

# *Playing the Man He Is: Role-Playing in Shakespeare's "Coriolanus"*

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SHAKESPEARE'S ADAPTATION OF Plutarch's *Life of Coriolanus* plays with a theme obsessively his, traceable to such an early play as *The Taming of the Shrew* where the disjunction between public and private selves gets its initial comic treatment. By the time of the second tetralogy of history plays, the necessity for people to conduct themselves in ways alien to their sense of what is most real and most authentic in their personalities has lost much of its original comic swagger. One of the reasons why Hal, for instance, is Shakespeare's most sophisticated political hero lies in his understanding of the need to operate in the political arena with an artistic Machiavellian hypocrisy, even though such an understanding produces the ennui he feels at having to rub shoulders with the likes of Nym, Bardolph, and the rest of Falstaff's cronies. "Doth it not show vilely in me to desire small beer?" (*Henry IV, Part II*, II.ii.5-6)<sup>1</sup> he asks Bardolph. At times like these, we may think back to his first and frankest soliloquy in *Henry IV, Part I*, where he tells us that, like the sun, he will permit the base, contagious clouds, "the foul and ugly mists / Of vapors" (I.ii.190-91) — the Nym, Bardolphs, Petos, and the Falstaffs — to smother up his beauty from the world until he decides the time for time's redemption. As he says, he has sounded the bass-string of humility, but we should not expect him to enjoy doing so (though many critics still seem to think he does), not even in his duets with Falstaff's *basso buffo*.

Hal's adoption of what has become the traditional rascalion role for the Prodigal Son to play exposes the bankruptcy of his father's tactics in dealing with his fractious nobility. Henry's inability to be anything but the inflexible, heavy-handed authori-

tarian in the first and second parts of *Henry IV* helps to precipitate England into further civil strife and to intensify an already unhappy personal isolation. In the two middle plays of the tetralogy Henry fails to recognize the need to deal in more serpentine ways with lawless resolute like Hotspur and Worcester, nor does he recognize the Machiavellian role-playing of his own son. He cannot see how like his own idea of himself Hal really is. As a consequence his suffering becomes more and more debilitating until he dies at the end of *Henry IV, Part II*, as Falstaff had foreseen, "from much grief, from study and perturbation of the brain" (I.ii.109-10). In contrast to his father, Hal is the consummate tactician, actor, and manipulator whom we watch working on his performance in isolated self-sufficiency, revealing his true feelings and his more authentic self only in the occasional bitter aside. He chooses his own humiliation.

Others in Shakespeare's plays of this period have to abase themselves because of some irresistible external compulsion which thrusts their role-playing on them. Hamlet's is a case in point. Hamlet begins as a kind of subdued Coriolanus figure contemptuously defiant of the pressure on him to conform to the pragmatic self-indulgences of Claudius' court. His anger is particularly aroused by Gertrude's imputation of dishonesty on his part, of inauthentic expressions of feeling about his father: "Seems, madam? Nay it is. I know not 'seems'" (I.ii.76). He soon does know seems, however, after seeing the Ghost, for the "antic disposition" he then assumes to bedevil and mystify his opponents transforms him bewilderingly from ascetic to madcap. It is difficult to imagine Coriolanus voluntarily adopting the manner of either of these role-players, despite his own sensitivity to the baleful thrust of simple words, "Mark you / His absolute 'shall'?" (III.i.89-90). At least Hal actively desires small beer, and Hamlet takes a savage delight in hoisting his opponents with their own petard. And yet throughout his play Coriolanus finds himself faced with the same necessity to sound Hal's bass-string of humility, to fool hostile observers to the top of his bent.

There are other recurring figures in Shakespeare's plays much closer in spirit to Coriolanus — those who cannot play a part under any circumstances, whose authentic natures cannot be

tamed whatever the external compulsions. Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing* — a cardboard villain in a romantic comedy — is such a one, insisting on his perverse integrity at his own and everybody else's expense: "I must eat when I have stomach and wait for no man's leisure; sleep when I am drowsy, and tend on no man's business" (I.iii.14-16). He places himself determinedly beyond all social constraints, delighting in his massive, sullen individualism even though his freedom to indulge it is ultimately self-sacrificing. As a result of his unwillingness to play any other role than the one of plain-dealing villain (as he himself boasts) his effectiveness in the pursuit of villainy is cripplingly diminished. He is a walking advertisement for his vocation, and Beatrice's witticism at his expense reflects this: "How tartly that gentleman looks! I never see him but I am heart-burned an hour after" (II. i.3-4). For the greater part of an earlier comedy, *The Taming of the Shrew*, Kate seems to be a female version of the same manic integrity. Like Don John's, her apparent unwillingness to compromise prevents her from getting what she may truly want — in her case, some suitors of her own to match those pursuing Bianca. In Petruchio she encounters a force as irresistible as Coriolanus, and is tamed by it — or so it seems. Petruchio himself belongs to yet another category of Shakespeare's role-players — those who do not mar their authentic natures a whit by their performances. (Iago is the supreme example.) In Petruchio's interpretation of rampaging masculinity he only exaggerates traits already firmly ingrained — his role-playing consists largely in playing hyperbolically himself.

If Coriolanus had been asked to play an exaggerated version of himself (which he does most of the time anyway) in order to succeed, he would presumably have had little difficulty in turning in a respectable performance. The large gesture and hyperbolic acclamation come naturally to him, despite his disgust with other people's hyperbolic acclamations about him. But the situation in *Coriolanus* demands that he play Hal's role rather than Petruchio's, which he tragically (and sometimes comically) cannot do. His first half-hearted attempt to tame his natural asperity occurs in Act II, Scene iii, the scene where he has to put on the "napless vesture of humility" (II.i.223), as he sardonically refers to it, to

beg the stinking breaths of the populace. He himself shrewdly foresees his own inability to master the necessary histrionics for the occasion: "It is a part / That I shall blush in acting, and might well be / Taken from the people" (II.ii.142-44). One way to avoid the embarrassment of an exercise in hypocrisy is to construct a performance that comes as perilously close as possible to being a failure — to undermine at every turn the appearance of sincerity in the role with intimations of a very different kind of sincerity, the one felt by the man behind the actor. A dangerous business, as Hamlet more than once discovers. Although Coriolanus dutifully parades himself before the citizens, wearing the gown of humility, his every other word makes it obvious that he is only going through the motions, and in as insulting and sardonic a manner as he dares. "I will," he says "practise the insinuating nod and be off to them most counterfeitedly" (II.iii.95-96). In the next act he has another burst of sarcastic confidence in his acting ability, "I'll mountebank their loves, / Cog their hearts from them" (III.ii.132-33). As it turns out, the cogging *is* done most counterfeitedly. The suspicion he arouses by his parodic performance — "But this is something odd" (II.iii.79) says the Third Citizen — breaks out into open resentment. Having had time presumably to reflect upon the experience, the Third Citizen can say less than one hundred lines later "Certainly / He flouted us downright" (II.iii.154-55). And from this realization on the citizens' parts it is but a short step for them — prodded by the Tribunes, Sicinius, and Brutus — to "revoke" their "sudden approbation" (II.iii.245-46) of Coriolanus for consul.

We have been well prepared for Coriolanus' inability to control his real feelings in this scene. The play's first act establishes him as instinctively, blindly verbal, unable to prevent himself (not wanting to prevent himself) from saying exactly what he feels, especially to and about those whom he despises. His opening words reveal him at his most unpleasantly uncompromising, contemptuous of anyone who will condescend even to pass the time of day with the citizens. "He that will give good words to thee will flatter / Beneath abhorring" (I.i.162-63) he says to them, unaware that his scornful words follow hard on Menenius Agrippa's crafty courtship of the citizens in speeches full of such

good words as "my countrymen," "my good friends," "mine honest neighbors." The delicate comedy of Shakespeare's treatment of Coriolanus in this opening scene is underscored by the tolerant affection Coriolanus feels for Menenius who by his good words should be beneath abhorring. In his tactical inauthenticity, Menenius is exactly what the patricians would like Coriolanus to be. As *l'homme moyen sensuel*, Menenius is the play's chief placator and willingly gives himself over to what Coriolanus considers to be a repellent fraternizing with the people and their representatives.

The opening act also establishes Coriolanus as the equally uncompromising heroic warrior, winning his third name for his heroism at the fall of Corioles. Though we are not meant to take all this splendour lightly, there is the occasional comic deflation culminating in the ninth scene when Coriolanus refuses to listen to those "acclamations hyperbolic" (I.ix.50) of Cominius, his general, incurring Cominius' mild rebuke, "Too modest are you, / More cruel to your good report than grateful / To us that give you truly" (I.ix.52-54). Coriolanus calls Cominius' admiration "praises sauced with lies" (I.ix.52), the bounty Cominius offers him "A bribe to pay my sword" (I.ix.38). Although some critics think that Coriolanus' modesty here, and in the next act before the Senate, constitutes a saving grace in a man given to extremes of behaviour, it is more accurate to view Coriolanus' rejection of the honours due to him as just as extreme — as pathological even — and acknowledged to be so in the comradely joke Cominius makes at Coriolanus' expense: "By your patience, / If 'gainst yourself you be incensed, we'll put you, / Like one that means his proper harm, in manacles, / Then reason safely with you" (I.ix.54-57). Coriolanus' narcissistic humility — inherently comic — reaches a climax in the next act where he simply cannot bear to hear Cominius' public eulogy of his deeds, rushing from the Senate chamber determined not "To hear my nothings monstered" (II.ii.75). Nothings monstered! Indulging once again a modesty at Cominius' expense, he therefore does not hear Cominius' sonorous recital of his martial biography and misses what the New Penguin editor of *Coriolanus* calls "one of the finest pieces of epic poetry in English."<sup>2</sup>

If Coriolanus cannot bear to hear the glorious truth about himself, if he looks “upon things precious as they were / The common muck of the world” (II.ii.123-24), it should hardly be surprising that he would be so vehement when he believes himself to be dealing with those who *are* the common muck of the world, the citizenry of Rome. As a consequence of his snobbish intransigence towards the people, Cominius, Menenius, Volumnia, and various unnamed Senators spend most of their appearances in the play attempting to persuade Coriolanus to play the role that will persuade the citizens to approve his appointment as consul. Coriolanus’ allies insist that he must disguise his true nature, like Hal, be as much of a manipulator (for a while at least) as Menenius who spends his time cajoling and flattering those whom he, like Coriolanus, basically also despises, telling them pretty tales like the parable of the belly. What Menenius and the others advocate is a playful, condescending way of dealing with an unpleasant reality — the way of Hal, of Petruchio, of the Lords with Christopher Sly, of Hamlet with Polonius. The patriicians’ encouragement of Coriolanus’ play-acting is the most potent instance of their attempts to persuade him to do their bidding in a play filled with the rhetoric of advocacy. It opens, for instance, with the oratory of the First Citizen wittily attempting to incite his fellow citizens to violence against Coriolanus. With the arrival of Menenius, the language of persuasion takes on silken trappings in his attempt to persuade the citizens that it would be ungrateful madness to turn on the noblest Roman of them all. A comic variant on this pattern occurs in Act IV when Menenius, Sicinius and Brutus combine forces to try to restrain Volumnia and Virgilia (her gracious silence notwithstanding) from their expressions of uncontrollable anger over Coriolanus’ banishment.

Irresistible pressure is put on Coriolanus in the two great scenes of persuasion at the heart of the play — Act III, Scene i and Act III, Scene ii. In them all the main Roman characters — except Sicinius and Brutus of course — do their best to force Coriolanus to sue for the citizens’ grace and favour, and both scenes are full of exhortations to him to act the part, “stoop to th’ herd” (III. ii.32) as Menenius contemptuously puts it, “spend a fawn on ’em” (III.ii.38-39) as Volumnia says. The severest pressure

comes from Volumnia who has the surest grasp of the tactics needed. Strong-minded though she may be, her verse at its most persuasive emotionally charts a perilous course semantically as this extract with its wavering pronouns illustrates:

If it be honor in your wars to seem  
 The same you are not, — which, for your best ends,  
 You adopt your policy — how is it less or worse,  
 That it shall hold companionship in peace  
 With honor, as in war; since that to both  
 It stands in like request? (III.ii.46-51)

The passage's syntax contradicts Volumnia's insistence on the ease with which honour and policy can be "unsevered friends" (III.ii.42) in peace and war. Despite Menenius' awestruck response to her ratiocinative powers, her language here and later ("I would dissemble with my nature" (III.ii.62)) exposes the morally suspect character of the theatrical contract she wants Coriolanus to agree to: turn against your real self, she urges, use words you don't mean, divorce them from reality, lie. The precariousness of her position is further emphasized in her use of that eloquent yet homely simile when she advises Coriolanus to be as "humble as the ripest mulberry / That will not hold with handling" (III.ii.79-80). Not to hold with handling also reminds us of Coriolanus' physical revulsion from Rome's populace; he can never permit himself to be handled.

Despite his best intentions, Coriolanus' second and more flamboyant attempt to play Hal fails miserably. "You have put me now to a part which never / I shall discharge to th' life" (III.ii.105-06) he says, and his metaphor from the theatre is taken up by his eager managers — "we'll prompt you" (III.ii.106) Cominius promises; "perform a part / Thou hast not done before" (III.ii.109-10) urges Volumnia. And then for a heady interval it appears as though Coriolanus — like Hamlet, Hal, Petruchio, and Kate before him — might indeed have the wit, the sarcastic histrionic ability, to see it through on these counterfeiting terms. But the more eloquent and sarcastic he becomes in taking the inventory of his antic disposition, the more the gall rises in him, so that his abrupt, climactic renunciation of the role seems inevitable:

I will not do't,  
 Lest I surcease to honor mine own truth  
 And by my body's action teach my mind  
 A most inherent baseness. (III.ii.120-23)

"Mine own truth" — Polonius' authentic self — the integrity that confounds Don John. In Coriolanus' case, however, his own truth goes far beyond the simple-mindedness of Polonius' copy-book maxims about a normative moral authenticity or Don John's equally simple-minded adherence to a stubborn individualism. To the other characters, Coriolanus seems the embodiment of some implacable, heroic force, an agent of unshunnable destiny, the incarnation of the capricious power of the gods. According to Aufidius, Coriolanus speaks divine things like Jupiter; Cominius views his leadership of the Volscians as something supernatural, "he is their god. He leads them like a thing / Made by some other deity than nature, / That shapes man better" (IV.vi.91-93); Menenius thinks "His nature is too noble for this world" (III.i.255). His mother revels — terrifyingly — in her conception of him as some automaton wading impersonally through a sea of blood, doing deeds of cold ferocity. On the battlefield Coriolanus is irresistible, like "shunless destiny" (II.ii.110) according again to Cominius who can never deny the asking of one whose "rare example made the coward / Turn terror into sport" (II.ii.101-02). Coriolanus worships at the shrine of his own integrity and constancy. He sees himself as if made of monumental alabaster, impervious to change and temptation: "And I am constant" (I.i.234) he pontificates. "You keep a constant temper" (V.ii.90) Aufidius says when Coriolanus resists the blandishments of Cominius and Menenius. The Second Watchman echoes Aufidius' judgement: "He's the rock, the oak not to be wind-shaken" (V.ii.104-05).

All these confident pronouncements on Coriolanus' essentially undeviating nature, his own truth, are obviously untrue, as we have already seen. But even if they were completely true, we recognize that the notion of the self they embody has little to do with our modern-day conception of an authentic self as something hidden deep in the unconscious, disguised rather than revealed by our public behaviour. Coriolanus' authentic self is irre-



pressibly social, both in the sense that he cannot prevent himself from expressing it — rather than disguising it — publicly, and in the more significant sense that it is determined by a concept of public service and public display drummed into him by his mother from the cradle. Menenius' description of the Roman state in the play's opening scene could just as well be a description of Coriolanus himself. Menenius talks of Rome as an irresistible force

whose course will on  
The way it takes, cracking ten thousand curbs  
Of more strong link asunder than can ever  
Appear in your impediment. (I.i.65-68)

It is easy to imagine these lines, in their rolling enjambement, describing the furious course of Rome's archetypal patrician Juggernaut, Coriolanus, whose authentic self is not one like Don John's or Hamlet's or Petruchio's but the extreme expression of the mores of the Roman patrician, warrior caste, depending on the existence of a valued mode of social conduct for him to be truly what he truly is. Hence he is most false to his nature not so much when he tries to placate the citizens by playing ineptly a Machiavellian political role as when he attempts to redefine himself as someone divorced from his social reality as the quintessential Roman. When he betrays his caste after its members have betrayed him, he betrays that which gives him definition as a unique human being, and his alienation is mirrored in the cruder, parallel example of self-alienation in the character of Aufidius who, in a much more ruthless fashion, abandons the principles that made *him* what he was.

When Coriolanus turns on Rome he turns on himself. Banished from Rome, he no longer has an authentic self; like Othello he no longer exists when his occupation is gone; he is nameless and in the fifth act almost speechless. As Cominius says:

He was a kind of nothing, titleless,  
Till he had forged himself a name o' th' fire  
Of burning Rome. (V.i.13-15)

It seems as though Coriolanus can only be authenticated by Rome, standing or burning — a view of Rome that is fundamen-

tally a mystification. It is a Platonic version of the city-state, an abstraction, that has nothing to do with the complicated political reality — the one we have experienced throughout the play — that is really Rome; it has more in common with the bogey-Rome that Menenius uses to frighten the citizens with in the play's first scene. So that when Coriolanus says to his mother, "Would you have me / False to my nature? Rather say I play / The man I am" (III.ii.14-16), we realize that, insofar as he has been modelled on an illusion, we may well say that, without knowing it, he has all his life been playing the man he is.

We can see therefore why Coriolanus' third and most important submission to the wills of others in the fifth act takes the form it does. He is able to resist all of Volumnia's arguments (including, as I understand it, the threat of a family suicide) except her terrible observation that he will be remembered by posterity solely as Rome's destroyer; his Volscian name will be equated with a barbaric act of destruction, "This fellow had a Volscian to his mother; / His wife is in Corioles, and this child / Like him by chance" (V.iii.178-80). In the face of such a prospect, Coriolanus' will collapses; no longer can he "stand / As if a man were author of himself / And knew no other kin" (V.iii.35-37). No man is author of himself, least of all Coriolanus whose mother is Volumnia and whose father is Rome. He returns therefore to his authentic self when he sees that his stand against Rome is merely play-acting, "Like a dull actor now, / I have forgot my part, and I am out / Even to a full disgrace" (V.iii.40-42). He returns, in other words, to the part he can never forget, his idealized, aristocratic Roman role; he reverts to playing the man he is; and thus the tragedy of Rome is averted at the expense of its chief citizen and most innocent protagonist.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> References to Shakespeare are from *The Complete Works*, ed. Alfred Harbage (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1969).
- <sup>2</sup> G. R. Hibbard (ed.), *Coriolanus* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: New Penguin Shakespeare, 1967), p. 213.