

The Coming of Coriolanus

by

Whitall N. Perry

Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 9, No. 4. (Autumn, 1975). © World Wisdom, Inc.

www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

He wants nothing of a god but eternity and a heaven to throne in.

Shakespeare

Coriolanus and Aufidius: Angel and Titan; the chronicled facts are meager—myth and history intertwined. According to tradition, Caius (or Gaius, or Gnaeus) Marcius Coriolanus was a fifth century B.C. Roman hero descended from the patrician house of the Marcii and raised fatherless by his widowed mother, Volumnia. Already as a stripling he had gained renown on the battlefield, thrusting back Tarquinius Superbus, the expelled Roman despot who was engaged in a final desperate assault to recover Rome—and for which deed of bravery Marcius won his first oaken garland. Yet while beloved at home by the nobles and the senate for his valour and probity, he earned nothing but the contumacy of the people in turning a deaf ear to what they rightly or wrongly considered their grievances and oppression under the upper classes; and he watched to his vexation the senate yield before the entreaties of the plebeians to have their interests represented by five elected tribunes, of whom the first two were the seditious-minded demagogues Sicinius Velutus and Junius Brutus.

The Romans at this time were warring with the Volscian nation, whose principal city, Corioli, was under siege (493 B.C.); and it was here that Marcius extraordinarily distinguished himself, entering the gates virtually singlehanded and conquering on all sides through might of stroke, swiftness of foot, and daring of soul, with a voice and a look that transfixed the enemy in terror. Emerging bloodied but triumphant—to the amazement of all, he left his wounds unattended while rallying to the hard-pressed flank of the consul Cominius, who was engaging the Volsces in the field. A complete Roman victory resulted, with Marcius all the more astonishing those present by slighting his prowess and wounds, and refusing a share in the spoils. Cominius, however, seized the occasion to honour Marcius for his signal exploit at Corioli with the title “Coriolanus”.

In Rome, meanwhile, the tribunes were fomenting dissension by pretending that the dearth of corn—resulting from the neglect of agriculture during this period of wars—was contrived by the senate to keep the people subjugated. Because of his lofty bearing and uncompromising manner, Coriolanus for all his popular acclaim was made the butt of the people’s discontent; and thus when his name was duly proposed for consulship, it was no difficult matter for Sicinius and

Brutus to play on the commoners' fear of impending tyranny, thereby circumventing his election. Coriolanus, moreover, did nothing by flattery or other means to help his cause, but on the contrary showed himself inflexible, so that when shipments of corn began arriving from the provinces, he inveighed in the senate against its distribution to the people except upon the abolition of the tribunes, whom he castigated as factious rabble-rousers, while at the same time chastising the senators for their vacillation in the face of a popular uprising. This brought a mob howling at his heels, which was held at bay by the young nobles, warriors, and patrician friends of Coriolanus, who together even fended off the aediles ordered by the tribunes to arrest him. Things finally reached a pass where the tribunes bid the aediles to seize their prey and fling him headlong off the Tarpeian rock, but again these efforts were repulsed, until it was ultimately agreed that Coriolanus should be given a public trial, to which he willingly consented. His attempts, however, at answering a series of false and malicious charges led to his accusation as a traitor, and the tribunes by means of a rigged vote got him condemned to perpetual banishment.

With no show of emotion, Coriolanus quit the gates of Rome—to the jubilation of the plebeians and distress of the patricians—he being the only man apparently untouched by this misfortune.

The inhabitants were soon to undergo sensations of another order upon discovering to their horror that Coriolanus had returned to the outskirts of the city heading a Volscian army through an alliance he had formed at Antium with his former foe, the dreaded Volscian leader Tullus Aufidius. Coriolanus, the very man who in his youth had driven back the banished Tarquinius was himself, now exiled in turn, ready to sack the city he had formerly saved; and Rome was this time without a champion to dispatch. The plebeians were all at once howling for the repeal of his banishment, alleging the great love they had always really had for his person; and the senate upon deliberation was moved to delegate ambassadors chosen from his closest friends to plead their cause. The menacing vanquisher proving totally obdurate, a body of priests was next sent in full procession, but with no better hearing.

Then an amazing spectacle ensues: Coriolanus is seated in his camp, when he beholds a party of women advancing, led by his mother, Volumnia, who is accompanied by his wife Virgilia and their children, along with Valeria, a noblewoman of the highest rank. The proud warrior steps forward to embrace his family, and after summoning the Volscian council, lets his mother speak. The humble, prayerful eloquence with which she pleads her and her country's distress wins him to compassion, and he ordains a peace that will be honourable for both belligerents. "You have gained a victory," he tells Volumnia, "fortunate enough for the Romans, but destructive to your son; whom you, though none else, have defeated."

Coriolanus consequently broke up camp and led the Volscians homeward, while the jubilant Romans celebrated their deliverance by erecting a temple in honour of the goddess Fortuna. Aufidius, meantime, felt his inveterate hatred for Caius Marcius mounting along with uncontrollable envy, first, because he had been frustrated in his ambition to crush the Romans, and secondly, because he saw the flower of his people rallying around their new leader to his

own neglect. As a result—in keeping moreover with what Coriolanus foretold his mother—Aufidius had conspirators assassinate the hero, who was afterwards buried by the Volsces with the greatest honours befitting a noble warrior.

The Volscian leader was himself killed in subsequent battle, and his nation became disunified until it finally had to submit on humiliating terms to the yoke of Rome.

* * *

William Shakespeare drew the material for his play, *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*, from Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, as translated by Sir Thomas North in 1579 from James Amyot's French rendering.

In Plutarch's eyes, Coriolanus for all his virtues and noble qualities has the grave faults of "ungraciousness, pride, and oligarchical haughtiness", being a man of "unsociable, supercilious, and self-willed disposition... combined with a passion for distinction... ambitious always to surpass himself" which becomes "absolute savageness and mercilessness... [he] never imagining that it was the weakness and womanishness of his nature that broke out, so to say, in these ulcerations of anger."

Critics likewise find Shakespeare's Coriolanus "haughty", "arrogant", "passionately self-willed", a man of "passionate rage" who "renounces in angry egoism his principles... in his deadly need for revenge."¹

But it is a good question: why did Shakespeare with his enormous imagination and intelligence infused by a triple genius—spiritual, psychological, and poetico-dramatic—bother at the very summit of his career to write this play at all? And the point of this paper is to demonstrate that the playwright, true to his usual alchemy, is delivering a threefold message simultaneously spiritual, cosmological, and social in bearing.

Spiritual: here Shakespeare, as in so many if not all of his plays, is exploiting the theatre as a microcosmic abridgement of the Universe on which to stage the drama of the human soul in its quest for self-knowledge or spiritual enlightenment; and it is known that the aptly named Globe Theatre was proportioned to the cosmological principles conveyed in Hermetic geometry delineating the *fabrica mundi*, or hierarchized grades of existence.² The leading characters portray basic potentialities in the human being as such—whether for good or evil, while the subordinate actors represent different elements, aspects, and factions of the soul in varying degrees of order or disorder. Coriolanus' bosom friend, the aging patrician Menenius Agrippa, even speaks about "the map of my microcosm", and he chides the complaining citizens with the

¹ Cf. the Cambridge Edition Text, as edited by William Aldis Wright, 1936.

² Cf. Frances A. Yates: *The Art of Memory* (London, Routledge and Regan Paul, 1966). When the first Globe burned down in 1613, Ben Jonson exclaimed, "See the World's ruins!"

following allegory which Shakespeare had from Plutarch, who calls it “celebrated”. Here is how the Greek biographer tells it: “It once happened that all the other members of a man mutinied against the stomach, which they accused as the only idle, uncontributing part in the whole body, while the rest were put to hardships and the expense of much labour to supply and minister to its appetites. The stomach, however, merely ridiculed the silliness of the members, who appeared not to be aware that the stomach certainly does receive the general nourishment, but only to return it again, and redistribute it amongst the rest.” Shakespeare’s Menenius concludes the image in these words:

The senators of Rome are this good belly,
And you the mutinous members; for, examine
Their counsels and their cares, digest things rightly
Touching the weal o’ the common, you shall find
No public benefit which you receive
But it proceeds or comes from them to you,
And no way from yourselves.

John of Salisbury in his *Policraticus* (1159) uses a similar micro-cosmic figure, which he says he drew from Plutarch, to describe the body politic or true commonwealth—reminiscent of Plato’s ideal state—as functioning analogously to the harmoniously ordered inter-play of bodily members, with the difference that the senate for him is the heart, the stomach representing financial officers and keepers. In any case, this device coming at the play’s beginning affords the esoteric members of the audience the necessary clue for unravelling what follows after. And the soul of Menenius is itself really the stage on which the whole drama is enacted. He is of all the senators the one most popular with the people, the great moderator, the pacifier, the person best qualified to arbitrate between Authority or Intellect—whom we shall soon discover to be Coriolanus—and opinion or the affections, namely the populace or Roman state, as epitomized in Menenius’s own ego. His voice while perspicacious and earnest is honeyed with notes of compromise, the man ever ready to champion Truth provided it does not overly disturb his creature comforts, he being by his own admission “one that loves a cup of hot wine with not a drop of allaying Tiber in’t; said to be something imperfect in favouring the first complaint; hasty and tinder-like upon too trivial motion; one that converses more with the buttock of the night than with the forehead of the morning.” In short, the spiritual adept striving to make the best of two worlds—at the risk of losing them both. “If thou give to thy soul her desires, she will make thee a joy to thy enemies.”³

Cosmological: Coriolanus inwardly stands for the Intellect, the Self; outwardly he is the Solar Hero or Logos, the defender of Truth, the ravager and scourge of injustice. What critics deem his arrogance and vengefulness is in reality the impossibility to be other than himself, for

³ *Ecclesiasticus* XVIII. 31.

“The Word of God... shall rule... with a rod of iron;”⁴ and the last thing he possesses is self-will, being Self-possessed. He has but one enemy, Tullus Aufidius, who stands for the Adversary, the ophidian principle, the Demiurge or Power of Illusion, and of whom Marcius says: “I sin in envying his nobility, And were I anything but what I am [this reservation is crucial], I would wish me only he... Were half to half the world by the ears, and he Upon my party, I’d revolt, to make Only my wars with him: he is a lion That I am proud to hunt.” These problematic lines must be taken in the light of what Ananda Coomaraswamy exposes in his article, *The Darker Side of Dawn*.⁵ “The concept of deity presents itself to us under a double aspect; on the one hand as gracious, on the other as awful... A majority of religions in their exoteric formulation treat these contrasted aspects in outward operation as distinct and opposed forces, divine and satanic, celestial and chthonic. Satan is commonly thought of as a Serpent or Dragon and is often so represented, upon the stage or in art. Yet the Solar hero and the Dragon, at war on the open stage, are blood brothers in the greenroom. From the Christian point of view, the fallen Angels are ‘fallen in grace, but not in nature’; and from the Islamic, Iblis is restored at the end of time; in other words Satan becomes again Lucifer.” And he gives the Vedic corollary in his twin article, *Angel and Titan: An Essay in Vedic Ontology*.⁶ “The Devas and Asuras, Angels and Titans, powers of Light and powers of Darkness in RV. [*Rg Veda Samhitâ*], although distinct and opposite in operation, are in essence consubstantial, their distinction being a matter not of essence but of orientation, revolution, or transformation, as indicated by such express statements as ‘The Serpents are the Suns’ in PB [*Pancavimsa Brâhmana*]’ Thus Hermes can write: “By the friendship of contraries, and the blending of things unlike, the fire of heaven has been changed into light, which is shed on all below by the working of the Sun.” The same with Zoroastrianism and its apparently irreconcilable “dualism”: René Guénon points out that “Ormazd and Ahriman are both begotten by Zrvana Akarana and must merge back into him at the end of time”.⁷ This is what is known as the “resolution of contraries”.

In his book, *Logic and Transcendence*,⁸ Frithjof Schuon has a chapter on the Demiurge where he explains that “the presence of the serpent in the Earthly Paradise is an analogous enigma, and likewise the pact which seems to exist between God and the devil on the subject of mankind: the devil has the right to seduce men, God ‘permits’ evil without positively ‘wishing’ it. All these difficulties are clarified in the light of the [Vedantic] doctrine of *Mâyâ*,” which he goes on to state is the principle of individuation inseparable from the process of manifestation as such. Set forth briefly, the begetting of the worlds presupposes the sacrifice or splitting up of *Purusha*, the Supreme Consciousness, from the One into the many through its polarization with

⁴ *Revelation XIX. 13, 15.*

⁵ Smithsonian Publication 3304, Washington D.C., 1935.

⁶ *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol., 55, no. 4, New Haven, Conn., 1935.

⁷ “Le Demiurge”, *Etudes Traditionnelles*, Paris, 1951, p. 147.

⁸ New York, Harper and Row, 1975.

Prakriti, the Primordial Substance which contains the three *gunas*—cosmic qualities or tendencies—in latent modality but whose *Mâyâ* is freed through this confrontation with *Purusha* to effect what Schuon calls the “universal coagulation”. The necessity for such a cosmic confrontation must be deduced from Coriolanus’ cryptic remark about breaking ranks with Aufidius if only to create the possibility for warring with him. (“If the fierceness were not,” says Jacob Boehme, “there could be no mobility.”) As regards the latter’s “nobility”, even Satan by royal lineage is “the prince of this world”, or as Dante expresses it: “*Lo imperador del doloroso regno*”.

Meanwhile, evil on the contingent or manifested plane of existence is altogether real, and our cosmic protagonists are very far removed from the greenroom. “I’ll fight with none but thee,” says Marcius; “for I do hate thee Worse than a promise-breaker.” The Dragon is the sole opponent in stature worthy of St. Michael’s ire—a lion the Archangel is “proud to hunt”. So with Mary and the Serpent: “God has never made and formed but one enmity,” writes St. Louis de Montfort, commenting on Genesis III.15:

I will put enmities between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed: she shall crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel.

And he goes on to add: “but it is an irreconcilable one, which shall endure and grow even to the end. It is between Mary, His worthy Mother, and the devil.” Aufidius for his part has this to say about Marcius: “‘Tis sworn between us we shall ever strike Till one can do no more,”— and to Marcius: “We hate alike: Not Afric owns a serpent I abhor More than thy fame and envy.” Such then is the cosmological contention forming the background on which hangs the fate of this Roman commonwealth.

Social: although Shakespeare is considered an Elizabethan, he was only thirty-six years old at the turn of the seventeenth century, with nearly half his literary output yet to come before his death in 1616 at the age of fifty-two, and at least twelve plays to be written during the Jacobean period. He passed, then, his maturest years in a time of rapidly increasing religious and social strife, and he could read the handwriting on the wall: Oliver Cromwell’s rise and the execution of Charles I were only some three decades away; the hierarchy of values inherited from the Middle Ages—infallibility in the spiritual order and sovereignty in the temporal, to cite Joseph de Maistre—was being washed asunder on a humanistic tide that would ultimately estrange man from God and his final ends, and render humanity inhuman. After Charles, the plebeians would be crying for the blood of Louis XVI, and then the proletarians for that of Nicholas II. On the desecration of the old order depended the vitality of the new—if the word vitality is applicable to our modern relativistic civilization, which “by its divorce from any principle,” to cite Coomaraswamy, “can be likened to a headless corpse of which the last motions are convulsive and insignificant.” Even though true that the “old serpent”—as the Apocalypse words it—“must be loosed a little season,” this did not prevent Shakespeare from exercising his prerogative of *noblesse oblige* to leave a message for the coming generations, with the obvious expedient for

prudence's sake of casting it in terms of early Roman antiquity. There is moreover *a double entendre* in using Rome for the setting, as through this means he manages into the bargain an admonition aimed at the Church—assiduous these recent times in banishing everything from saints to rites and doctrines inimical to its present zeal to “temporize”.

But the moment has come to let Shakespeare himself speak.

* * *

The play opens on a Roman street with a mob of mutinous citizens, clubs and staves in hand, out to kill Caius Marcius whom they brand as “chief enemy of the people... a very dog to the commonality” since he will not grant them corn at their own price. They are intercepted by Menenius Agrippa, whom they immediately flatter as “one that hath always loved the people”; he then delivers his parable about the belly, when suddenly their prey himself enters. “What’s the matter, you dissentious rogues,” exclaims Marcius, “That, rubbing the poor itch of your opinion, Make yourselves scabs?”

And do the rioters for this immediately set upon him? No. One rebel meekly replies, “We have ever your good word.” To which Marcius rejoins: “He that will give good words to thee will flatter Beneath abhorring. What would you have, you curs, That like nor peace nor war?... Who deserves greatness Deserves your hate; and your affections are A sick man’s appetite, who desires most that Which would increase his evil. He that depends Upon your favours swims with fins of lead And hews down oaks with rushes. Hang ye!”

Now anyone who has had to do with incendiary crowds will admit that the use of such language—however irresistibly tempting is not the wisest expedient for escaping whole with one’s life, particularly when it is your life they are after. Only two situations exist which can give the above scene any plausibility, and Shakespeare undoubtedly intended both. Either we have here a leader the stature of an Alexander or Caesar and vested with Heaven’s authority to hold the world in abeyance,—or else it is the voice of the Intellect castigating the disordered elements in the soul—all these factious pulls and motions of triviality, contempt, meanness, cynicism, envy, pretension, hardness of heart, sloth, inordinate desires, hypocrisy, sottish reveries, and the rest. “Would the nobility lay aside their ruth, And let me use my sword,” adds Marcius, “I’d make a quarry With thousands of these quarter’d slaves, as high As I could pick my lance.” At which Menenius hastens to reply: “Nay, these are almost thoroughly persuaded; For though abundantly they lack discretion, Yet are they passing cowardly.” And indeed, what can the soul’s infirmities do when confronted with the Intellect, else than submit, or howl in impotent rage?

The distinction between the plebeians as human individuals for one thing and as a would-be autonomous democracy for another is always maintained by Shakespeare. Thus from among the citizens are to be heard astute observations; for example, to the charge that Marcius is proud “even to the altitude of his virtue”, someone rejoins: “What he cannot help in his nature, you account a vice in him.” But Coriolanus stigmatizes the people insofar as an entity, with being

“the many-headed multitude”, since this entity by definition is dispersed, fragmented, and essentially volitionless without reference to a higher order. And here again to this accusation of many-headedness some particular citizen shows himself perfectly lucid, as evidenced in the following banter:

Third Citizen. We have been called so of many; not that our heads are some brown, some black, some abram,⁹ some bald, but that our wits are so diversely coloured: and truly I think, if all our wits were to issue out of one skull, they would fly east, west, north, south; and their consent of one direct way should be at once to all the points o’ the compass.

Second Citizen. Think you so? Which way do you judge my wit would fly?

Third Citizen. Nay, your wit will not so soon out as another man’s will; ‘tis strongly wedged up in a block-head; but if it were at liberty, ‘twould, sure, southward.

Second Citizen. Why that way?

Third Citizen. To lose itself in a fog; where being three parts melted away with rotten dews, the fourth would return for conscience’ sake, to help to get thee a wife.

Meantime, back to the original street scene: Marcius announces with indignation to Menenius that the people in another part of the city are exultant, having just been granted five tribunes “to defend their vulgar wisdoms... ‘Sdeath! The rabble should have first unroof’d the city, Ere so prevail’d with me; it will in time Win upon power, and throw forth greater themes For insurrection’s arguing.” Then he turns on the crowd: “Go; get you home, you fragments!”

At this moment a messenger hastens in with the news that the Volscies are in arms, to which Mârcius replies: “I am glad on’t; then we shall ha’ means to vent Our musty superfluity.” A senator orders the citizens to be gone, whereupon Marcius changes his mind: “Nay, let them follow: The Volces have much corn; take these rats thither To gnaw their garners. Worshipful mutiners, Your valour puts well forth; pray, follow.” Here the stage directions read “Citizens *steal away.*”

Sicinius turns to his fellow-tribune Brutus: “Was ever man so proud as is this Marcius? ...Such a nature, Tickled with good success, disdains the shadow Which he treads on at noon. But I do wonder His insolence can brook to be commanded Under Cominius.”

Marcius is treated to a demonstration of this “valour” on the battlefield at Corioli in beholding his countrymen, overwhelmed by the first Volscian onslaught, “All hurt behind; backs red, and faces pale With flight and agu’d fear! Mend and charge home,” he cries, “Or, by the fires of heaven, I’ll leave the foe And make my wars on you.”

The fighting is renewed, and the Volscies retire into their city with Marcius pursuing them right through the gates while urging on the Romans to follow:

⁹ Auburn.

First Soldier. Foolhardiness! not I.

Second Soldier. Nor I. [MARCIVS *is shut in.*

Third Soldier. See, they have shut him in.

All. To the pot, I warrant him.

At this point the commanding Roman general, Titus Lartius, enters the scene asking, “What has become of Marcivus?” To which all reply: “Slain, sir, doubtless.”

Lartius. O noble fellow!

Who, sensibly, outdares his senseless sword,
And, when it bows, stands up. Thou art left, Marcivus:
A carbuncle entire, as big as thou art,
Were not so rich a jewel. Thou wast a soldier
Even to Cato’s¹⁰ wish, not fierce and terrible
Only in strokes; but, with thy grim looks and
The thunder-like percussion of thy sounds,
Thou mad’st thine enemies shake, as if the world
Were feverous and did tremble.

Marcivus all of a sudden emerges, bloodied but still fighting. The scene could be right out of Isaiah (Ch. LXIII) where the Logos declares:

I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people there was none with me: for I will tread them in mine anger, and trample them in my fury; and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain all my raiment...

And I looked, and there was none to help; and I wondered that there was none to uphold: therefore mine own arm brought salvation unto me; and my fury, it upheld me.

And I will tread down the people in mine anger, and make them drunk in my fury, and I will bring down their strength to the earth.

While the Romans rush in for the spoils, Marcivus, wounds and all, hastens to succor Cominius who is battling Aufidius and his Antiates. Taking a few volunteers, Marcivus then locks in personal combat with Aufidius, “the man of my soul’s hate”, until the Volsces come to their leader’s aid, whereupon the whole company is driven back by the sword of the Roman hero.

The best efforts of Lartius and Cominius to honour the warrior with the praise and share in spoils which are his due meet with polite but firm refusal; wherewith Cominius not to be outcountenanced exploits the moment to announce—”In sign of what you are, not to reward What you have done”—”that Caius Marcivus Wears this war’s garland; in token of the which, My

¹⁰ There is an anachronism here. Shakespeare is referring to Plutarch’s Coriolanus, who “had, what Cato [234—149 B.C.] thought a great point in a soldier, not only strength of hand and stroke, but also a voice and look that of themselves were a terror to the *enemy*.”

noble steed, known to the camp, I give him, With all his trim belonging; and from this time, For what he did before Corioli, call him, With all the applause and clamour of the host, CAIUS MARCIUS CORIOLANUS! Bear The addition nobly ever!”

Coriolanus. I will go wash;
And when my face is fair, you shall perceive
Whether I blush, or no: howbeit, I thank you.
I mean to stride your steed, and at all times
To undercrest your good addition
To the fairness of my power.

Coriolanus then begs one favour—although admitting that “The gods begin to mock me” after his having refused “most princely gifts”—namely, that a certain poor man in Corioli who treated him with kindness and is now prisoner, be given his liberty. Incidentally, what Cominius mistakes for modesty in the victor’s comportment is actually that indifference to both praise and blame which marks the superior man, and which, far from being just a “moral” virtue, is based on the observance of a human equilibrium commensurate with the Divine economy.

Act I ends with a scene in the Volscian camp where Aufidius gives vent to his feelings about Coriolanus, whom a soldier has just called the devil:

Bolder, though not so subtle. My valour’s poison’d
With only suffering stain by him; for him
Shall fly out of itself. Nor sleep nor sanctuary,
Being naked, sick, nor fane nor Capitol,
The prayers of priests, nor times of sacrifice,
Embarquements¹¹ all of fury, shall lift up
Their rotten privilege and custom ‘gainst
My hate to Marcius. Where I find him, were it
At home, upon my brother’s guard, even there
Against the hospitable canon, would I
Wash my fierce hand in’s heart.

* * *

Back in Rome (Act II), Sicinius and Brutus—who microcosmically typify pride and malice--are still smarting over what they deem to be pride in Marcius, to which Menenius answers: “You talk of pride. O! that you could turn your eyes towards the napes of your necks, and make but an interior survey of your good selves...

“You know neither me, yourselves, nor anything... Our very priests must become mockers if

¹¹ Hindrances, restraints.

they shall encounter such ridiculous subjects as you are. When you speak best unto the purpose it is not worth the wagging of your beards; and your beards deserve not so honourable a grave as to stuff a botcher's cushion, or to be entombed in an ass's pack-saddle. Yet you must be saying Marcius is proud; who, in a cheap estimation, is worth all your predecessors since Deucalion, though peradventure some of the best of 'em were hereditary hangmen."

Coriolanus now returns, crowned with an oaken garland, to the glorious acclaim of the city, where he meets his mother, who alludes to his prerogative for consulship. "Know, good mother," he replies, "I had rather be their servant in my way Than sway with them in theirs."

Brutus caustically observes that "All tongues speak of him, and the bleared sights Are spectacted to see him: your prattling nurse Into a rapture lets her baby cry While she chats him: the kitchen malkin¹² pins Her richest lockram 'bout her reechy neck, Clambering the walls to eye him:... such a pother As if that whatsoever god who leads him Were silyly crept into his human powers, And gave him graceful posture."

Hence, "We must suggest the people in what hatred He still hath held them;" and this, adds Sicinius, "suggested At some time when his soaring insolence Shall teach the people—which time shall not want, If he be put upon 't; and that's as easy As to set dogs on sheep—will be his fire To kindle their dry stubble; and their blaze Shall darken him for ever."

Here a messenger arrives to summon the tribunes to the Capitol:

'Tis thought
That Marcius shall be consul.
I have seen the dumb men throng to see him, and
The blind to hear him speak; matrons flung gloves,
Ladies and maids their scarfs and handkerchers
Upon him as he pass'd; the nobles bended,
As to Jove's statue, and the commons made
A shower and thunder with their caps and shouts:
I never saw the like.

Two *officers* at the Capitol debate about the forthcoming elections. To the first officer's charge that Coriolanus is "vengeance proud, and loves not the common people", the second answers: "Faith, there have been many great men that have flattered the people, who ne'er loved them; and there be many that they have loved, they know not wherefore: so that if they love they know not why, they hate upon no better a ground. Therefore, for Coriolanus neither to care whether they love or hate him manifests the true knowledge he has in their disposition; and out of his noble carelessness lets them plainly see't... but he hath so planted his honours in their eyes, and his actions in their hearts, that for their tongues to be silent, and not to confess so much, were a kind of ingrateful injury; to report otherwise, were a malice, that, giving itself the lie, would

¹² Slut.

pluck reproof and rebuke from every ear that heard it.”

The senate being now convened with the tribunes present to consider the candidacy, Brutus interposes an innuendo about Coriolanus and the people, to which Menenius replies: “He loves your people; But tie him not to be their bedfellow.”

Coriolanus gives his own criterion: “I love them as they weigh.” He then retires, rather “than idly sit To hear my nothings monster’d” as he words it, for Cominius is now going to enumerate the warrior’s great qualities one by one. Later he is called back to be informed that the consulship is his. But here a problem arises for custom requires that he address the populace in a gown of humility and expose his battle scars, all of which he finds ridiculous. Menenius pushing him to it, Coriolanus rehearses in raillery: “Look, sir, my wounds! I got them in my country’s service, when Some certain of your brethren roar’d and ran From the noise of our own drums.”

“O me! the gods!” cries Menenius, “You must not speak of that: you must desire them To think upon you.”

“Think upon me! Hang ‘em! I would they would forget me, like the virtues Which our divines lose by ‘em.”

“You’ll mar all,” sighs the good Menenius, departing. “Speak to ‘em, I pray you, In wholesome manner.”

Coriolanus. Bid them wash their faces,
And keep their teeth clean.

The citizens now start arriving, who prove no match for Coriolanus’ witty repartee. When one says, “You have been a scourge to her [your country’s] enemies, you have been a rod [note the Biblical reference] to her friends; you have not indeed loved the common people;” he replies: “You should account me the more virtuous that I have not been common in my love.” Hardly knowing whether flattery or offence is intended, but swayed by the man’s power, the citizens give their approbation to his consulship. The tribunes then get the people aside, persuading them that they have been duped, and order them instantly to tell their friends that “They have chose a consul that will from them take Their liberties; make them of no more voice Than dogs that are as often beat for barking As therefore kept to do so.”

* * *

Act III opens on a street in Rome where Coriolanus, the generals, senators, and patricians enter to a flourish of cornets. Lartius informs the newly-elected consul that Aufidius has retired to Antium, saying “That of all things upon the earth he hated Your person most, that he would pawn his fortunes To hopeless restitution, so he might Be call’d your vanquisher.”

“I wish I had a cause to seek him there,” says Coriolanus, “To oppose his hatred fully.” At

this moment Sicinius and Brutus arrive. “Behold! these are the tribunes of the people, The tongues o’ the common mouth: I do despise them; For they do prank them in authority Against all noble sufferance.”

The tribunes charge Coriolanus to pass no further, that the people are incensed against him. He tongue-lashes them, while Menenius pleads, “Be calm, be calm.”

Coriolanus. It is a purpos’d thing, and grows by plot,
To curb the will of the nobility:
Suffer’t, and live with such as cannot rule
Nor ever will be ruled.

The tension mounts, with Menenius all the time saying to the consul, “Let’s be calm... Not now, not now... Well, no more.” But Coriolanus is unleashed. Brutus tells him: “You speak o’ the people, As if you were a god to punish, not A man of their infirmity.” His choler is mentioned. “Choler!” lie exclaims, “Were I as patient as the midnight sleep, By Jove, Would be my mind.” (Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar expresses the same thing in saying, “I am constant as the northern star.”)

Sicinius. It is a mind
That shall remain a poison where it is,
Not poison any further.

Coriolanus. Shall remain!
Hear you this Triton of the minnows? mark you
His absolute ‘shall’?...
O good but most unwise patricians! why,
You grave but reckless senators, have you thus
Given Hydra here to choose an officer,
That with his peremptory ‘shall’, being but
The horn and noise o’ the monster’s, wants not spirit
To say he’ll turn your current in a ditch,
And make your channel his?
... If you are learned,
Be not as common fools; if you are not,
Let them have cushions by you. You are plebeians
If they be senators... and my soul aches
To know, when two authorities are up,
Neither supreme, how soon confusion
May enter ‘twixt the gap of both and take
The one by the other.¹³

(¹³ bis) This is of course the pattern that ensued, until Caesar came to overthrow the existing order and establish emperorship. But to explain the vitality of the ancient Roman state, account must be taken of the level of humanity constituting a democracy at that period, which was immeasurably superior to the

The reader will remember that the purpose of this paper is not to retell the play, but to demonstrate by examples its spiritual, cosmological, and social implications as outlined earlier.

Coriolanus alleges that the behaviour of the citizens at home and on the battlefield does not argue for their deserving corn gratis, and that if the senate bends out of “courtesy” to “this bisson¹⁴ multitude”, then “we debase The nature of our seats, and make the rabble Call our cares, fears; which will in time break ope The locks ‘o the senate, and bring in the crows To peck the eagles.”

“Come, enough,” pleads Menenius, the great pacifier.

“No,” insists Coriolanus, “Take more: What may be sworn by, both divine and human, Seal what I end withal!”... He concludes beseeching the senators to “at once pluck out The multitudinous tongue; let them not lick The sweet which is their poison. Your dishonour Mangles true judgment, and bereaves the state Of that integrity which should become it, Not having the power to do the good it would, For the ill which doth control ‘t.”

Sicinius finds this sufficient grounds for naming Coriolanus a traitor, and Brutus summons the aediles, while his fellow-tribune tries to apprehend the orator.

Coriolanus Hence, old goat!

Cominius. Aged sir, hands off.

Coriolanus. Hence, rotten thing! or I shall shake thy bones Out of thy garments.

Sicinius. Help, ye citizens!

Menenius. On both sides more respect.

A general scuffle ensues about Coriolanus, with Menenius panting: “What is about to be?—I am out of breath; Confusion’s near; I cannot speak. You, tribunes To the people! Coriolanus, patience! Speak, good Sicinius.” The good Sicinius speaks: “What is the city but the people?”

Brutus ordains that “Marcius is worthy Of present death,” where-upon Sicinius orders him cast off the Tarpeian rock. But Coriolanus draws his sword, saying he prefers to die on the spot, and challenges all comers—with the result that no one is left around him but his friends, to whom he declares: “I would they were barbarians,—as they are, Though in Rome litter’d,—not Romans, as they are not, Though calv’d i’ the porch o’ the Capitol.”

Menenius begs the nobles to disband. “I’ll try whether my old wit be in request With those that have but little: this must be patch’d With cloth of any colour.” As the others are leaving, he muses: “His nature is too noble for the world: He would not flatter Neptune for his trident, Or Jove for’s power to thunder.”

blood infusing such a government form since Shakespeare’s day.

¹⁴ Blear-eyed.

The tribunes now returning with the rabble, Menenius employs all his art at compromise to placate their frenzy, promising that he will prevail on Coriolanus to submit to public trial. He next goes to the hero's home where he enlists the support of Volumnia and the patricians present to get Coriolanus to repent before the tribunes.

Coriolanus. For them! I cannot do it to the gods; Must I then do't to them?

The consensus of opinion is yes, but Coriolanus resists until his mother says: "To beg of thee it is my more dishonour Than thou of them."

Coriolanus. Pray, be content:
Mother, I am going to the market-place;
Chide me no more. I'll mountebank their loves,
Cog¹⁵ their hearts from them, and come home below'd
Of all the trades in Rome.

Cominius alerts him to "answer mildly", for the accusations will be severe, whereupon Menenius chimes in: "The word is 'mildly'."

Coriolanus. Pray you, let us go:
Let them accuse me by invention, I
Will answer in mine honour.

Menenius. Ay, but mildly.

Coriolanus. Well, mildly be it then. Mildly!

All goes "mildly" until Sicinius tells Coriolanus, "you are a traitor to the people."

Coriolanus. The fires i' the lowest hell fold-in the people!
Call me their traitor! Thou injurious tribune!
Within thine eyes sat twenty thousand deaths,
In thy hands clutch'd as many millions, in
Thy lying tongue both numbers, I would say
'Thou liest' unto thee with a voice as free
As I do pray the gods.

"Is this the promise that you made your mother?" asks Menenius.

Coriolanus. I'll know no further:
Let them pronounce the steep Tarpeian death,
Vagabond exile, flaying, pent to linger
But with a grain a day, I would not buy
Their mercy at the price of one fair word.

¹⁵ Filch.

Banishment is pronounced by the tribunes and the citizens.

Coriolanus. You common cry of curs! whose breath I hate
As reek o' the rotten fens, whose loves I prize
As the dead carcasses of unburied men
That do corrupt my air, I banish you;
And here remain with your uncertainty!
Let every feeble rumour shake your hearts!
Your enemies, with nodding of their plumes,
Fan you into despair! Have the power still
To banish your defenders; till at length
Your ignorance,—which finds not, till it feels,—
Making but reservation of yourselves,—
Still your own foes,—deliver you as most
Abated captives to some nation
That won you without blows!
Despising, For you, the city, thus I turn my back:
There is a world elsewhere.

Indeed, it is Coriolanus who banishes the people, since the affections are necessarily subservient to the Intellect, the lower always being passive to the higher, which alone holds the initiative—whatever the appearances. This is why, for example, the Quran (IV.157) says concerning Jesus: “They slew him not nor crucified him, but it appeared so unto them.”

* * *

We find Coriolanus at the beginning of the next Act before a gate of the city with his family and friends. “Come,” he says, “leave your tears: a brief farewell: the beast With many heads¹⁶ butts me away... I shall be lov'd when I am lack'd... Believe 't not lightly,—though I go alone Like to a lonely dragon, that his fen Makes fear'd and talk'd of more than seen,—your son Will or exceed the common or be caught With cautelous¹⁷ baits and practice... While I remain above the ground you shall Hear from me still; and never of me aught But what is like me formerly.”

Scarcely has he departed, when Volumnia, accompanied by Menenius and Virgilia, runs into the tribunes. “O! you're well met,” she cries. “The hoarded plague o' the gods Requite your love!”

“Peace, peace! be not so loud,” begs Menenius—always the great moderator, but she will not be stopped. Turning to Sicinius: “I would my son Were in Arabia, and thy tribe before him, His good sword in his hand.”

¹⁶ The expression is Horace's. *Belua multorum capitum* (Ep.I.i.76.)

¹⁷ Deceitful, insidious

“What then?” asks the tribune.

“What then!” replies Virgilia; “He’d make an end of thy posterity” —to which Volumnia adds: “Bastards and all.”

Menenius. Come, come: peace!

Whatever Shakespeare intended, the line about Arabia irresistibly calls to mind Islamic traditions concerning the Mahdi (“The Guided One”) who will manifest at the end of time and, in the words of the Prophet Muhammad, “fill the earth with equity and justice, even as it has been filled with tyranny and oppression.”

The banished hero now turns his wrath against his own country,—in keeping with a further passage from the same chapter of Isaiah cited earlier:

In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them: in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he bare them, and carried them all the days of old.

But they rebelled, and vexed his holy Spirit: therefore he was turned to be their enemy, and he fought against them.

What this means is, Heaven rejects those who reject it, thus allowing the Enemy entrance. The warmth of mercy has been kindled through the people’s ingratitude into the fire of rage.

Needfully disguised in the hostile city of Antium, Coriolanus gains the house of his adversary, Aufidius, and pushes his way through the perplexed servants to their master, who does not recognize him—even unmuffled; whereupon he reveals himself and his purpose, explaining how the insubordination of the Roman people was “Permitted by our dastard nobles, who Have all forsook me... And suffer’d me by the voice of slaves to be Whoop’d out of Rome... In mere spite, To be full quit of those my banishers, Stand I before thee here... I will fight Against my canker’d country with the spleen Of all the under fiends.” He concludes in saying that if the Volscian leader does not wish to join with him, Aufidius is welcome to kill him then and there.

Elatedly Aufidius accepts the collaboration of his ancient foe; nor could he do otherwise, for what else is it than the Light’s withdrawal from our world that releases its penumbral “counterpart”, the Powers of Darkness?

The servants are dumbfounded at the alteration in this unbidden visitor whom they had tried to thrust back at the door. “What an arm he has!” says one. “He turned me about with his finger and his thumb, as one would set up a top... Would I were hanged but I thought there was more in him than I could think.”

“So did I,” answers another servant (who earlier had assured Aufidius he would have beaten the fellow like a dog, “but for disturbing the lords within”), “I’ll be sworn: he is simply the rarest

man in the world.”

They compare him to their general, concluding that Coriolanus “was too hard for him,—directly to say the truth on’t: before Corioli he scotched him and notched him like a carbonado.”

“And he had been cannibally given,” says another, “he might have broiled and eaten him too.”

A servant has arrived from his master’s table: “O slaves! I can tell you news; news, you rascals.” The news is that an incredible alliance has been formed—“our general is cut in the middle, and but one half of what he was yesterday, for the other has half, by the entreaty and grant of the whole table”—with the result that war is up. “Why,” says another, “then we shall have a stirring world again. This peace is nothing but to rust iron, increase tailors, and breed ballad-makers.” Shakespeare is enunciating the doctrine here that a true war is more real than a false peace, it being, as Guénon remarks, the means whereby multiplicity on a lower order through undergoing destruction is transformed into a higher unity—which holds both macrocosmically and microcosmically. The servants go on chatting: “Let me have war, say I; it exceeds peace as far as day does night; it’s spritely, waking, audible and full of vent. Peace is a very apoplexy, lethargy, mulled,¹⁸ deaf, sleepy, insensible; a getter of more bastard children than war’s a destroyer of men.” “‘Tis so,” adds another: “and as war, in some ‘sort, may be said to be a ravisher, so it cannot be denied but peace is a great maker of cuckolds.”

In Rome, meanwhile, the citizens are relishing all the pleasures of a false peace. Sicinius turns to Brutus as Menenius approaches “‘Tis he, ‘tis he. O! he is grown most kind Of late. Hail, sir!”

Menenius. Hail to you both!

Sicinius. Your Coriolanus is not much miss’d
But with his friends: the commonwealth doth stand,
And so would do, were he more angry at it.

Menenius. All’s well; and might have been much better, if
He could have temporiz’d [something impossible by definition].

Several citizens enter and congratulate the tribunes, who return their greetings. “This is a happier and more comely time,” observes Sicinius, “Than when these fellows ran about the streets Crying confusion.”

The Hindus have a saying that an abandoned house harbouring snakes, scorpions, bats, centipedes, and vermin is perfectly tranquil until someone opens the doors and shutters and passes a broom. This is just what happens now, for an aedile brings news learned from a slave—cast in prison for his words—that the Volsces are penetrating Roman territory. “Tis Aufidius,” exclaims Menenius, “Who, hearing of our Marcius’ banishment, Thrusts forth his horns again

¹⁸ Insipid, flat.

into the world.”

“Go see this rumourer whipp’d,” cries Brutus. But a messenger confirms the report with the still more fearful news that Marcius is allied with Aufidius.

Menenius. This is unlikely:
He and Aufidius can no more atone,
Than violentest contrariety.

Then another messenger verifies the worst, when Cominius himself enters: “O! you have made good work!... You have help to ravish your own daughters, and To melt the city leads upon your pates, To see, your wives dishonour’d To your noses... [Marcius] is their god: he leads them like a thing Made by some other deity than Nature, That shapes man better; and they follow him, Against us brats, with no less confidence Than boys pursuing summer butterflies. Or butchers killing flies.”

Menenius. You have made good work,
You, and your apron-men; you that stood so much
Upon the voice of occupation and
The breath of garlic-eaters!

“He will shake Your Rome about your ears,” adds Cominius; “Who is’t can blame him T’ Menenius observes that “We are all undone unless The noble man have mercy.” “Who shall ask it T’ says Cominius. “The tribunes cannot do’t for shame; the people Deserve such pity of him as the wolf Does of the shepherds: for his best friends, if they Should say, ‘Be good to Rome’, they charg’d him even As those should do that had deserv’d his hate, And therein show’d like enemies.”

Menenius. ‘Tis true:
If he were putting to my house the brand
That should consume it, I have not the face
To say, ‘beseech you, cease.’—You have made fair hands,
You and your crafts! you have crafted fair’!...

Sicinius and Brutus. Say not we brought it.

Menenius. How! Was it we? We lov’d him; but, like beasts
And cowardly nobles, gave way unto your clusters,
Who did hoot him out o’ the city.

Cominius. But I fear
They’ll roar him in again. Tullus Aufidius,
The second name of men, [Shakespeare shows whom he means by this] obeys his points
As if he were his officer: desperation
Is all the policy, strength, and defence,
That Rome can make against them.

“If he could burn us all into one coal,” says Menenius, “We have deserv’d it.”

The citizens come trooping in, disowning their complicity: “That we did we did for the best; and though we willingly consented to his banishment, yet it was against our will.”

Cominius. You’re goodly things, you voices!

Aufidius meantime in his camp near Rome is beginning to rankle with envy as he sees with what “witchcraft” Coriolanus is gaining the adoration of his men. “I think he’ll be to Rome As is the osprey to the fish, who takes it By sovereignty of nature.” The time is nearing, he decides, when Marcius must be overturned.

Act V brings us back again to the public place in Rome where the nobles and tribunes are gathered. Cominius is telling how he went before Coriolanus ineffectually, who would not even answer to his name. “He was a kind of nothing, titleless, Till he had forg’d himself a name o’ the fire Of burning Rome... I offer’d 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.”

Menenius tells the tribunes, “You are the musty chaff, and you are smelt Above the moon. We must be burnt for you.” The tribunes nevertheless prevail on him to exercise his propitiatory arts, and he finally resolves to approach Coriolanus—but only after the man has dined, reasoning by his own measure that “With wine and feeding, we have suppler souls Than in our priest-like fasts.”

It is here that the audience witnesses the patrician’s least fine hour, his accumulated faults all tumbling out at once. Arrived at the Volscian camp, he is prevented by the guards from passing further. “My name,” he argues, no doubt “hath touch’d your ears: it is Menenius.” “Be it so,” says a guard, “go back: the virtue of your name Is not here passable.”

Menenius. I tell thee, fellow,
The general is my lover: I have been
The book of his good acts, whence men have read
His fame unparallel’d, haply amplified.

Menenius embroiders further upon his own virtues, until the guard interrupts: “Faith, sir, if you had told as many lies in his behalf as you have uttered words in your own, you should not pass here; no, though it were as virtuous to lie as to live chastely... Can you, when you have pushed out your gates the very defender of them, and, in a violent popular ignorance, given your enemy your shield, think to front his revenges with the easy groans of old women, the virginal palms of your daughters, or with the palsied intercession of such a decayed dotant as you seem to be? Can you think to blow out the intended fire your city [Menenius, as was said, epitomizes the micro-cosmic commonwealth] is ready to flame in with such weak breath as this? No, you are deceived; therefore, back to Rome, and prepare for your execution.” Any “guard” who speaks thus eloquently is really an angel with a flaming sword barring the gates of Heaven from all

unlawful passage.

Menenius, of course, is beside himself with bafflement, when suddenly Coriolanus appears, accompanied by Aufidius, to ask what is wrong. The old patrician smugly lets the “Jack guardant” know that he “cannot office me from my son Coriolanus: guess, but by my entertainment with him, if thou standest not V the state of hanging, or of some death more long in spectatorship.” Whereupon turning to Coriolanus: “The glorious gods sit in hourly synod about thy particular prosperity, and love thee no worse than thy old father Menenius does! O my son, my son, thou art preparing fire for us; look thee, here’s water to quench it. I was hardly moved to come to thee [Menenius is unaware of the egotistical insolence conveyed in this flattery]; but being assured none but myself could move thee, I have been blown out of your gates with sighs [“your gates” he says, to Marcius, who has already been “whooped out” of these gates no longer his]; and conjure thee to pardon Rome, and thy petitionary countrymen. The good gods assuage thy wrath, and turn the dregs of it upon this varlet here [what a sense of proportion!]; this, who, like a block, hath denied my access to thee.”

Coriolanus. Away!

Menenius. How! Away!

Coriolanus. Wife, mother, child, I know not. My affairs
Are servanted to others.

Underscoring his resoluteness, the Scourge of Rome hands his former friend a paper written expressly for him, concluding: “Another word, Menenius, I will not hear thee speak.” He draws the attention of Aufidius to his unswerving intransigency, which the Volscian leader acknowledges.

The guards make the departing patrician eat his former words, who bravely declares: “He that hath a will to die by himself fears it not from another.”

Having witnessed this encounter, the guard who prevented Menenius remarks: “A noble fellow, I warrant him.” To which another guard replies: “The worthy fellow is our general: he is the rock, the oak not to be wind-shaken.

*

*

*

The next scene opens in the tent of Coriolanus, who with Aufidius is preparing devastating plans for the morrow; when the company of women enters—Volumnia, Virgilia with the young Marcius, Valeria, and attendants—all in mourning habits.

“My mother bows,” observes Coriolanus, “As if Olympus to a molehill should In supplication nod.”

By these lines Shakespeare lets us know that Volumnia is no ordinary woman,—and certainly the playwright was sentimental neither about patriotism, nor about motherhood—nor

for that matter about any-thing else. If the commonwealth for him is precious and worth losing one's life to defend, it is because it is a paradigm of the human state, which is made not only in the image of God, but made for God. Similarly, Volumnia by the fact of having borne the Solar Hero—whom she calls “the only son of my womb”—is identified in some way with Theotokos or Deipara; and Coriolanus earlier in the play shows what veneration she merits, with the words: “my mother, Who has a charter to extol her blood, When she does praise me grieves me.” Alchemically speaking, she represents the anima mundi, the *materia prima* or undefiled substance underlying the compounded modalities of created forms, and through whose receptive and trans-parent Nature the brilliance of the Archetypal Qualities is filtered down to infuse our world with Beauty, Love, Beneficence, and Mercy. Virgilia, Valeria, and the young Marcius are all by extension arms of Volumnia's Compassion.

As the figure of Divine Justice and Majesty, Coriolanus is not to be moved: “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.”

But the Divine Justice is no match for the Divine Mercy. Virgilia looks upon him: “My lord and husband!”

“Like a dull actor now.” says Coriolanus melting, “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’.”

He kisses her, and then beholds his mother: “You gods! I prate, And the most noble mother of the world [note that Shakespeare does not say, “in the world”] Leave unsaluted. Sink, my knee, i' the earth.” He kneels. “Of thy deep duty more impression show Than that of common sons.”

Volumnia. O! stand up bless'd;
Whilst, with no softer cushion than the flint,
I kneel before thee, and unproperly
Show duty, as mistaken all this while
Between the child and parent.

This is a marvellous play between the Spirit and the Spouse—between what Hindus would call the Deva and the Sakti.

Coriolanus. What is 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.
Murd'ring impossibility, to make
What cannot be, slight work.

But Coriolanus for all that is not to be easily swayed. He asks his feminine petitioners to be mindful that “The things I have forsworn to grant may never Be held by you denials. Do not bid me Dismiss my soldiers, or capitulate Again with Rome’s mechanics” [looking down the centuries, it is these mechanics who eventually have become the masters of our technological and democratic world].

Volumnia now makes her impassioned plea, with Coriolanus ordering Aufidius to witness every Word so that nothing may be thought to be conspired behind his back. She stresses her dilemma in having to pray either for a Roman victory, that would see her son led manacled through the streets, or for his victory, that will raze her city. When she vows that for him to march into Rome will be to trample on the womb that bore him, he can endure no more, and rises to leave:

Not of a woman’s tenderness to be,
Requires nor child nor woman’s face to see.
I have sat too long.

But Volumnia implores him: “Nay, go not from us thus. 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 show’d;’ the Romans, ‘This we receiv’d; ‘ and each in either side Give the all-hail to thee, and cry, ‘Be bless’d For making up this peace!’ “ She points out that while the end of war is uncertain, it is certain if he wipe out Rome his name will be abhorred down the ages. “Say my request’s unjust, And spurn me back; but if it be not so, Thou art not honest, and the gods will plague thee, That thou restrain’st from me the duty which To a mother’s part belongs.”

She continues her supplication until Coriolanus in silence takes her hand.

O, mother, mother,
What have you done? Behold! the heavens do ope,
The gods look down, and this unnatural scene
They laugh at. O my mother! mother! O!
You have won a happy victory to Rome;
But, for your son, believe it, O! believe it,
Most dangerously you have with him prevail’d,
If not most mortal to him. But let it come.
Aufidius, though I cannot make true wars,
I’ll frame convenient peace.

He asks Aufidius if he in similar circumstances would have granted less.

“I was mov’d withal,” replies the Volscian leader.

Coriolanus. I dare be sworn you were

And, sir, it is no little thing to make
Mine eyes to sweat compassion.

But the Volscian leader murmurs aside: “I am glad thou hast set thy mercy and thy honour
At difference in thee: out of that I’ll work Myself a former fortune.”

Coriolanus, meanwhile, turns to his feminine supplicants

Ladies, you deserve
To have a temple built you: all the swords
In Italy, and her confederate arms,
Could not have made this peace.

We know from Plutarch that the temple mentioned was consecrated to Fortuna. This goddess is also named Panthea as combining the attributes of all other deities; and her cult becomes identified with Isis, many of whose shrines in turn later become Marian.

* * *

In Rome during this interval, Menenius is assuring the terror-stricken Sicinius that the party of women may as well prevail with Coriolanus as for the tribune to succeed in displacing the coign or corner-stone of the Capitol with his little finger: “But I say, there is no hope in’t. Our throats are sentenced and stay upon execution... This Marcius is grown from man to dragon: he has wings; he’s more than a creeping thing... He sits in his state, as a thing made for Alexander.¹⁹ What he bids be done is finished with his bidding [cp. Psalm CXLVIII.5: ‘he commanded, and they were created.’]. He wants nothing of a god but eternity and a heaven to throne in.”

“Yes, mercy,” insists Sicinius, “if you report him truly.”

“I paint him in the character,” Menenius continues. “Mark what mercy his mother shall bring from him: there is no more mercy in him than there is milk in a male tiger; that shall our poor city find: and all this is ‘long of’ you.”

“The gods be good unto us!” cries the tribune.

“No,” answers the other, “in such a case the gods will not be good unto us. When we banished him, we respected not them; and, he returning to break our necks, they respect not us.”

What Menenius has yet to realize is that the blow to his self-esteem just now administered by Coriolanus (none other, really, than his spiritual master) is the merciful *coup de grace* that has broken the knot of his ego, thus redeeming his soul—the commonwealth here—and by the same token reducing the tribunes (who are nothing else than the foremost elements of revolt in this

¹⁹ We are again confronted with an a prolepsis, Alexander the Great coming more than a century after Coriolanus. But prior to the Roman hero’s time, how many examples not directly out of mythology did the playwright have to choose from?

soul) to repentance.

A messenger enters, warning Sicinius to fly for his life: “The plebeians have got your fellow-tribune, And hale him up and down: all swearing, if The Roman ladies bring not comfort home, They’ll give him death by inches.”

Then a second messenger enters, announcing that the women have prevailed.

Menenius. This is good news [note the sudden detachment in his tone]:
I will go meet the ladies. This Volunmia
Is worth of consuls, senators, patricians,
A city full; of tribunes, such as you,
A sea and land full. You have pray’d well to-day:
This morning for ten thousand of your throats,
I’d not have given a doit. Hark, how they joy!

Sicinius. First, the gods bless you for your tidings, next,
Accept my thankfulness.

Second Messenger. Sir, we have all
Great cause to give great thanks.

The ladies enter in a grand procession with music, shouts, and drums.

First Senator. Behold our patroness, the life of Rome!
Call all your tribes together, praise the gods,
And make triumphant fires; strew flowers before them:
Unshout the noise that banish’d Marcius;
Repeal him with the welcome of his mother;
Cry, ‘Welcome, ladies, welcome!’

* * *

Aufidius is now in Corioli, plotting with conspirators for Coriolanus’ destruction. He tells them he feels like “a man by his own alms empoison’d... I seem’d his follower, not partner; and He wag’d²⁰ me with his countenance, as if I had been mercenary... At a few drops of women’s rheum, which are As cheap as lies, he sold the blood and labour Of our great action: therefore shall he die.”

He sets his grievances in writing before the lords of the city, when Coriolanus arrives with the wild acclaim of the populace, who have no eyes but for him. The Roman hero greets the lords and is duly apprizing them of all the proceedings, when Aufidius names him a traitor, calling him moreover “Marcius”: “Ay, Marcius, Caius Marcius. Dost thou think I’ll grace thee with that robbery, thy stol’n name Coriolanus in Corioli? You lords and heads of the state, perfidiously He

²⁰ Remunerated.

has betray'd your business, and given up, For certain drops of salt, your city Rome, I say 'your city', to his wife and mother; Breaking his oath and resolution like A twist of rotten silk, never admitting Counsel o' the war, but at his nurse's tears He whin'd and roar'd away your victory, That pages blush'd at him, and men of heart Look'd wondering each at other."

Coriolanus. Hear'st thou, Mars?

Aufidius. Name not the god, thou boy of tears.

Coriolanus. Measureless liar, thou hast made my heart
Too great for what contains it. Boy! O slave!
Pardon me, lords, 'tis the first time that ever
I was forc'd to scold. Your judgments, my grave lords,
Must give this cur the lie.

Confusion breaks out.

Coriolanus. Cut me to pieces, Volscies; men and lads,
Stain all your edges on me [it is still Coriolanus who commands]. Boy! False hound!
If you have writ your annals true, 'tis there,
That, like an eagle in a dove-cote, I
Flutter'd your Volscians in Corioli:
Alone I did it. Boy!

Calling him an "unholy braggart", Aufidius has the conspirators set upon him, joined by the people, who have been reminded of their losses in this former battle.

Coriolanus. O! that I had him,
With six Aufidiuses, or more, his tribe,
To use my lawful sword!

Aufidius and the conspirators draw; and kill Coriolanus; Aufidius then stands on the body.

Says a lord: "Thou hast done a deed whereat valour will weep." Another lord orders: "Bear from hence his body; And mourn you for him! Let him be regarded As the most noble corse that ever herald Did follow to his urn."

Aufidius. My rage is gone,
And I am struck with sorrow. Take him up:
Help, three o' the chiefest soldiers; I'll be one,
Beat thou the drum, that it speak mournfully;
Trail your steel pikes. Though in this city he
Hath widow'd and unchilded many a one,
Which to this hour bewail the injury,
Yet he shall have a noble memory.
Assist.

[*Exeunt, bearing the body of CORIOLANUS. A dead march sounded.*]

Aufidius standing on the body and struck with sorrow recalls the celebrated image in Hindu iconography of Kâlî trampling on the inert form of Siva and protruding her tongue for shame as she discovers in her wild dance that she has been usurping the rightful place of the Lord of the Universe. Aufidius, now bereft of the energizing source of his fierceness, has nowhere left to go but the greenroom. Coriolanus for his part, having accomplished the function for which he came to earth, namely, the restoration of the commonwealth, can once again resume his eternal abode in heaven on his throne.

* * *

To the possible objection that all this is arbitrary speculation which takes undue liberties with Shakespeare, there are several replies. First, it would be hard to prove that the play's symbolic content as given above is not essentially what the dramatist intended: too many lines are precise to a degree well beyond what could be argued as pure coincidence; the very accuracy with which he conveys his ideas denotes a genius conscious of the doctrines exposed. Moreover, Hermetic teachings for those with the keys are transparent not only in Shakespearean tragedies, but in the romances, comedies, and historical plays as well; an esoteric content—sometimes referred to as the “Lesser Mysteries”—informs the whole extent of this authorship.

Secondly, even assuming Shakespeare did not a priori set out with the intentions herein attributed to him, the universality and greatness of his inspiration is such that it could be said to lend itself to multiple interpretations; but this argument is weak, as it implies a genius which is more or less mediumistic and unconscious of its ends—contradicted here by the continual precision and pertinence that betoken an intellect active in the highest degree.

Thirdly, if one still scruples that liberties have been taken with Shakespeare, the objection can be pushed back to say that Shakespeare himself was taking liberties with Plutarch. And what really matters in any case is that the internal evidence and logic be coherent.

But what is finally pertinent has yet to be said: Out of the dusk and dust and debris of our tottering civilization—bordering upon that which the Bible calls the Abomination of Desolation,—faith, truth, and righteousness must again manifest. And on this point there can be no doubt: Coriolanus is coming.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

*What could begin to deny self, if there were not something in man
different from self?*

William Law.