn us against overconfidence or hubris.

A melodrama or villain tragedy offers us "moral satisfaction," but it doesn't teach us anything. Rather it only plays to our baser instincts. Shakespeare's *Richard the Third* and *Macbeth*, however, are not simply melodramas. *Macbeth* is a basically good man who makes a tragic mistake, and he realizes, right from the beginning, that he has acted wrongly, even if he never exactly repents. *Richard the Third* is more purely evil, but he is also dramatically and psychologically compelling; and in the fifth act, after his dream in which he is visited by the ghosts of those whom he has killed, he suffers some acute, albeit temporary, pains of conscience. Claudius, in *Hamlet*, also suffers from stings of remorse, which he finds a "heavy burden!" (3.1.55). We can and do feel some regret at the downfall of such villains, as Aristotle would probably admit. A villain or revenge tragedy actually can be properly tragic, even by Aristotle's standards.

Aristotle claims that pity and fear are purged (or purified) by the catharsis of the denouement.[9] Now it's true that pity and fear are not exactly pleasurable emotions, but why do they need to be purged? In fact, pity and fear are healthy emotions that can wisely guide our actions. Almost all spectators and critics agree that tragedy is cathartic, but what exactly is being purged? More precisely, our identification with the protagonist is purged when we accept the necessity of his downfall. Catharsis involves a kind of vicarious satisfaction of our desire for the closure of sacrifice.[10] Put another way, the ambivalent mimetic tensions aroused by the play are resolved by the ending. Such catharsis functions to express

and contain potentially disruptive, antisocial desires and resentments stirred by social hierarchy. Gans observes, "The archetypal tragic hero [or villain] is a usurper of central power" (OT 137). At the same time, the events leading up to catharsis teach us important lessons about what it means to be human. Aeschylus writes,

Zeus, who guided mortals to be wise,
has established his fixed law—
wisdom comes through suffering.
Trouble, with its memories of pain,
drips in our hearts as we try to sleep,
so men against their will
learn to practice moderation.
Favours come to us from gods
seated on their solemn thrones—
such grace is harsh and violent. (*Agamemnon*, lines 209-218)

Suffering is essentially redemptive, for both tragedy and Christianity. Christ transforms evil into good, by accepting it and not resisting, by sacrificing himself. Oedipus accepts his fate and, in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, becomes a prophet and savior for Athens.

In regard to the necessity of suffering, election seems to function very similarly to fate. The books of the Bible are obsessed with the problem of suffering. Adam and Eve are sentenced to a life of toil and hardship ending in death (with a promise of future salvation) after they eat the forbidden fruit. Almost all the heroes of the Bible are more or less tragic figures, despite or rather because of their election. The Bible, like tragedy, recognizes suffering as a source of significance.

We've noted the purely human elements of election, and when these elements are freed from any divine sanction, they can still lead to suffering, but the determination of such suffering can seem merely gratuitous instead of cathartic or meaningful, as we find in certain of Shakespeare's late tragedies.

5. The Example of *Coriolanus*

It's generally agreed that *Coriolanus* is problematic as a tragedy. Our identification with Coriolanus is lacking and so the catharsis of the ending is defective.[11] A. C. Bradley has observed the absence of fate and larger natural forces (458-9). In Shakespeare's source for the play, Plutarch records the impact of supernatural occurrences on several important events in his "Life of Coriolanus." Plutarch also defends the idea that the gods inspire individuals to action at historically significant junctures. Shakespeare included supernatural elements in the Roman plays *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, where they add considerable depth and meaning to the events portrayed. *Coriolanus* is apparently an experimental work: what does tragedy look like without any supernatural forces at play? It's sometimes characterized as an ironic tragedy, which

suggests that what it enacts is not what it means. But what does it mean? I argue that the central problem of *Coriolanus* is election, or more specifically the implicit dialogue between tragic fate and election. The play serves to demonstrate the incompatibility of election, taken to its logical conclusion, with tragedy.

In broadest outline *Coriolanus* follows the traditional formula of tragedy rather precisely: a hero whose pride brings about his humbling and downfall. The fifth act reconciliation scene between Coriolanus and his family certainly achieves a measure of pathos, but the play is missing the key ingredient of fate. The family functions in some of the same ways as fate, as a greater power that determines his end, but Coriolanus's family is unconnected to the cosmic order, unlike *King Lear* and Greek tragedy. As we'll see, family in *Coriolanus* is purely social and finally domestic. Only Coriolanus's almost unbelievable immaturity and lack of foresight bring about his estrangement from his home and family. One could say the same about *King Lear*, but Lear's two oldest daughters' determined infidelity represents a genuine disruption of natural order. Cordelia's refusal to participate in the ceremonial "love test" is pointedly directed to her sisters' hypocrisy; and it is Goneril and Regan (along with their husbands) who begin a civil war. The family dynamic in *Coriolanus* is completely different (more on this below).

Marcus finds election to his heroic identity during the battle for the city of Corioles. He literally receives a new name as a result of his success there. One could say it was fate or chance that allowed for the closing of the city gate upon Marcus, trapping him alone among the Volscian soldiers, but his election is entirely the result of his own actions, when he single-handedly defeats the city's defenders. Marcus's initial election harkens back to the world of ancient epic, where military success is key for identity; his problem is that he inhabits a modern world.[12] There are no gods to help or hinder him in his battles.

For Modernity, authority is never assured; it must be continually reaffirmed, which involves a negotiation with the audience. The problem of authority is ongoing, requiring further elections. So while *Coriolanus* succeeds on the battlefield and wins a new name, he still must stand for election in the modern sense, the counting of votes or "voices," in order to achieve political authority as the consul of Rome. "Authority" is demystified as purely political. Centrality is revealed as dependent upon the spectators. Let's take a look at the circumstances surrounding his election for consul.

The play begins with a riot of the plebeians, which threatens the security of Rome in a serious way, so much so that the patricians find themselves compelled to grant the plebeians a team of political representatives, the tribunes. From his first appearance on stage, *Coriolanus* is defined by his contempt for the plebeians, which he is not shy about expressing. *Coriolanus*'s problematic relationship with the plebeians is actually more important than the military conflict with Aufidius and the Volscians. Even though it is Aufidius and his minions who kill *Coriolanus*, his inability to earn the continued trust of the plebeians is the decisive event that leads to his exile and death. Shakespeare is careful not to take any sides in *Coriolanus*'s conflict with the commoners. Rome is suffering from a shortage of food, and the citizens are rioting because they are hungry. We don't know if the patricians are actually hoarding food, as the citizens claim, but the patricians are evidently not going hungry. *Coriolanus* despises the plebeians because they are not reliable soldiers, and he believes that they don't deserve any special consideration, even during a famine.[13] The plebeians, individually, are portrayed with

some sympathy, but collectively they are virtually the allegorical embodiment of inconstancy, and they are easily manipulated by the tribunes, who are purely self-interested politicians.[14] But the plebeians have valid reasons for distrusting Coriolanus. And Coriolanus believes he has legitimate grounds for despising the plebeians. Whether he is justified in his treatment of them is another question.

The plebeians are not demonized or idealized. Their inconstancy allows for some flashes of comedy, but overall they are less comic than the patrician Menenius. They are presented as flawed human beings, subject to the same foibles as everyone else, including Coriolanus, whose revenge upon Rome is decidedly puerile, not noble. Coriolanus's fatal flaw, if you will, is that he refuses to recognize them as human beings.

In the Rome of the play, the plebeians hold the key role in the social order, and the patricians are represented as helpless in the face of their dissent and revolts. Although Coriolanus would like for the patricians to use their military strength to put down the plebeians with violence, the patricians recognize correctly that such would not be a viable or lasting resolution of the problem. The plebeians, collectively, are simply too powerful and recalcitrant, and they must be appeased.

The world of *Coriolanus* is rather unique among Shakespeare's plays, in that there is no stable basis for social order. Externally, Rome is constantly threatened by invasion from the Volscians, and Coriolanus is apparently their only bulwark from conquest. In purely military terms, he plays a role comparable to Hector for Troy in Homer's *The Iliad*. At the end of the play, after Coriolanus's death, the audience may well wonder if Rome is any safer than it was when Coriolanus was threatening to destroy it. Internally, Rome is threatened by revolts from the plebeians. After Coriolanus is exiled, the tribunes do succeed in quieting the plebeians temporarily, but the political situation of Rome is presented as inherently unstable, reflecting the inconstancy of the plebeians and their distrust of the patricians. There is no firm basis for authority in the city, and no accepted concept of natural order to which anyone can appeal. Menenius's fable of the belly is presented humorously and cannot be taken seriously as a paradigm for social order (1.1.87-153). According to Menenius's parable, the patricians are selflessly distributing the resources of the city to everyone fairly, but in fact, the commoners are hungry and the patricians are not. Moreover, Coriolanus describes the plebeians as diseases and sores upon the body of the state (1.1.165; 3.1.81-2), and the tribunes describe Coriolanus in similar terms (3.1.304-317). Rather than a paradigm of order, the body metaphors serve to illustrate the vulnerability of the state to revolt and corruption.[15] In the world of the play, democracy or republicanism is not a viable solution to the problem of social order. Shakespeare's audience might have seen the answer here as the rise of a Caesar, but such is never presented as a possibility in the play. In larger terms, there are no sacred or natural forces working to direct events toward a stable conclusion.

After Coriolanus defeats the Volscians, everyone expects him to stand for consul. The traditional procedure for doing so involves standing in the central plaza among the assembled citizens, wearing only a minimal gown, displaying the wounds that he has suffered in his defense of Rome, and asking for their "voices" individually among small groups of two or three. A key to Coriolanus's character is that he consistently resists any public acclamation. When the audience is fellow patricians or soldiers, however, Coriolanus can accept their praise, albeit with some reluctance. This is interpreted by those sympathetic to him as modesty. But in his relationship with the plebeians, we can see that his pride is such that he doesn't

like to acknowledge any dependence upon them. By failing to comply sincerely with the ritual, he ironically grants to the plebeians the very authority he wants to deny them. His mother points out that he “might have been enough the man you are / With striving less to be so” (3.2.21-22), by cooperating with the ritual and not giving the plebeians the opportunity to reject him. His scorn for the plebeians ends up being an unintentional tribute to them.

The play makes clear that election depends upon an audience, and for this reason, election is leveling. The central figure and the periphery are explicitly on the same level. The point of the ritual is, first, to demonstrate that the candidate has literally sacrificed himself for the country; and second, that he will continue to do so as consul. The candidate must acknowledge his dependence upon the people, and by doing so he assures them that his new role is one of service, not personal aggrandizement. Such has always been the traditional rhetoric of kingship, but the ritual anointing of a king emphasizes the divine sanction for his authority, which the people are expected to respect and obey. The ritual of standing for the consulship, in contrast, is one of public humiliation, a symbolic sacrifice. Coriolanus is not afraid of sacrifice on the battlefield, which is a contest of equals. But he doesn't regard the plebeians as equals. The ritual of election makes clear that one's response is a determining factor; and it fails in its intended purpose because he cannot affirm his election properly. The play highlights the fact that election, unlike fate, is essentially dialogical in nature.

The ritual of standing for consulship can be compared to Christian sacrifice. The candidate's wounds recall the wounds Christ suffered during his crucifixion, which he displayed to the disciples after his resurrection. The showing of wounds, in both cases, expresses the imperative for moral reciprocity. Christ's sacrifice reflects humans' need for repentance and forgiveness, and it is directed to reconciling God and humans. By the same token, the ritual of consulship is meant to reconcile the plebeians with the need for a political/military leader. It grants the candidate authority as consul, but only on the condition that he sacrifice himself for the community, by protecting them from foreign invasion and serving the greater good—a revisioning of the basis for social hierarchy reflecting the political dynamics of the Roman state. There are no gods involved in this ritual; it is based purely on reciprocity.

When it is suggested that he run for consul, Marcius says,

Know, good mother,
I had rather be their servant in my way,
Than sway with them in theirs. (2.1.201-203)

He would rather serve the city as a soldier, which gives him the freedom to follow his own path. He recognizes that the consul is dependent on public opinion, so that as consul, despite the “sway” of his position, he would be forced to deal with the commoners' concerns and demands, which he regards as illegitimate.

His resistance to political centrality is such that he actually doesn't want to be consul—a determination that he repeats and reinforces in his asides during the ceremony, despite his willing (but reluctant) participation. He stands for election basically because it's expected of him—and to satisfy his mother's ambitions for him—although he does have strong ideas on how the city should be run.

Most Shakespeare's heroes (if not the pure villains) resist their calling to centrality, because they recognize on some level that they are being called to a tragic fate. The tragic irony is that their resistance ends up being the means by which they fulfill their destiny, as when Othello demands of Iago that he provide the "ocular proof" of Desdemona's infidelity (3.3.376). (In the New Testament, Paul's determination to root out Christianity becomes the very means by which he becomes its most influential proponent.) They resist their fate, but at the same time they desperately seek out and find their election. By the same token, it is Marcius' resistance to the established ritual that ends up fueling his final destiny as exile and revenger. But his resistance to election is actually an example of how the play is in dialogue with fate rather than conforming to it. What's key here is his motivation.

Coriolanus makes clear to his friends and family that he believes his participation in the ceremony would be playing a false role, one that involves flattering the plebeians with an honor they do not deserve, an action that violates the integrity of his identity. Shakespeare's villains play a role simply to advance their ambition and resentments. The heroes, both in comedy and tragedy, play a role typically because of corruption in high places or some other danger. But in neither case is there any concern about the *honesty* of playing a role, such as we find in *Coriolanus*. His resistance to playing a role is rather different from the tragic hero's resistance to fate. He rages against the tribunes and plebeians, not the cosmos or evil villains, as we find in other tragedies. Nor does he recognize his own complicity, as do King Lear and Hamlet.

Coriolanus explains his resistance to the ceremony as modesty:

. . . It is a part
That I shall blush in acting, and might well
Be taken from the people. (2.2.145-47)

To brag unto them, "Thus I did, and thus!"
Show them th'unaching scars which I should hide,
As if I had received them for the hire
Of their breath only! (2.2.148-51)

He presents his reluctance as humility, and it's true that he never boasts (except to Aufidius). He regards his heroic actions as simply the ordinary duty of a soldier, and he consistently shuns public approbation. Such is not inherently false, inconsistent, or blamable. But the real reason is that he doesn't like to acknowledge his dependence upon others, especially the ones he despises, the plebeians and their representatives. And in this sense, there is something inherently false and

arrogant in his posture. It's true that his success as a soldier is completely due to his own efforts—the other soldiers abandon him at Corioles—but as a public person, a social creature, we are all dependent upon others for recognition and support. The anthropological truth of cultural centrality is that it depends upon (and is created by) the recognition of an audience. The spectators (both on- and offstage) can plainly see that he is deluded to think his identity and public value are truly autonomous, and Plutarch correctly faults him for his arrogance. Now, on one level, this is the traditional lesson of tragedy, and it's expressed typically in terms of fate and the gods. We are all subject to larger forces to which we must submit ourselves in fear and trembling. But here the larger forces are demystified as comparable to the actual audience of the London theaters, ordinary citizens. Hubris in tragedy is a rivalry with the gods, who take responsibility for its punishment. Marcius, on the other hand, is in rivalry with the plebeians and especially the tribunes, who are, in a sense, even lower than the plebeians, lacking their integrity and charity. The tribunes attack Marcius purely out of self-interest, without any regard for his service and Rome's dependence upon him; while the plebeians recognize his service and deserts—along with his faults.

Shakespeare gives considerable attention to how the citizens of Rome, including the patricians, perceive and understand Coriolanus—his ambivalent and mutable reputation is a major theme of the play. In the opening scene, the plebeians, led by the first citizen, are determined to kill Coriolanus, "and we'll have corn at our own price" (1.1.10-11). When the second citizen objects, the first citizen gives a reasoned argument for why they must proceed in this way and concludes, "I speak this in hunger for bread, not in thirst for revenge" (1.1.22-23). The discussion continues with a consideration of the question why their actions should be directed "especially against Caius Marcius?" (1.1.24-25). One citizen asks, "Consider you what services he had done for his country?" (1.1.28-29). The first citizen replies that his service was motivated by the selfish reason of personal fame. He continues, "Though soft-conscienced men can be content to say it was for his country, he did it to please his mother, and to be partly proud, which he is, even to the altitude of his virtue" (1.1.35-38). The second citizen objects, "What he cannot help in his nature, you account a vice in him. You must in no way say he is covetous" (1.1.39-41). The first citizen grants the point, but objects that even if he not covetous (for wealth or position), as everyone in the play admits, still "he hath faults (with surplus) to tire in repetition" (1.1.43-44). This scene functions, of course, as dramatic exposition, to introduce the audience to Marcius. But it is consistent with Shakespeare's representation of the plebeians as reasonable creatures open to diverse opinions and perspectives. They recognize quite perceptively his faults and his virtues, and they are correct that he is the main voice among the patricians for denying the plebeians any special allowance of food despite their hunger. Following this debate, they listen attentively (if skeptically) and with reasoned comments to Menenius's long-winded fable of the belly. Despite their initial determination to lynch Marcius, they act as a deliberative body comparable to the Roman Senate.

After Marcius wins the battle for Corioles, the Senate meets to consider his election to the consulship, which must be approved by the Senate first and then the people. Before the Senate enters, the first and second officers (officials of the Senate but not apparently patricians) appear on stage and discuss Coriolanus's merits and faults, especially his known resistance to flattering the common people when standing for consul. One officer defends Coriolanus on the grounds that he stands above those politicians who dishonestly compliment the people simply to gain power, while secretly despising them (2.2.7-15). The other officer counters that Coriolanus's refusal to flatter the people goes beyond "noble carelessness"

(about whether the people love or hate him) as the second officer describes it. He observes that Coriolanus is in effect determined to insult them, and he concludes, with finely-pointed ethical judgment, "to seem to affect the malice and displeasure of the people is as bad as that which he dislikes, to flatter them for their love" (2.2.21-23). The discussion concludes with the second officer's observation that Coriolanus's ascent has been by the difficult route of military success, not political machinations, and that for the people to deny him the consulship would be "a kind of ingrateful injury," an assessment seconded by the first officer (2.2.31). One could say that the sophisticated consideration of psychology and politics here belongs to Shakespeare, but it is significant that he attributes these insights to the ordinary citizens of Rome.

Let's take a look at how Coriolanus and the plebeians interact during the election ceremony. Before Coriolanus appears, seven or eight Roman citizens enter on stage and discuss whether they should approve his election to consulship. The discussion centers on their ethical and political duty in this matter. The first citizen says, "Once, if he do require our voices, we ought not to deny him." The second citizen points out, "We may, sir, if we will" (2.3.1-2). They recognize Coriolanus's service to Rome and their obligation to obey the traditions of Rome, which demands his election. But they also understand that, despite the ceremonial apparatus, they are still free citizens who may deny him their voices. The third citizen gives an extended speech on their civic duty in regard to Coriolanus's service to Rome, and he concludes,

If he tell us his noble deeds, we must also tell him our noble acceptance of them. Ingratitude is monstrous, and for the multitude to be ingrateful, were to make a monster of the multitude: of the which we being members, should bring ourselves to be monstrous members. (2.3.8-13)

It's typical of the Roman plays that the common people are referred to with pejorative terms, but it's remarkable that they here show themselves well aware of this stereotype; and they act in precise contradiction to the prejudice; considering well whether their civic duty obligates them to elect Coriolanus. The first citizen objects that it is Coriolanus who promotes the stereotype of the mob: "And to make us no better thought of, a little help will serve; for once we stood up about the corn, he himself stuck not to call us the many-headed multitude" (2.3.14-17). The citizens continue with a witty and funny discussion of what exactly it would mean for them to be a "many-headed multitude" if the label were taken literally (far from being a mimetically-driven mob, they wouldn't be able to agree on anything). They are capable of an intelligent debate about their proper duty as citizens; and they are clever enough to play with words as the poets do. The word play among lower-class characters is not just a convention of Shakespearean drama; it is a well-deserved tribute to the wit of the common people of Rome/England—a tribute that contradicts Coriolanus's poor opinion of them.

Following this discussion, Coriolanus appears with Menenius and in private conversation with him he denigrates the plebeians insultingly, as he continues to do in asides during the ceremony. He addresses the plebeians:

Coriolanus: You know the cause, sir, of my standing here.

Third Citizen: We do, sir; tell us what hath brought you to't.

Coriolanus: Mine own desert.

Second Citizen: Your own desert!

Coriolanus: Ay, but not mine own desire.

Third Citizen: How not your own desire?

Coriolanus: No, sir, 'twas never my desire yet to trouble the poor with begging.

Third Citizen: You must think, if we give you anything, we hope to gain by you.

Coriolanus: Well then, I pray, your price o' th' consulship?

First Citizen: The price is to ask it kindly.

Coriolanus: Kindly! Sir, I pray, let me ha 't. I have wounds to show you, which shall be yours in private. —Your good voice, sir; what say you?

Second Citizen: You shall ha' it, worthy sir.

Coriolanus: A match, sir. There's in all two worthy voices begged. I have your alms: adieu.

Third Citizen: But this is something odd.

Second Citizen" An 'twere to give again,—but 'tis no matter. (2.3.63-84)

He shows himself reluctant to play his role in the ceremony, to even state out loud why he is there, or to give the plebeians any respect or due. He claims that he is there only to claim his "desert," as if his merit and its rewards were completely independent of any public recognition, and this during a ceremony that is directed to precisely the purpose of public recognition—a recognition of the plebeians' rights in reciprocity with the candidate's merits. His claim, "'twas never my desire yet to trouble the poor with begging," is disingenuous, since it gives a pejorative meaning to what is intended as a dignified civic ceremony. The citizen replies, "You must think, if we give you anything, we hope to gain by you" (2.3.) The citizens recognize that the ceremony is meant to affirm the reciprocity between a ruler and the people. All the citizen asks is that Marcius respect them, "ask it kindly," and affirm the purpose of the ceremony. I can't imagine a more gracious answer to Coriolanus's passive-aggressive comments here.

The plebeians, of course, after Coriolanus leaves for the next group, recognize well that he is in effect insulting them: "But this is something odd, . . . An 'twere to give again,—but 'tis no matter." But they graciously choose to ignore the insult and grant him their votes anyway.

The fourth citizen challenges Coriolanus with a paradox:

You have deserved nobly of your country, and you have not deserved nobly.

Coriolanus: Your enigma?

Fourth Citizen: You have been a scourge to her enemies, you have been a rod to her friends; you have not indeed loved the common people. (2.3.87-93)

A fair and accurate assessment of Coriolanus's merits and faults. Coriolanus replies,

You should account me the more virtuous that I have not been common in my love. I will, sir, flatter my sworn brother, the people, to earn a dearer estimation of them; 'tis a condition they account gentle. And since the wisdom of their choice is rather to have my hat than my heart, I will practice the insinuating nod and be off to them most counterfeitly. That is, sir, I will counterfeit the bewitchment of some popular man and give it bountiful to the desirers. Therefore, beseech you, I may be consul. (2.3.94-103)

When Coriolanus says, "You should account me the more virtuous that I have not been common in my love," this sounds like it could be a compliment to the people, but in fact he is saying he doesn't love the common people because they don't deserve it. Whether that should be accounted "virtuous" or blindly arrogant is a debatable question. In what follows, he claims that the common people only want flattery, not honest recognition; they want his "hat" rather than his "heart"—a completely unjustified and nonsensical assertion. He then says he will doff his hat to them "counterfeitly" and counterfeit the "bewitchment" of the stereotypical politician. He seems to be claiming the virtue of honesty; but in fact he openly proclaims his hypocrisy and expects the hearers to accept it as such. He sarcastically calls their supposed desire for lies and flattery "the wisdom of their choice," which is a direct insult to the plebeians. The fifth citizen politely replies,

We hope to find you our friend; and therefore give you our voices heartily.

Fourth Citizen: You have received many wounds for your country.

Coriolanus: I will not seal your knowledge with showing them. I will make much of your voices, and so trouble you no further.

Both Citizens: The gods give you joy, sir, heartily! (2.3.103-110)

Throughout the exchange with Coriolanus, the plebeians are consistently courteous, gracious, and honest. We can't assume they don't understand his barely-disguised insults. Rather they recognize him as a distinguished soldier and his merits, on that basis, for the consulship. They choose diplomatically to overlook his insults. They are realists, in effect, hoping for the best from a candidate who at least doesn't make empty promises. They put their civic duty above their personal interests. It's not clear that Coriolanus ever acts with similar disinterestedness.

A little later in this scene, after Coriolanus leaves and the tribunes arrive, the citizens realize, "He mock'd us when he begg'd our voices," and another replies, "Certainly he flouted us downright" (2.3.159-60). The first citizen defends him, but the rest of the citizens are agreed that "He used us scornfully" (2.3.163). They remember that he never actually showed them his wounds or recounted his "noble deeds," as the ceremony demands. The tribunes remind them that they were "fore-advised" to try to obtain from Coriolanus promises about their future treatment, which, if he made, they could have held him to; or, if he responded with "rage" to their demands, they could have rejected him upon evident grounds (2.3.192-200). Perhaps the citizens felt constrained by the protocol of the ceremony. In any case, it is only when the tribunes incite them that they decide to reverse their approval and deny him their voices.

As we observed above, Coriolanus resists the ceremony because he sees his part in it as inherently false and in that sense theatrical. He doesn't believe it possible for a patrician honestly to honor the plebeians. His mother agrees but defends the role-playing with Coriolanus's own doctrine that a military commander can deceive the enemy about the true strength (or weakness) of his forces with perfect honor (3.2.43-63). So we see that Coriolanus actually doesn't have any principled objection to deceit in situations unconcerned with the obligations of honor. How then do we explain his objection to playing a role before the plebeians, a crucial plot point that is Shakespeare's invention, not found in Plutarch? The deeper issue is not the supposed theatricality of the ritual (as many critics have assumed[16]), what Coriolanus perceives as the element of deceit or insincerity; but the fact that the ritual involves giving homage to the plebeians, recognizing the value of their "voices." Now, it's true that for Coriolanus to pay homage to the plebeians would be lying or at best flattery, since he despises them. But there are two problems with his position. First, the plebeians don't deserve his hatred. Shakespeare emphasizes that they act with charity, respect, and dignity during the ceremony and elsewhere, despite Coriolanus's open contempt for them. Second, the ceremony itself is fully justified by the principle of moral reciprocity and the importance of the plebeians to the city. It is not fundamentally intended to be theatrical but rather representational. It's only Coriolanus's aberrant vanity that makes it theatrical. By being "true to himself" Coriolanus denies the larger truth that the citizens have certain inherent political rights. We don't need to be Marxists to recognize the value of the working class and their need for adequate food. Ironically, later in the play, Coriolanus's mother, Volumnia, accuses him of playing a part in his *refusal* to make any concessions to his fellow Romans: "Thou hast affected the fine strains of honor, / To imitate the graces of the gods . . ." (5.3.149-50). There is certainly some complexity to the moral issue here, since the plebeians can be inconstant, on and off the battlefield; but no more so than anyone else in the play. After all, the patricians finally acquiesce in Coriolanus's exile (4.5.79-83; 4.6.118-121); and Coriolanus himself reverses his loyalty to the city. There are no real villains in the play, although the tribunes come close to being so. But despite the moral ambiguity at play here, the fact remains that Coriolanus's despite for the plebeians is almost completely unjustified. His resistance to election fits the formal requirements of tragedy, but it contradicts fate on every level. Election, taken to its logical conclusion here, works against fate and the catharsis of the ending. By emphasizing the role of the audience and the perversity of Coriolanus's response Shakespeare undermines our identification with Coriolanus and the logic of tragedy, which demands our sympathy with the hero in his opposition to greater powers.

As we saw, Coriolanus finally does agree to beg the plebeians for their "voices," but his heart is obviously not in it. The plebeians' response is similarly ambivalent; they approve him at first, but they are easily persuaded by the tribunes into rejecting him. When he argues publicly against giving the plebeians any voice, the tribunes accuse him of "treason" (3.1.174) and sentence him to precipitation from the Tarpeian rock, sparking a street battle between the plebeians and patricians. The patricians eventually persuade the tribunes to proceed with some semblance of legal order, and Coriolanus is subjected to a public trial of sorts. His friends and mother plead with him to repent and appease the plebeians, and he agrees to do so. But at the trial, when the tribunes charge him with being "a traitor to the people" (3.3.71), he cannot restrain himself and intemperately curses the tribunes, whereupon they sentence him to banishment.

The trial functions as Coriolanus's calling to a new identity as an exile and revenger, an election that he emphatically affirms. When the tribunes pronounce a sentence of banishment, he curses the tribunes and the people profusely in extravagant terms and concludes: "I banish you! . . . Despising / For you the city, thus I turn my back. / There is a world elsewhere" (3.3.133, 143-45). By banishing Rome he ironically affirms his responsibility for his sentence. In private conversation with his family and friends, he says,

. . . though I go alone,
 Like to a lonely dragon that his fen
 Makes feared and talked of more than seen, your son
 Will or exceed the common or be caught
 With cautelous baits and practice. (4.1.30-33)

The dragon, we know, is not only a lonely creature but also a vengeful one. Coriolanus understands his election in cosmic, fated terms, and he predicts that he will win fame or be killed by treachery. Again, he seeks an identity comparable to that of Achilles in *The Iliad*, a world governed by fate. But the audience understands that his "fate" is purely the result of his immature lack of self-discipline, quite unlike Achilles' noble rage, which was directed to a king, not the commoners. Achilles' rage (as expressed in his determination to withdraw from battle), however ethically problematic, was recognized and sanctioned by his divine mother, Thetis, and then by Zeus.

In his exile, Marcius goes to Rome's enemies, the Volscians, and arrives at the home of his military nemesis, Aufidius. Clearly his exile from Rome is a turning point for his character. As an exile, he is exposed to larger forces, in ways that he has not acknowledged before. He shows himself well aware of the vulnerability in his situation, and he addresses the men on the street of Antium with a new humility. Rather than challenging Aufidius to single combat, he bares his neck to him and asks for mercy. Rather than playing a role, however (as some critics have claimed), he is honest about his situation. [17] He recognizes and acknowledges what it means to be an exile. This is an important step towards his final end, and one that fits the logic of tragedy. The play does not completely refute tragedy, but rather puts election into a dialectical relationship with fate. His election as exile does lead to his final end. Election, in this case, brings out the inherent paradox of tragic fate, a paradox that finally undermines it in *Coriolanus*. In his exile, he begins to develop some empathy with the audience. But he is his old irascible self in his conversation with Aufidius's servants, and likewise in his immediate determination to destroy Rome.

The tragic hero is almost by definition a victim (a term derived from the Latin *victima*, a person or animal killed in a religious sacrifice). This is obvious in a tragedy of good vs. evil, like *Othello* or *King Lear*, despite the hero's *hamartia* or complicity. Even in the tragedies with no real villains, we can certainly say that the protagonist is "fortune's fool" (*Romeo and Juliet* 3.1.135). Now, in the case of Coriolanus, he wants to see himself as a victim and in effect a tragic hero. As far as he's concerned, he has no choice but to despise the plebeians, and he has no choice but to express his despise. He sees his exile as completely undeserved, and he seems to believe that he has no choice but to ally himself with Rome's enemy the Volscians. In a soliloquy, Coriolanus speaks on the irony of his making friends with the enemy against whom he has so

ferociously fought (4.4.12-26). But the play records no real reflection on his part about his decision to do so. He justifies it weakly as follows: "My birthplace hate I, and my love's upon / This enemy town" (4.4.23-24). In other words, since Rome has expressed its hatred for him, he believes he has no choice but to hate Rome in return and make battle upon it. But in fact it is his own perversity that is responsible for his situation. Choosing to hate Rome is another example of his precipitous and ill-considered arrogance. His friends, family, and the patrician class are still loyal to him. Before he leaves, Cominus offers to accompany him in his exile, with the well-justified assumption that he will be called back to Rome sooner or later (4.1.38-44). Presumably, Coriolanus could have stayed at any one of the more wealthy patricians' country estates during his exile. So even though he is (very briefly) humbled by his vulnerable status as an exile in a foreign state, which adds to his pathos for spectators, at the same time, it is only his childish willfulness that puts him into this situation. And his identity as refugee is soon replaced with that of successful general and revenger; but not a sympathetic revenger like Hamlet, whose uncle was a fratricide and regicide. His determination to destroy Rome at the head of a Volscian army is psychologically plausible but at the same time a further expression of his lack of maturity. He never considers how it will affect his family, friends, or the numerous individuals who had nothing to do with his exile.

When Coriolanus arrives outside Rome with the Volscian army, Cominus goes to the Volscian camp and pleads with Coriolanus for mercy. He returns to Rome and reports:

I offered to awaken his regard
 For 's private friends. His answer to me was,
 He could not stay to pick them in a pile
 Of noisome musty chaff. He said 'twas folly,
 For one poor grain or two, to leave unburnt
 And still to nose th' offense. (5.1.23-28)

Thus dismissing all regard for his friends and family. When Menenius appeals to him, he says, "Wife, mother, child I know not" (5.2.83).

The fifth act reconciliation scene of Marcius with his mother/family is one of Shakespeare's great dramatic achievements; it bears comparison with King Lear's reunion with Cordelia, or the exchange of forgiveness between Hamlet and Laertes at the end of that play. By giving in to his mother's eloquent plea, Marcius finally accepts his common humanity, and he recognizes the imperative of his approaching death. Nonetheless, Marcius's election to his identity as exile and revenger works against the tragic pathos of the reconciliation scene and his death at the hands of Aufidius and his minions. Election foregrounds the role of the audience, which is demystifying in the case of *Coriolanus*, showing centrality as the result of the periphery's attention, whether in adulation or hatred, not an independent quality of the centralized figure. By insulting the plebeians, Marcius seeks out and creates his newfound identity to such an extent that we can no longer regard it as the result of larger forces but purely his own invention. It's obvious that his revenge is completely unnecessary and ignoble, so our reception of his forsaking his revenge must be conditioned by this knowledge.

In many tragedies, the family functions as part and parcel of the larger forces that drive the plot. Aristotle notes that the betrayal of family ties is one of the most effective ways of evoking pathos (18). In Aeschylus's *The Eumenides*, the Erinyes or Furies are specially dedicated to punishing those who violate family bonds. The family, in effect, is a reflection of the cosmic order; and this is reinforced by the fact that we are usually dealing with a royal family or one of mythic status, associated with the gods. Such, however, is not the case in *Coriolanus*. It's true that Marcius, his family, and Valeria are members of the patrician class and descended from distinguished ancestors. But the play functions to degrade any respect we might have for the authority of the patricians in terms of class status. They are helpless in the face of the commoners' revolts, and they are powerless to prevent Marcius's exile. Moreover, without Marcius's help, they are unable to defend Rome effectively from foreign invasion. As individuals, Marcius and his family have great dignity, but Volumnia is no more sympathetic than Marcius; and Marcius's too close relationship with his domineering mother seems abnormal, as many critics have noted.

The reconciliation scene includes numerous references to the gods and "Great Nature." When Marcius first sees his family, he says,

My wife comes foremost; then the honored mold
 Wherein this trunk was framed, and in her hand
 The grandchild to her blood. But, out, affection!
 All bond and privilege of nature, break!
 Let it be virtuous to be obstinate.
 What is that curtsy worth? or those doves' eyes,
 Which can make gods forsworn? I melt, and am not
 Of stronger earth than others. My mother bows,
 As if Olympus to a molehill should
 In supplication nod: and my young boy
 Hath an aspect of intercession, which
 Great Nature cries 'Deny not.' Let the Volsces
 Plough Rome and harrow Italy, I'll never
 Be such a gosling to obey instinct, but stand,
 As if a man were author of himself
 And knew no other kin. (5.3.22-37)

Marcius recognizes the claims of "affection . . . All bond and privilege of nature"; his wife's "doves' eyes," which "can make gods forsworn." But he remains determined to deny his loyalty to his family, which contradicts the principle of honor to which he has devoted his whole life. His insistence upon autonomy is taken here to its logical and absurd conclusion. Marcius again repels our sympathy for him. He has betrayed not only his country and family but also himself, his deepest principles. To claim, as he does, that he will "stand, / As if a man were author of himself / And knew no other kin," expresses his consistent drive to independence; but in this situation it is at the same time a betrayal of his even more

fundamental drive to honor, which includes fidelity to one's tribe (his mother's speech makes exactly this point [5.3.142-48]). His situation, in a sense, reflects the conflict between election and fate, insofar as election is sought out and affirmed. Marcius would like to see himself as the victim of a tragic fate, but the play actually works against that interpretation.

Othello and Macbeth also betray their own deepest principles, a betrayal that is fundamental to their tragic pathos; but Othello and Macbeth are the victims of persuasive evil agents, however guilty they may be in acceding to evil. Brutus, on the other hand, in *Julius Caesar*, believes he is remaining faithful to his highest principles (even while he betrays his loyalty to Caesar), and he honestly fails to recognize (until too late) the Machiavellian plotting that surrounds and finally engulfs him. Coriolanus stands alone among Shakespeare's tragic heroes in terms of his willful self-betrayal.

When his mother kneels to him to begin her pleading, Marcius responds,

What's this?
 Your knees to me? to your corrected son?
 Then let the pebbles on the hungry beach
 Fillip the stars! Then let the mutinous winds
 Strike the proud cedars 'gainst the fiery sun;
 Murdering impossibility, to make
 What cannot be, slight work. (5.3.56-62)

He emphatically asserts the disorder in the cosmos, the reversal of natural order represented by his mother's action. But we can't help but see his descriptions of this disorder as hyperbolic and histrionic, especially given his prior complicity. Unlike Lear's invocations of the final apocalypse, it's hard to take Marcius completely seriously here, however sincere his words may be. What could be more natural than for Volumnia to plead for mercy from her son, when facing the destruction of her home and family? It is only her stubborn pride and Marcius' choice to attack Rome that makes for the reversal. What Marcius fails to recognize is that it is his disloyalty to Rome that is an unnatural disruption of the social order, not his mother's plea. His extravagant description of the event reflects his peculiar relationship with his overbearing mother.

When addressed by his wife Virgilia, Marcius responds,

Like a dull actor now,
 I have forgot my part, and I am out,
 Even to a full disgrace. Best of my flesh,
 Forgive my tyranny; but do not say
 For that, 'Forgive our Romans.' (5.3.40-44)

His reference to himself as a “dull actor” is significant, because election in Shakespearean drama is typically (meta)theatrical—which can add to the pathos of the character, suggesting that they are the pawn of greater powers—but here it suggests the opposite, that his identity is essentially false on some level, despite the fact that he sees himself as the emblem of authenticity. When he compares himself to an actor, he affirms the theatrical aspect of election. In a sense, he has been called to play a role his whole life (first of all, by his mother). Gans writes, “Shakespeare’s heroes do not merely struggle for the center; they understand centrality as a role to be played” (*OT* 152). Such can add to our sympathy for the hero’s plight; but in this case, it works against it; because the role of revenger is so artificial and self-willed.

Finally overcome by the power of his mother’s plea, Marcius takes her hand, and, after a moment of pregnant silence, he exclaims,

O mother, mother!
 What have you done? Behold, the heavens do ope,
 The gods look down, and this unnatural scene
 They laugh at. Oh my mother, mother! Oh!
 You have won a happy victory to Rome;
 But for your son—believe it, oh, believe it!—
 Most dangerously you have with him prevailed,
 If not most mortal to him. But let it come—. (5.3.182-189)

This is a moment of great tragic pathos, no doubt; he finally recognizes and accepts his shared humanity, as must we all in the face of death. But this powerful moment is in dialogue or rather contrast with his former choices, not any cosmic agents, despite his invocation of them. Or rather, the larger forces are entirely domestic and all-too-human.

Marcius admits his kinship, love, and duty to his family and country, and that is certainly to his credit. The reference to the gods looking down and laughing at “this unnatural scene” seems intended to invoke a cosmic, tragic context. But at the same time, the gods “laugh at” Marcius’s plight, which undermines the gravity of the situation. The threat to burn Rome and betray his family is undoubtedly serious, but there are no greater powers at play here, only Marcius’s purely personal animosity and willful blindness.

Let’s backtrack a little to Volumnia’s speech to Coriolanus. Her plea emphasizes her divided duty; on the one hand, to the safety and success of her son; but also her love for family and country:

. . . Thou barr’st us
 Our prayers to the gods, which is a comfort
 That all but we enjoy; for how can we,
 Alas, how can we for our country pray,

Whereto we are bound, together with thy victory,
 Whereto we are bound? Alack, or we must lose
 The country, our dear nurse, or else thy person,
 Our comfort in the country. We must find
 An evident calamity, though we had
 Our wish, which side should win; for either thou
 Must as a foreign recreant be led
 With manacles thorough our streets, or else
 Triumphantly tread on thy country's ruin,
 And bear the palm for having bravely shed
 Thy wife and children's blood. (5.3.104-118)

Marcius is similarly divided between his pledge to the Volscians and his loyalty to his family and city. It appears that one way cannot be chosen without betraying the other. The forced choice between two dreadful alternatives is the classic stuff of tragedy. But the tragic choice here is really a false dichotomy. Marcius's promise to the Volscians was to "fight / Against my cankered country" and put their interests ahead of Rome's (5.3.95-96). Volumnia proposes a solution that is arguably to the best advantage of both countries:

If it were so that our request did tend
 To save the Romans, thereby to destroy
 The Volsces whom you serve, you might condemn us
 As poisonous of your honour. No, our suit
 Is that you reconcile them, while the Volsces
 May say "This mercy we have showed," the Romans,
 "This we received," and each in either side
 Give the all-hail to thee and cry "Be blest
 For making up this peace!" (5.3.132-140)

Most critics, following Coriolanus's suggestion (5.3.187-189), assume that he betrays the Volscians by making a peace treaty and that his doom is sealed thereby, but I take the opposite position.^[18] The Volscians might well find the Romans more valuable as a tributary ally. If Rome was sacked and burned, as Marcius planned, the survivors would be forever hostile to the Volscians. (The sacking and burning of Troy, we might remember, did not turn out well for the Greeks, in the aftermath.) After Coriolanus agrees to make a treaty, Aufidius says to himself, "I am glad thou hast set thy mercy and thy honor / At difference in thee. Out of that I'll work / Myself a former fortune" (5.3.200-202). In the final scene, Aufidius pretends to be offended that Marcius broke his promise and forwent sacking Rome, but actually he is glad that Marcius made the treaty, since this gives him an excuse to murder Marcius and assume his former position of leadership. The rest

of the Volscians apparently approve the peaceful resolution; when Marcius returns to Corioles, he comes marching with drums and colors, accompanied by the commoners. His speech to the assembled city presents the treaty as a great triumph for the Volscians, and there is no anticipation of a counterargument.

The Volscian soldiers might well have been upset at the treaty, but, except for the conspirators, they nonetheless happily acclaim Marcius and their success on his ceremonial entry into Corioles. When Aufidius denounces Marcius, and his minions attack him, several Volscian lords protest against his slaying. The people that approve his killing cry out against him not because he has supposedly betrayed the Volscians in his military campaign against Rome, but because they suddenly remember that he killed their family members (5.6.126-28). Volumnia's solution really is successful and beneficial for all. It is only Aufidius's personal and therefore contingent envy that results in Marcius's death, not any cosmic fate. Even if Rome had been sacked and burned, Aufidius presumably would have found some excuse to murder Marcius sooner or later anyway. After Marcius is killed, the leading Volscians immediately regret the deed, and one says to Aufidius, "Thou hast done a deed whereat valor will weep" (5.6.139). Even Aufidius admits, "My rage is gone, / And I am struck with sorrow" in his final speech (5.6.153-54). Their regret contributes to the tragedy, but it also makes his death seem almost accidental. Aufidius is supported by the crowd at the moment of the murder, but immediately afterward everyone repents Marcius's death. A rather unconvincing end to an unconvincing tragedy, qua tragedy.

6. Conclusion

The primary question of aesthetics, in my view, is what makes a work of art compelling for its original audience? For the ancient Greeks, the inventors of epic and tragedy, it was stories of the larger-than-life men and women of the Heroic age along with the gods they worshipped. The Judeo-Christian tradition taught the world, however, that ordinary people could be the subject of compelling literature if they are called to a singular destiny. Augustine is called to his special role in Christian history by a mysterious voice in the garden, *tolle lege, tolle lege*. Dante is called to be a poet by his encounter with Beatrice on the street, as he recounts in *La Vita Nuova*; and he is called to be the inspired seer of *The Divine Comedy* by the appearance of Virgil, who in turn was sent by Beatrice. The recorded lives of medieval saints often include a visionary moment of calling, which finds confirmation in miracles and martyrdom. Shakespeare's tragic heroes are the heirs of this tradition, which finds more or less secular expression in his plays, although the question of salvation or damnation may be relevant, and supernatural forces are often involved. The problems posed by the protagonists' calling or election drive the plots of Shakespeare's tragedies.

There are many commonalities between the literary expression of tragic fate and Judeo-Christian calling. They both involve trials, temptations, and suffering. Shakespearean drama manages a brilliant synthesis of fate and election. This synthesis is addressed to the problem of public authority for the audience (their potential rivalry with the stage figures) in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. Shakespearean tragedy focuses on the causes, moment, and consequences of election, the drama of which becomes the source of its compelling power. Election differs from fate, however, in that the all-too-human subject of election must seek out, find, and affirm their election; and the centrality bestowed by election is always found in

relationship to an audience. While these largely human elements can be and usually are assimilated to the tragic paradigm, when taken to an extreme, they are desacralizing and work against traditional tragic catharsis, resulting in ironic tragedies such as *Coriolanus* or *Timon of Athens*.

Works Cited

Aeschylus. *Agamemnon*. Trans. Ian Johnston. <http://johnstoniatexts.x10host.com/aeschylus/agamemnonpdf.pdf> (<http://johnstoniatexts.x10host.com/aeschylus/agamemnonpdf.pdf>). 2002.

Aristotle. *Poetics*. Trans. Richard Janko. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987.

Bradley, A. C. *Second Annual Shakespeare Lecture: Coriolanus*. 1912. *Proceedings of the British Academy, 1911–1912*. 1976. V. 5: 457–473.

Brower, Reuben A. *Hero and Saint: Shakespeare and the Greco-Roman Heroic Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971.

— — —. Introduction. *Coriolanus. The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972. 1312-1322.

Brown, Andrew S. "Ridiculous Subjects: *Coriolanus*, Popular Representation, and the Roman Tribunes in Early Modern Drama." *English Literary Renaissance* 52.2 (Spring 2022): 229-259.

Gans, Eric. "Form Against Content: René Girard's Theory of Tragedy." *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*. Jan./Jun. 2000: 53-65.

— — —. *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.

Girard, René. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Research undertaken in collaboration with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort. Trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987.

Goldman, Peter. "Staging the Emergence of Metadrama in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*." *Anthropoetics: The Journal of Generative Anthropology* 28.2. Spring, 2023.

— — —. "*The Winter's Tale* and Antitheatricalism: Shakespeare's Rehabilitation of the Public Scene." *Anthropoetics: The Journal of Generative Anthropology* 17.1 (Fall 2011). <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1701/1701goldman/>.

Greene, William Chase. *Moira: Fate, Good, and Evil in Greek Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948.

Halliwell, Stephen. *Between Ecstasy and Truth: Interpretations of Greek Poetics from Homer to Longinus*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

Heath, Malcolm. Introduction. *Poetics*. By Aristotle. Trans. Malcolm Heath. London: Penguin, 1996. vii-lxvii.

Hunter, Robert G. *Shakespeare and the Mystery of God's Judgments*. Athens, Georgia, 1976.

Kermode, Frank. Introduction. *Coriolanus*. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974. 1392-1395.

Lehnhof, Kent. "'Rather say I play the man I am': Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and Elizabethan Anti-theatricality." *Shakespeare and Renaissance Association Selected Papers 23*, ed. Byron Nelson (2000), 31-41. Available at https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/english_books/5/ (https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/english_books/5/).

McAlindon, Tom. *Shakespeare Minus 'Theory'*. 2004. New York: Routledge, 2016.

McCutcheon, Robert. "The Call of Vocation in *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*." *English Literary Renaissance* 41.2 (Spring 2011): 332-374.

Ormsby, Robert. "*Coriolanus*, Antitheatricalism, and Audience Response." *Shakespeare Bulletin* 26.1 (2008): 43-62.

O'Toole, Fintan. *Shakespeare is Hard But So is Life: A Radical Guide to Shakespearian Tragedy*. Rev. Ed. London, Granta, 2002.

Paster, Gail Kern. "'To Starve with Feeding': The City in *Coriolanus*." *Shakespeare Studies* 11 (1978): 123-144.

Plutarch. "The Life of Caius Marcius Coriolanus." *Plutarch's Lives, Englished by Sir Thomas North in Ten Volumes*. Vol. Three. 1579. London: J.M. Dent, 1910.

Rozett, Martha Tuck. *The Doctrine of Election and the Emergence of Elizabethan Tragedy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.

Sanders, Eve Rachele. "The Body of the Actor in *Coriolanus*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 57.4 (Winter, 2006): 387-412.

Shell, Alison. *Shakespeare and Religion*. London: Bloomsbury, 2010.

Shakespeare, William. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare, Seventh Edition*. Ed. David Bevington. Pearson, 2014.

Notes

[1] For the argument that fate is not operative in Shakespearean tragedy, see, for example, Fintan O'Toole, *Shakespeare is Hard But So is Life* (Granta, 2002), pp. 24-25. In my view, the opposition between free will and fate is a philosophical problem, not a literary one. In tragedy, they work together with no contradiction. Tragic and epic protagonists, Classical and Renaissance, are free agents who can and do make free choices. Tragic irony depends on the fact that the protagonist's free actions contribute to his downfall. Fate actually works together with free will. Free will is a necessary condition for fate, considered as a literary effect.

[2] On the early modern crisis of authority, and how Shakespearean drama responds to the potential for rivalry and resistance in the audience, see Peter Goldman, "Staging the Emergence of Metadrama in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Anthropoetics: The Journal of Generative Anthropology* 28.2 (Spring, 2023).

[3] Martha Tuck Rozett, in her *The Doctrine of Election and the Emergence of Elizabethan Tragedy* (Princeton, NJ: 1984), views Renaissance tragedy as deeply indebted to the medieval morality play tradition, whereby many Elizabethan tragedies are fundamentally concerned with the question of salvation or damnation for the leading characters. I agree that the heritage of the "Everyman" morality plays is important, but on a different level than that proposed by Rozett. Each person's life, in Protestant preaching, is a drama of salvation or damnation; and Hamlet deals explicitly with these possibilities, for himself and others. But salvation or damnation is not a concern in many tragedies—Shakespeare's Roman plays, for example. The importance of the morality play tradition for Renaissance drama is not just the question of salvation/damnation in the narrow sense, for leading characters, but rather in that the life of each individual spectator is potentially a drama of cosmic proportions (at least from the individual's perspective), just as with the Apostles Peter, John, Thomas, Judas, and Paul—ordinary men who went through intense trials and tribulations on their life's momentous journey. Classical tragedy and morality plays are structured to facilitate identification with the protagonist, but in Renaissance drama such identification becomes a problem to be solved—a problem that, for many critics, is not satisfactorily resolved, as for example with T. S. Eliot's critique of *Hamlet*. In any case, election is addressed to this problem. I argue that because the spectators are potentially rivals to the onstage figures, in terms of the drama of their lives, the representation of election is ultimately addressed to the question of authority in the protagonist's relationship to their on- and offstage audience. Election calls the protagonist to a new identity and drives the plots of the plays. Salvation/damnation may be relevant, but it is not the primary issue in tragic election.

[4] Some critics have argued that English Renaissance tragedies are concerned with whether the protagonist is predestined for salvation or damnation. See Robert G. Hunter, *The Mystery of God's Judgments* (Athens, Georgia, 1976); Alison Shell's chapter on "Providence, Fate, and Predestination" in *Shakespeare and Religion* (Bloomsbury, 2010), pp. 175-222; and Rozett, *The Doctrine of Election*. It's true that salvation or damnation is often an explicit concern, but such is never represented as the effect of predestination. Dr. Faustus and Macbeth, for example, are both presented as free agents who

make deliberate choices leading to their damnation. In Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, the question is not whether Faustus was predestined to hell at his birth, but whether a person who knowingly sells his soul to the devil can ever sincerely repent and find salvation. The problem for villains such as Claudius and Macbeth is that repentance would involve public confession of their crimes, which would result in their execution by the state. Their fear of death and public humiliation is greater than their fear of hell.

[5] All Shakespeare quotations are from *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare, Seventh Edition*, ed. David Bevington (Pearson, 2014).

[6] Rozett writes that in *Hamlet* and similar works "the catalyst triggering the protagonist's transformation is the appearance of a ghost" (p.182). Rozett doesn't notice how it is Hamlet's "prophetic soul" that calls forth the ghost, or how Hamlet's calling reinforces (or not) his tragic fate. She is mainly interested in the moral ambiguity of revenge for an Elizabethan audience; so that Hamlet's revenge becomes in effect a casuistic case of conscience for the spectators. Hamlet, on the other hand, is only concerned with whether the ghost is truly his father or a damned spirit. He never questions the legitimacy of killing his father's murderer. Rozett writes, "The revenger's descent into hell is a terrifying reversal of the morality play protagonist's regeneration" (p. 182). But Hamlet is mainly troubled about his moral culpability for *not* taking immediate revenge. After Hamlet's death, Horatio expresses the hope, "flights of angels sing thee to thy rest" (5.2.362).

[7] On Shakespeare's turn to Romance, see Peter Goldman, "The *Winter's Tale* and Antitheatricalism: Shakespeare's Rehabilitation of the Public Scene," *Anthropoetics: The Journal of Generative Anthropology* 17.1 (Fall 2011).

[8] The exact meaning of "catharsis" in Aristotle's *Poetics* is open to question. In Aristotle's *Politics*, the catharsis produced by music is associated with "healing," "pleasurable relief," and thus, apparently, some form of emotional purgation—a meaning that it retains in ordinary English usage: Aristotle, *Politics* (1342a4-15), qtd. in Malcolm Heath, Introduction, *Poetics* (London: Penguin, 1996), p. xxxviii. The sorrow and regret experienced at the ending of a Shakespearean tragedy is obviously different from the audience response to "blowing away the bad guys" during a Hollywood film. Tragic catharsis includes some ambivalence, not least because "pity" and "terror" are contradictory (but not mutually exclusive) emotions. Without entering into the debate around Aristotle's usage of catharsis in the *Poetics*, I would suggest that the ending of a Shakespearean tragedy typically includes some emotional release in addition to other, more constructive responses.

[9] There's some controversy over whether catharsis in Aristotle's *Poetics* should be interpreted in terms of purgation or purification. Stephen Halliwell argues persuasively that Aristotle's usage of catharsis in his *Poetics* includes positive education and ethical functions in addition to simply emotional release, and the religious notion of catharsis as purification helps clarify these constructive effects. See Stephen Halliwell, *Between Ecstasy and Truth: Interpretations of Greek Poetics from Homer to Longinus*, (Oxford University Press, 2011) pp. 208-265. Moreover, purgation and purification are broadly

overlapping in meaning, not mutually exclusive. Purgation is a form of purification and vice-versa. In any case, when it comes to understanding the effects of a tragedy's denouement, our own knowledge and experience are a better guide than Aristotle's helpful but cryptic comments.

[10] See Eric Gans on this point: "Form Against Content: René Girard's Theory of Tragedy," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* (Jan./Jun. 2000), p. 54.

[11] For a concise account of the debate surrounding *Coriolanus* as a tragedy, see Frank Kermode's Introduction to *Coriolanus* in *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Houghton Mifflin, 1974), pp. 1392-95. Kermode describes *Coriolanus* as "a tragedy of ideas, schematic, finely controlled" (p. 1392).

[12] See Reuben A. Brower for a comparison of Coriolanus with Achilles, as well as a discussion of *Coriolanus* in relationship with the ancient Greek, Roman, and Renaissance epic traditions: Introduction to *Coriolanus* in *The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), pp. 1312-1322; and *Hero and Saint: Shakespeare and the Greco-Roman Heroic Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 354-381.

[13] Bradley cites evidence from the play that the commoners actually are effective soldiers, and he defends the commoners against Coriolanus's other criticisms of them, p. 462.

[14] The tribunes have their defenders, but space considerations here prohibit a detailed discussion of what is only a minor point in support of my thesis. In any case, the evidence that they are purely self-interested politicians is fairly obvious. For a discussion of the larger historical, literary, and political contexts for Shakespeare's representation of the tribunes, see Andrew S. Brown, "Ridiculous Subjects: *Coriolanus*, Popular Representation, and the Roman Tribunes in Early Modern Drama," *English Literary Renaissance* 52.2 (Spring 2022), pp. 229-259.

[15] See Kermode on the "analogy of the body politic with the human body" in the play, pp. 1393-94.

[16] Several critics have pointed out that Coriolanus's resistance to the election ceremony is comparable to the criticisms leveled against the London theaters by antitheatricalists. In both cases, class hierarchy is stake. Coriolanus's fears that he will debase himself by playing a role are similar to the antitheatricalists' fears that actors pretending to be who they are not will undermine the legitimacy of established social roles (especially the congruence between appearances and reality) for both actors and audience. But there are crucial differences between the election ceremony and a theatrical performance that have not been appreciated. A staged play is openly fictional, while the election ceremony is not intended to be fictional but rather an expression of reciprocity between plebeians and the candidate. It is only Coriolanus's inability to respect the plebeians as human beings that makes for any deceit. In his speech to the Senate, he objects to the purpose of the ceremony, not just its form (3.1.93-115, 122-164). He opposes giving the plebeians any voice in Rome's affairs. The fact that Coriolanus sees his participation in the ceremony as "theatrical" or false is tangential to the issue of recognizing that

the plebeians have certain fundamental political rights as citizens. The issue is not deception as such, but the particular content of the deception in this case. On antitheatricalism and *Coriolanus*, see Kent Lehnhof, "Rather say I play the man I am': Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and Elizabethan Anti-theatricality," *Shakespeare and Renaissance Association Selected Papers* 23, ed. Byron Nelson (2000), pp. 31-41; Eve Rachele Sanders, "The Body of the Actor in *Coriolanus*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 57.4 (Winter, 2006), pp. 387-412; Robert Ormsby, "*Coriolanus*, Antitheatricalism, and Audience Response," *Shakespeare Bulletin* 26.1 (2008), pp. 43-62.

[17] For the claim that *Coriolanus* plays a role in his exile, see Lehnhof, "Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*," and Sanders, "The Body of the Actor."

[18] See, for example, Gail Kern Paster, "'To Starve with Feeding': The City in *Coriolanus*," *Shakespeare Studies* 11 (1978), pp. 141-2. Tom McAlindon goes so far as to claim that Volumnia herself "must know" that the success of her plea will result in *Coriolanus*'s death: *Shakespeare Minus 'Theory'* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 129.

ap@humnet.ucla.edu (mailto:ap@humnet.ucla.edu)

Last updated: April 8, 2024 at 10:10 pm

Copyright 2024 Anthropoetics