

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



## **The Changing Faces of Virtue: Plutarch, Machiavelli and Shakespeare's *Coriolanus***

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### **Introduction: The hinges of virtue**

‘Let it be virtuous to be obstinate’, says Caius Martius Coriolanus, shortly before the catastrophe of Shakespeare’s tragedy (*Coriolanus*, 5.3.26).<sup>1</sup> In uttering these words, he articulates a moral hypothesis which is of central importance to *Coriolanus*: the supposition that steadfastness of principle is a fundamental good. This is a theory which the play puts to the test. The idea of ‘virtue’ — in a variety of guises — is a key focus of this essay, which identifies as crucial those moments at which definitions of virtue are unsettled, transformed, or confronted with a range of alternatives. Several commentators have connected Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* with the political ideas of Niccolò Machiavelli, the Florentine theorist whose notoriety rests upon his recommendation of moral flexibility for political leaders. For Anne Barton, who reads the play in the context of Machiavelli’s *Discourses* on Livy’s history of early Rome, *Coriolanus* dramatises the futile persistence of obsolescent virtues (the valorisation of battlefield heroics) in an environment of subtler needs and growing political sophistication.<sup>2</sup> In *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice*, Annabel Patterson hints at Shakespeare’s sympathy with the idea of popular political representation, proposing that ‘there is nothing in the play to challenge that famous interpretation of the tribunate which [. . .] Machiavelli made a premise of Renaissance political theory’.<sup>3</sup> John Plotz

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt, Katherine Eisaman Maus, Jean E. Howard, and Walter Cohen (New York: Norton, 1997). All subsequent citations of Shakespeare plays will refer to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Barton, ‘Livy, Machiavelli, and Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*’ [1985], repr. in *Modern Critical Interpretations: William Shakespeare’s ‘Coriolanus’*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), pp. 123–47.

<sup>3</sup> Annabel Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 143. This is not a view shared by John Roe, who asserts that Shakespeare’s ‘depiction of the tribunes is markedly at

has also noted a Machiavellian schematic at work in the play's depiction of ubiquitous political deceptions, arguing that '*Coriolanus* is the tragedy of the gap that looms between the private "true" Self and a public realm of tacitly accepted mendacity'.<sup>4</sup> Plotz's reading corresponds with the broader readings of Hugh Grady, who recognises in Shakespeare's work a tension between Machiavellian *Realpolitik* and a concerted subjective scrutiny which he associates with the writings of Michel de Montaigne. 'Machiavellian ideas', he writes,

are not simply passively accepted; rather, they constitute a problematic for Shakespeare, a set of critical presuppositions which create problems of their own, a set of ideas probed, questioned, and searchingly critiqued, but never dismissed or simply condemned.<sup>5</sup>

Although Grady applies his hypothesis chiefly to *Hamlet* and Shakespeare's second tetralogy of history plays, he claims that Shakespeare's later Roman plays — including *Coriolanus* — 'constitute a final phase of Shakespearian involvement with the themes of Machiavelli'.<sup>6</sup> Most recently, critical focus has shifted to the relationships between civilian populations and the military bodies which, at least nominally, defend them. Cathy Shrank — who argues that the play calls for interpretations of 'civility' in the context of contemporaneous English civic corporations (rather than the broader state) — has shown how *Coriolanus* 'taps into early modern anxieties about the role of the professional soldier', using Machiavelli to illustrate these anxieties.<sup>7</sup> Nichole E. Miller's discussion of personal sacrifice and limited reciprocity also discusses the threat of the professional soldier through the Machiavellian prism, as well as the sacrificial aspects of concessionary politics described by Machiavelli in his *Discourses*.<sup>8</sup> This essay focuses on the radical linguistic and conceptual uncertainties which, in *Coriolanus*, are generated by political pragmatism of the kind promoted by Machiavelli. Aspects of Machiavelli's most famous works, *The Prince* and *The Discourses*, are discussed here, alongside *The Art of War*, whose publication in English predates that of his other works and which exemplifies the changing reception of Machiavelli in England. I take the view that Shakespeare's interest in 'Machiavellian' ideas prompted him to misrepresent

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odds with Machiavelli's attitude to them'. Roe, *Shakespeare and Machiavelli* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), p. 194.

<sup>4</sup> John Plotz, 'Coriolanus and the Failure of Performatives', *ELH*, 63.4 (1996), p. 809.

<sup>5</sup> Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare, Machiavelli, & Montaigne: Power and Subjectivity from 'Richard II' to 'Hamlet'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 45.

<sup>6</sup> Grady, p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> Cathy Shrank, 'Civility and the City in *Coriolanus*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 54.4 (2003), p. 418.

<sup>8</sup> Nichole E. Miller, 'Sacred Life and Sacrificial Economy: Coriolanus in No-Man's Land', *Criticism*, 51.2 (2009), pp. 269–74.

his Plutarchan source in order to examine the paradoxical effects of idealistic inflexibility, and to indicate the moral challenges posed by conceptual indeterminacy.

The notion of a pluralised system of civic virtues begins with the founding of nations. Numa Pompilius, the fabled successor to Romulus on the Roman throne, recognised the need for his subjects to adapt their behaviour according to time and circumstance. According to Plutarch, Numa instituted and set upon hinges a twofold value system to reflect the respective demands of war and peace:

[T]he first [month], which is January, was called after the name of Janus. [. . .] Numa took away the month of March from the first place, & gave it unto January: because he would have peace preferred before war, & civil things before martial. For this Janus (were he king, or demigod) in the former age was counted very civil & politic. For he changed the life of men, which before his time was rude, cruel, & wild: & brought it to be honest, gentle, & civil. For this cause they do paint his image at this day with two faces, the one before, and the other behind, for thus changing the lives of men. And there is in Rome a temple dedicated unto him, which hath two doors, that be called the doors of war: for the custom is to open them, when the Romans have any wars in place, and to shut them when they be at peace. To have them shut, it was a rare thing to see, and happened very seldom [. . .].<sup>9</sup>

Janus is a god of thresholds, of change and new beginnings. He is associated with the advent of man's civility and his month displaces that of Mars from the start of the calendar, ushering in the new year with new resolutions, 'changing the lives of men' and establishing a fresh template of virtuous conduct. The Temple of Janus, built by Numa upon the Capitoline Hill, gave the opposing qualities of peace and war symbolic expression. When the Temple gates were open, which (as Plutarch acknowledges) was most of the time, Rome was a formidable opponent, fierce in protection of her territories against incursions by neighbouring competitors. When the gates were closed, Rome became a new city, with a new set of civic values.

Plutarch, from whose 'Life of Numa' the extract above is taken, provided Shakespeare with the narrative foundations for *Coriolanus*, the history of a Roman military marvel expelled from his own city for failing to meet the requirements of peacetime, and his

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<sup>9</sup> Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes*, trans. by Thomas North (London: Thomas Vautroullier and John Wright, 1579), p. 79. Here, as elsewhere, I have modernised spellings used in the original editions, but retained the original punctuation.

terrible, but ultimately abortive, campaign of vengeance. Although Shakespeare followed his classical source closely, he made certain significant alterations. Plutarch relates how, expelled from Rome, Coriolanus finds his new Volscian friends unwilling to commit to war, and so cynically engineers the conditions for renewed hostilities. Then, advancing on Rome, Plutarch's Coriolanus demonstrates acute political consciousness by carefully and deliberately inciting the Roman plebeians against the patrician class. Although these facets of Plutarch's account offer excellent material for compelling drama, Shakespeare elected to omit them from his play.

In this study, I examine Shakespeare's representation of mutable civic virtues in *Coriolanus*, a play whose tragic ending lies in the failure of its protagonist to recognise that martial valour must 'learn to coexist with the values of peace and, even in war, modify its antique, epic character'.<sup>10</sup> In considering Shakespeare's portrayal of the tensions between unitary and pluralised codes of public values, I scrutinise the dynamics of a concessionary form of politics (Rome's nascent democracy) in which the value of actions is subject to constant reinterpretation, as well as the language through which such negotiations are conducted. I compare this mode of systematised indeterminacy (of values and of language) with the unwavering convictions of the play's central character, in whom Shakespeare presents a contrasting emblem of moral consistency. One important focus of this essay is upon Shakespeare's departures from his Plutarchan source, omissions and alterations made in order to present the central figure as a model of rigidly unitary values. By making these changes, Shakespeare offers a figure who — in marked contrast to the Coriolanus whose 'craft and deceit' had been criticised by Plutarch — embodies guilelessness and honestly-held (if misguided) convictions.<sup>11</sup> I argue that these changes were made by Shakespeare in order to construct a play which dramatises a confrontation between determined, 'obstinate' idealism on the one hand, and the kind of pragmatic flexibility of values associated with Machiavellian doctrine on the other. A key question which arises from this consideration is whether allegiance is owed to the state as an entity or to a particular set of values with which the subject aligns him- or herself.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Barton, p. 145.

<sup>11</sup> Plutarch, p. 260.

<sup>12</sup> This question has long formed the basis of polarised interpretations of *Coriolanus* both on the stage and in critical writing: the play has seemed to invite audiences to take sides, usually eliciting responses which either favour democratic or autocratic systems of rule. Much has been written about the polarising effects of *Coriolanus*. See, for instance, Peter Holland's introduction to the most recent Arden edition of the play (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). The A. P. Rossiter lecture, 'Coriolanus', begins with a catalogue of four different political responses to the play, incorporating responses by William Hazlitt, radical right-wing French groups of the early 1930s, Soviet Russia, and the British newspaper, *The Daily Worker* (Rossiter, *Angel with Horns: Fifteen Lectures on Shakespeare*, ed. by Graham Storey, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Longman, 1989), pp. 235–37). More recently, Shrank's essay, 'Civility and the City in *Coriolanus*', similarly opens with a paragraph describing the radical variations in political emphasis offered by adaptations,

## I: 'Virtue self'

At the start of his account of the life of Coriolanus, Plutarch advised his readers that moral perspective is qualified by temporal circumstance. Far from referring to the schema of binary virtues symbolised by Numa's gates of war, Plutarch was indicating the sense of cultural distance experienced by people who try to understand the customs of past times. The civic values of early republican Rome, he wrote, did not wholly reflect those of his own times. 'In those days', writes Plutarch (in Thomas North's sixteenth-century translation),

valiantness was honoured in Rome above all other virtues: which they called *Virtus*, by the name of virtue self, as including in that general name, all other special virtues besides. So that *Virtus* in the Latin, was as much as valiantness.<sup>13</sup>

Plutarch's contextual commentary emphasises the temporal and cultural estrangement of historian and subject. Virtue, he tells us, is not what it used to be (or used not to be what it is now). As well as conveying a sense of temporal distance, Plutarch's description expresses a marked conceptual uncertainty. His dependence upon etymological derivation draws attention to the mutability of words and concepts. Martial virtue does not just incorporate 'all other special virtues besides': it dissolves into them.

Shakespeare read Plutarch's account carefully and took notice of this passage. The dramatist's direct engagement is made apparent in act two, when Caius Martius, having literally earned a name for himself through his heroics at Corioles, runs for election as consul. Speaking in his support before the senate is his colleague and friend Cominius, who defines Roman virtue according to the terms set out by Plutarch (above), and names Coriolanus as its principal exemplar. 'It is held', says Cominius,

That valour is the chiefest virtue and

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performances and critical interpretations of Shakespeare's play (p. 406). In *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice*, Patterson discusses the play's continued susceptibility to 'ideological appropriation', but stresses Shakespeare's positive interest in the relationship between the state and the individual subject in early republican Rome (pp. 120–22). James Kuzner has challenged critics such as Patterson, arguing that *Coriolanus* is concerned with the possibility of a retreat from the sheltering impostures of civic existence: 'in seeking to exist outside Rome's fictions, as I believe Coriolanus does, he also stands for other, more habitable forms of unprotected existence'. Kuzner, 'Unbuilding the City: *Coriolanus* and the Birth of Republican Rome', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 58.2 (2007), p. 175.

<sup>13</sup> Plutarch, p. 238.

Most dignifies the haver. If it be,  
The man I speak of cannot in the world  
Be singly counterpoised. (2.2.79–83)

There follows a tribute to Coriolanus' matchless military endeavours, from his boyhood to his most recent feats in the Volscian stronghold of Corioles. Cominius' speech supplies the Plutarchan definition of Roman virtue with its archetypal embodiment. Yet the speech is conspicuously lacking in semantic stability: surface meaning is unsettled by a counter-current of uncertainty. Cominius' words — 'It is held', 'If it be' — indicate a range of unspoken alternatives relating to virtuous conduct. The testimony falls short of a full endorsement. Anne Barton interprets Cominius' speech with the aid of Shakespeare's clown, Touchstone, who recognises the linguistic potency of conditional qualifiers of the type used here:

'If', as Touchstone points out in *As You Like It*, is a word with curious properties and powers: 'Your If is the only peacemaker; much virtue in 'If.' Cominius's 'If', like Touchstone's, is a kind of peacemaker. [. . .] 'If' continues to mediate between martial prowess as a traditional all-sufficing good and the possible claims of other human ideals.<sup>14</sup>

Cominius' qualifications expose a radical uncertainty in the narrative he seems to be endorsing. 'If' suggests an alternative 'If not' and subtly displaces valour from its assumed position as Rome's 'chiefest virtue'.<sup>15</sup> Other aspects of Cominius' speech underscore this uncertainty. 'It is held' is a distancing phrase equivalent to 'they say'. It acknowledges the semantic instability generated by a process of conceptual definition founded upon collective interpretation. When Cominius prefixes it to his description of Rome's estimation of valour, it should prompt the question, 'By whom is it held?'. This problem of conceptual indeterminacy (or multiplicity) underpins much of the political action of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*.

Shakespeare's awareness of the shortcomings of rigid moral definitions invites comparison with Machiavelli. In Shakespeare's lifetime, Machiavelli's most prominent

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<sup>14</sup> Barton, p. 124.

<sup>15</sup> Barton connects this incident with Livy's account of Marcus Curtius, who saved Rome from destruction in 362 BCE, when a chasm opened up in the Forum. Roman soothsayers concluded that the sudden rupture demanded the sacrifice of Rome's most prized asset, but were unable to determine what this was. Curtius reminded them that Rome's greatest quality was the valour of its heroes, and hurled himself fully armed into the chasm, which then closed behind him. Barton's point in making this connection depends upon the initial consternation of the soothsayers: martial valour was already no longer the obvious yardstick for measuring virtue. Barton, p. 123. See also Livy, *The Roman Histories* Written by T. Livius of Padua, trans. by Philemon Holland (London: Adam Islip, 1600), pp. 252–53.

works had yet to be published in English translation, although it is clear that some of Shakespeare's peers (Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson, to name but two) knew Machiavelli through reading and not just by reputation. Recent studies on Shakespeare's engagement with Machiavellian ideas do not rely on Shakespeare's direct familiarity with the Florentine's writings.<sup>16</sup> Instead, Machiavellian ideas relating to politic expediency had become a discursive field in their own right, simultaneously shocking and appealing for their amorally objective analysis of the workings of power. Machiavelli's reputation on the early modern English stage is best illustrated in Christopher Marlowe's play, *The Jew of Malta*, whose prologue is spoken by 'the Machiavel' himself:

To some, perhaps, my name is odious,  
 But such as love me guard me from their tongues,  
 And let them know that I am Machiavel,  
 And weigh not men, and therefore not men's words.  
 Admired I am of those that hate me most.  
 Though some speak openly against my books,  
 Yet will they read me, and thereby attain  
 To Peter's chair, and, when they cast me off,  
 Are poisoned by my climbing followers.  
 I count religion but a childish toy,  
 And hold there is no sin but ignorance. (*The Jew of Malta*, Prologue.5–15)<sup>17</sup>

Marlowe's characterisation is typical of the period in which he wrote. The speech emphasises the supposed wickedness of Machiavellian political thought, connecting it to the perceived heresies of the Roman Catholic Church ('Peter's chair' is the papal throne), and claiming for it an endless succession of scheming, murderous acolytes. Marlowe's prologue carries considerable satirical weight. It sardonically indicates the broad appeal of Machiavelli's ideas, and derides the hypocrisy of powerful men who

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<sup>16</sup> 'We are dealing', asserts Hugh Grady, 'with analogies rather than the "source-and-influence" dynamics of traditional positivist historicism', p. 5. John Roe also concedes that Shakespeare's access to Machiavellian ideas may have come 'at a slight remove', pp. 4–5. N. W. Bawcutt contends that there is insufficient evidence to connect Shakespeare's ideas directly with the writing of Machiavelli, but acknowledges certain correspondences. Bawcutt shows that Shakespeare's interest in 'Machiavellian' ideas could have originated elsewhere, but is chiefly concerned with demonstrating Shakespeare's comparative humaneness. He argues that Shakespeare would, if familiar with Machiavelli's *Prince*, have found it 'uncongenial', 'repulsive', or 'offensive'. Bawcutt, 'Shakespeare and Machiavelli: A Caveat', *Shakespeare Survey*, 63 (2010), p. 244. I agree with Anne Barton that 'it would be more surprising if it could be proved that Shakespeare had managed to avoid reading Machiavelli than if concrete evidence were to turn up that he had', p. 135.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*, in *The Norton Anthology of English Renaissance Drama*, ed. by David Bevington, Lars Engle, Katherine Eisaman Maus and Eric Rasmussen (New York: Norton, 2002).

preach religious and moral absolutes, indicating a divorce between utterance and intention. Those who ‘love’ Machiavelli will not publicly acknowledge him; those who proscribe him nonetheless read him.

Machiavelli’s writings uniformly endorse pragmatism in the implementation of policy. They reject the idea that political decisions should be made in deference to presumed moral absolutes, arguing instead for tactical manoeuvrability dependent on circumstance. In order successfully to carry through these pragmatic schemes, it is necessary for the decision-maker to be a moral contortionist, as outlined in the following passage from *The Prince*:

it will be found that some things which seem virtues would, if followed, lead to one’s ruin, and some others which appear vices result in one’s greater security and wellbeing.<sup>18</sup>

Prudent political practice is likely to preclude moral rigidity, or the strict observance of ‘things which seem virtues’. Expedience, and not principle, becomes the arbiter of social values. The Roman world depicted by Shakespeare in *Coriolanus* is one in which conceptions of virtuous behaviour are constantly reassessed in order to address the demands of the immediate moment. One of the consequences of this is that an ostensibly moral community, which claims to have a fixed hierarchy of civic virtues, becomes ‘a morass of deception’ in which verbal communication is employed for the purpose of misrepresentation, or (as Plutarch’s etymology of ‘virtue self’ recognises) through which specific meanings are disintegrated into an unlimited range of subsidiary analogues.<sup>19</sup> Nichole Miller has described the importance of metonymic substitutions, in Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* and in contemporary media, which associate commonly-held values with communal identity. ‘[T]he soldier’, she writes,

is held up as an exceptional citizen, and this singularity is always figured in terms of a willingness to participate in the ultimate exchange: life for country. Yet this potential exchange in turn lends itself to endless abstraction and dilation: the willingness to give “life for country” becomes “life for democracy” or “freedom of religion.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, from *The Prince*, in ‘*The Prince*’ and ‘*The Discourses*’, ed. by Max Lerner (New York: Random House, 1950), p. 57.

<sup>19</sup> Plotz, p. 812.

<sup>20</sup> Miller, p. 267.



This process of semantic ‘abstraction and dilation’ dictates the parameters of participation, so that each reassessment of civic virtues impacts upon the relation between the individual citizen and the wider state. Both A. P. Rossiter and Anne Barton have stressed the importance of a speech given by the Volscian military leader, Tullus Aufidius, shortly before the tragic climax of *Coriolanus*. Embittered by his diminished standing with the Volscian people, he expresses his discontent in words which echo those of Machiavelli, above: ‘our virtues / Lie in th’ interpretation of the time’ (4.7.49–50). According to Barton, Aufidius’ complaint ‘might stand as the epigraph for this play as a whole’; for Rossiter, his comment supplies ‘the essence of the play’.<sup>21</sup> *Coriolanus*’ political message is thus reduced to the concentrated intensity of a stock cube. Rossiter connects the shifting ‘interpretations’ of virtue with the structure of Shakespeare’s play, arguing that each of the five acts dramatises a new “‘estimate” or valuation of Marcius’, whose own system of values remains static, whilst circumstantially-determined re-evaluations cast him in a range of public roles: ‘enemy of the people — demigod of war — popular hero home in triumph — Consul-elect — and then (through his assertion of what he always *had* asserted) public enemy and banished man’.<sup>22</sup> Rossiter’s interpretation, unsettlingly mechanistic in its proposal of unitary shifts in conceptual determination, is superseded by that of Barton, whose analysis focuses on moral indeterminacy and the disintegration of a certain structure for virtuous behaviour. She describes a Rome whose demands have become sophisticated, and in which a range of metamorphic values are in simultaneous operation at any one time. For Barton, *Coriolanus* is a remnant of a Rome that no longer exists: ‘The fact is that in an increasingly complex and finely balanced society, one in which even Cominius can hint that valour may not any longer be the chiefest virtue, Volumnia’s son is something of an anachronism, out of line even with the other members of his class’.<sup>23</sup> A range of civic virtues interact and demand constant mutual modification. This schematic corresponds directly with Machiavelli’s conjectures about the political structure of republican Rome, as outlined below.

## II: To all points o’th’ compass

Machiavelli admired the political constitution of the Roman republic. He regarded the running disputes between patricians and plebeians as providing the secret of good governance. In *The Discourses*, he writes of an oppositional dynamic which, following

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<sup>21</sup> Barton, pp. 144–45, and Rossiter, p. 250.

<sup>22</sup> Rossiter, p. 250. (‘Marcius’ is the spelling used by Rossiter.)

<sup>23</sup> Barton, p. 133. See note 15, above.

the establishment of a popular tribunate, endowed Rome with the appropriate channels of expression to safeguard the interests of all parties:

[A]fter many troubles, tumults, and dangers occasioned by the excesses which both the nobles and the people committed, [Rome] came, for the security of the people, to the creation of Tribunes, who were endowed with so many prerogatives [. . .] that they formed a powerful barrier between the Senate and the people, which curbed the insolence of the former.<sup>24</sup>

The mediation of the tribunes, Machiavelli writes, functioned as a limiting power, moderating aristocratic ‘excesses’ and protecting the wellbeing of Rome’s citizenry. Machiavelli describes a system which accommodates a plurality of perspectives, a range of virtue systems, by operating a process of mediation and concession. He claims that fierce political competition, viewed in terms of a two-party class struggle, was integral to the maintenance of a stable Roman state. In *The Discourses*, he responds to the charge that such a system is noisily combative by remarking that, in over three centuries of republican rule, political tensions in Rome ‘caused but very few exiles, and cost still less blood’.<sup>25</sup> Coriolanus was one of these exiles.<sup>26</sup> Machiavelli’s championship of effective political oratory is significant:

The demands of a free people are rarely pernicious to their liberty; they are generally inspired by oppressions, experienced or apprehended; and if their fears are ill-founded, resort is had to public assemblies where the mere eloquence of a single good and respectable man will make them sensible of their error.<sup>27</sup>

Here, oratorical talent provides the peacemaking ‘If’ which martial conquest cannot supply and, as Touchstone reminds us, there is ‘much virtue’ in linguistic sleight of hand. In this society, ‘the eloquence of a single good and respectable man’ makes the warrior’s ferocity redundant. ‘Consider’, says one of Coriolanus’ apologists, ‘That when he speaks not like a citizen, / You find him like a soldier’ (3.3.53–55). The problem in *Coriolanus* lies, as John Plotz recognises, in the fact that language becomes a tool used in order to manipulate and persuade, rather than to represent: ‘all space is occupied by words used to spur others to actions, words to quiet others from dissent, words to

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<sup>24</sup> *The Discourses*, p. 118.

<sup>25</sup> *The Discourses*, p. 119.

<sup>26</sup> See Book I, chapter 7 of *The Discourses*.

<sup>27</sup> *The Discourses*, p. 120.

perform public ceremonies in which no one really believes'.<sup>28</sup> Speech becomes the glib and oily art condemned by Cordelia in *King Lear*: the most significant battles in *Coriolanus* are fought with words, not swords.

*Coriolanus* is brimful of discordant opinions. The play opens with civil disturbances and the subsequent institution of popular tribunes. The history of Rome allows Shakespeare to imagine how a world might function in which voices are votes, where the ordinary citizen's opinion is given some official validation. (Cathy Shrank is persuasive in her argument that the theme of political participation in *Coriolanus* benefits from reading in the context of civic life in early modern England: 'Attention to the play's civic setting would [...] have been heightened for its metropolitan audiences at the time of its first probable performances, in 1608, since that was the year when London was itself incorporated, verifying the existing practices, privileges, and civic institutions previously based on individual charters and extending the city's authority into the suburbs'.)<sup>29</sup> Like many other plays by Shakespeare, *Coriolanus* shows popular opinion to be alarmingly pliable. When the tribune Brutus describes Coriolanus' triumphant entrance into Rome in act two, scene one, universal enthusiasm is depicted as impacting negatively on the everyday activities of civic life: when an infant is permitted to cry itself 'into a rapture', it is a sign that all is not well (2.1.193). Yet *Coriolanus* also shows an urgent regard for the establishment of consensus in an environment of diverse opinions. This urgency first manifests itself in the play's opening dialogue, as one mutinous citizen attempts to secure popular backing for the assassination of Martius: 'You are all resolved[...]' he asks his peers, 'Is't a verdict?' (1.1.3, 9). Consensus here is a prerequisite for action. Within a few lines, collective consent is dissolved into a considered debate to which five citizens contribute distinctive voices. However mercurial their collective sensibilities may be, the Roman people are not a rabble. They are conscientious and civic-minded individuals (who even claim to have given the Roman senate a fortnight's notice of their march), and are aware of the processes involved in turning disparate opinions into collective action (1.1.49–52).

The complexities of collective decision-making are demonstrated repeatedly in *Coriolanus*. There is one speech, in particular, which illustrates the benefits and disadvantages of democratic processes with simple clarity. In act two, scene three, one Roman citizen speaks to his fellow as follows:

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<sup>28</sup> Plotz, p. 813.

<sup>29</sup> Shrank, p. 412.

We have been called [the many-headed multitude] of many, not that our heads are some brown, some black, some abram, 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'th' compass. (2.3.16–21)

I cannot identify any sense of frustration or resentment in the speech. This is the voice of one who believes strongly that '[t]he people are the city', but who is conscious of the political heterogeneity this equivalence implies (3.1.200). The frenzied welcome given to Coriolanus after his heroic stand at Corioles is isolated and exceptional: consensual uniformity is a scarce commodity. Collective determination establishes a means by which to curb the impact of extreme perspectives and pursue a (relatively) moderate political course. It is this effect which Machiavelli champions in *The Discourses*. If (and here is that peacemaking 'If' again) 'consent of one direct way [is] at once to all points o'th' compass', then the point of general consensus should, in theory, be somewhere in the middle. The power of the people's state lies in the requirement it makes of all participants to make concessions in matters of ideological principle. In Rome, Coriolanus is alone in refusing, at least outwardly, to comply with these requirements. This non-compliance leads him to be characterised as one '[t]hat would depopulate the city and / Be every man himself' (3.1.264–65). This language, which describes the prospective incorporation of the body politic into one man, has monarchical implications resonant of the models of late medieval sovereignty set out by F. W. Maitland and Ernst Kantorowicz.<sup>30</sup> What is suggested here is a threatened return to tyrannical monarchy.<sup>31</sup> However, tyranny is presented by Shakespeare as only the least subtle means by which to exert control over the parameters of civic virtues.

In the government of 'voices', politicians are the choirmasters. They strive, for good or ill, to influence popular judgement and so determine the course of policy. When the two featured tribunes, Sicinius and Brutus, convince the people to revoke their election of

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<sup>30</sup> F. W. Maitland, 'The Crown as Corporation', repr. in *Collected Papers*, ed. by H. A. L. Fisher, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), III, pp. 244–70 and Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957). Both studies stress the significance of the monarchical body as a symbol of the state as a whole. The king is perceived as having 'two bodies', one composed of flesh and blood, the other a holistic incorporation of the realm.

<sup>31</sup> See Miller, p. 268: 'While Aufidius and the Volscians provide the play's external state of emergency, Coriolanus's banishment occurs because he represents a second and potentially more deadly (because internalized) threat, that of tyranny. More specifically, Coriolanus poses the threat of the citizen turned tyrant, a fear that Brutus and Sicinius, the play's plebeian tribunes, do not necessarily need to fabricate when they incite the citizens to rescind their favorable "voices" for the newly elected consul, Coriolanus'.

Coriolanus as consul, they are careful to ensure that the citizens appear to have reached this decision independently, in contravention of their advice:

BRUTUS [*to the* CITIZENS]

Lay

A fault on us your tribunes, that we laboured  
No impediment between, but that you must  
Cast your election on him.

SICINIUS [*to the* CITIZENS] Say you chose him

More after our commandment than as guided  
By your own true affections, and that your minds,  
Preoccupied with what you rather must do  
Than what you should, made you against the grain  
To voice him consul. Lay the fault on us.

BRUTUS [*to the CITIZENS*] Ay, spare us not. Say we read lectures to you [...].

(2.3.215–24)

The tribunes' duplicity offers them an extraordinary political safeguard. It is calculated to earn them the gratitude of the people and the appreciation of the patricians, as well as gaining them a desired political outcome. In *Political Characters of Shakespeare*, John Palmer described this scene as exemplifying 'good, sound electioneering'.<sup>32</sup> He continued: 'Admittedly it is dishonest. But do political leaders in the heat of an election always tell the truth?'<sup>33</sup> Whatever we may think about Palmer's defence of the tribunes' tactics, his cynical awareness is instructive. John Plotz's argument, that *Coriolanus* dramatises a political universe in which 'deceits [. . .] may be *de jure* forbidden, but are the *de facto* norm', echoes Palmer's sentiments, albeit with less approval.<sup>34</sup> In the Roman world of sharp political practices and moral flexibility, the guileless rigidity of Coriolanus makes him stand out. In a society of hypocrites, he is an anomaly.

Shakespeare's Coriolanus is incapable of adapting to Rome's newly established political system, where 'mere eloquence' (Machiavelli's words, above) contributes most strongly to the determination of political direction. Having incurred the wrath of the people in his botched campaign for the consulship, Coriolanus is advised by his mother to sue for forgiveness by demonstrating a feigned humility:

<sup>32</sup> John Palmer, *Political Characters of Shakespeare* (London: Macmillan, 1945), p. 273.

<sup>33</sup> Palmer, p. 274. See also Annabel Patterson, who concedes that 'some aspects' of the tribunes' manoeuvres are 'disreputable', but maintains that the establishment of a popular tribunate in *Coriolanus* can be regarded as a positive political development, p. 143.

<sup>34</sup> Plotz, p. 813.

CORIO LANUS What must I do?  
VOLUMNIA Return to th' tribunes.  
CORIO LANUS Well, what then, what then?  
VOLUMNIA Repent what you have spoke.  
CORIO LANUS For them? I cannot do it to the gods.  
Must I then do it to them? [...]  
VOLUMNIA If it be honour in your wars to seem  
The same that 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 honour, as in war, since that to both  
It stands in like request?  
CORIO LANUS Why force you this?  
VOLUMNIA Because that now it lies you on to speak to th' people,  
Not by your own instruction, nor by th' matter  
Which your heart prompts you, but with such words  
That are but roted in your tongue, though but  
Bastards and syllables of no allowance to your bosom's truth.  
(3.2.35–58)

Volumnia explicitly conflates the virtuous (or 'honourable') practices of war and peace, stressing the significance of politic adaptability according to the demands of the time. Coriolanus makes no positive response to his mother's reference to dissimulation in combat. We, who have seen him in battle, know that he does not 'adopt [his] policy'. His conception of valour as a unitary virtue will not permit it. John Plotz's differentiation between 'roted' and 'rooted' forms of speech in *Coriolanus* follows the model set out by Volumnia in the extract above.<sup>35</sup> Plotz identifies parallel conceptions in the historical writings of Thomas More, according to which, he writes, 'public deceit [...] is a sort of social glue that allows the transactions of (unequal) power to be transacted with a minimum of outright fuss and contradiction and the maximum of pleasant, mendacious, but common amelioration'.<sup>36</sup> Plotz's references to More are of peculiar interest, since More's suicidal refusal to recant his Catholicism and pledge unqualified allegiance to the Henrician state bears a resemblance to Coriolanus' own adherence to principle. ('Repent what you have spoke'. 'For them? I cannot do it to the gods'.) Coriolanus' steadfastness in a world of wavering values, in which speech and meaning have an uncertain relation, resonates compellingly in an English state that had

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<sup>35</sup> Plotz, p. 812 ff.

<sup>36</sup> Plotz, p. 813.

undergone two generations of religious upheaval. The ‘bastards and syllables’ deployed by Shakespeare’s characters for political gain disconnect subjective emotion from utterance. They are, as Volumnia explains, words which are ‘but roted in the tongue’. This ‘roted’ language affects the action of *Coriolanus* from the first scene to the last, contrasting with what Plotz describes as ‘rooted’ speech: unpremeditated expressions of the ‘bosom’s truth’. This distinction perpetrates a mischief on the relationship between language and represented actualities, argues Plotz, ‘so there is no notion of the truth-value of speech’.<sup>37</sup> This interpretation, it is acknowledged, is echoed in commentaries on Shakespeare’s second tetralogy of English history plays, which, according to James L. Calderwood, dramatises a progression from ‘verbal realism to skepticism’.<sup>38</sup> Tom McAlindon has profitably compared Shakespeare’s interest in verbal misrepresentation with ‘Machiavelli’s confident views on the efficacy of expedient perfidy’, while Hugh Grady has supplied additional emphasis: ‘One of the effects created by the precepts of Machiavellian rhetoric [...] is a devaluation of words themselves’.<sup>39</sup> In Plutarch’s ‘Life of Coriolanus’, Shakespeare found these Machiavellian considerations echoed and amplified, not only in the machinations of Roman political life, but also in the person of Coriolanus himself. Where Plutarch’s biography depicts a cynical strategist, Shakespeare’s Coriolanus is, without being politically naïve, a man whose idea of virtue will not accommodate deceit.

### III: Coriolanus and *The Art of War*

There is a prehistory to Machiavelli’s vilification in England. In 1560, Peter Whitehorne, a student at Gray’s Inn, published his translation of *The Art of War* by ‘Nicholas Machiavel’. Whitehorne’s dedicatory epistle, addressed to Queen Elizabeth (then in the second year of her long reign) makes the claim that,

of many strangers, which from foreign countries, have heretofore in this your Majesty’s realm arrived, there is none in comparison to be preferred, before this worthy Florentine and Italian, who having freely without gain of exchange (as after some acquaintance and familiarity will better appear) brought with him most rich, rare and plentiful

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<sup>37</sup> Plotz, p. 811.

<sup>38</sup> James L. Calderwood, *Metadrama in Shakespeare’s Henriad: ‘Richard II’ to ‘Henry V’* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979), p. 30.

<sup>39</sup> Tom McAlindon, *Shakespeare’s Tudor History: A Study of ‘Henry IV’, Parts 1 and 2* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p. 103; Grady, p. 72. See also Tim Spiekerman, *Shakespeare’s Political Realism: The English History Plays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001) and John Roe, *Shakespeare and Machiavelli*, chapters 2 and 3.

treasure, shall deserve I trust of all good English hearts, most lovingly  
and friendly to be entertained, embraced and cherished.<sup>40</sup>

Whitehorne's enthusiastic and public endorsement of Machiavelli is startling, given the ignominy universally heaped on him only a generation later. *The Art of War* takes the form of a series of dialogues on the practicalities of modern warfare. Like *The Prince* and *The Discourses*, it expounds strategic hypotheses through the discussion of historical examples, many of them taken from classical Rome.

Much of the book is devoted to the question of how soldiers should be selected and trained, in what manner they should be armed, and the most effective formations for a variety of combat scenarios. Yet Whitehorne's translation also provides a foretaste of the unscrupulousness upon which Machiavelli's later reputation rests. Significantly, like Volumnia, Machiavelli regards martial accomplishment as being dependent on political strategy. The successful captain must 'adopt his policy' in order to disrupt the unity of hostile forces: 'sow voices, which do pronounce the captain of th' enemies to be dead, or to have overcome on the other side of the army'.<sup>41</sup> He must also be prepared to broker truces for strategic gain, without any intention of holding to agreed terms:

It hath often been a profitable thing to a captain [...] to move an entreaty  
of agreement, and to make truce with [the enemy] for certain days: the  
which is wont to make the enemies more negligent in all doings [...].<sup>42</sup>

These recommendations, both of which emphasise the military benefits of tactical deception, expose the arbitrary relationship between words and their signification: 'bastards and syllables' are by no means confined to use in civic wrangling. Whitehorne's translation elegantly encapsulates the forethought involved in such strategic misdirection: to 'sow voices' is to plant verbal seeds in the expectation of a future harvest. The 'roted' language described by Volumnia and identified by Plotz may, in fact, become 'rooted' in popular thought: 'The chivalry of the enemies', writes Machiavelli, 'may be easily troubled [. . .] with rumours'.<sup>43</sup> Most significant, with regard to Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, is Machiavelli's promotion of the 'divide and conquer' stratagem:

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<sup>40</sup> Peter Whitehorne, 'The Epistle Dedicatorie' in Machiavelli, *The Arte of Warre*, trans. by Whitehorne (London: Nicholas England, 1560), fol. a iv<sup>r</sup>. Whitehorne's book substantially embellishes the practical lessons supplied by Machiavelli's dialogues. It includes an appendix detailing, among other things, the recipes for twenty-three different types of gunpowder and instructions for the manufacture of fireworks.

<sup>41</sup> *The Arte of Warre*, p. lxi.

<sup>42</sup> *The Arte of Warre*, p. lxxxix.

<sup>43</sup> *The Arte of Warre*, p. lxi.



A Captain ought, among all other of his affairs, with all subtlety to devise to divide the force of the enemy, either with making him to suspect his own men, in whom he trusteth, or to give him occasion, that he may separate his men, and thereby to become more weak.<sup>44</sup>

One of the illustrative models cited by Machiavelli for this piece of tactical guidance is Coriolanus himself, whom both Plutarch and Livy describe as having sought to instigate a division of patrician and plebeian interests in his assault on Rome. ‘You know’, runs Whitehorne’s translation, ‘how Coriolanus coming with an army to Rome, preserved the possessions of the nobility and those of the commonalty he burned and sacked’.<sup>45</sup> Alan Lehman reminds us that, by 80 CE, Coriolanus had ‘become a stock example of a good tactician’ for this precise reason.<sup>46</sup> Shakespeare chose to overlook this divisive strategy, and the tactical subtlety required by it, despite having read accounts of it in the Roman histories.

This is not the only instance in which Shakespeare departs from his Plutarchan source. A more remarkable break with Plutarch’s narrative is to be found in the fact that Shakespeare’s Coriolanus allies himself with a nettled Volscian force already eager to wage war on its rival, Rome. According to Plutarch, however, the Volscians, having arranged a two-year truce with Rome, were unwilling to renew hostilities and were able to mingle unmolested with the people of Rome. Plutarch explains how Coriolanus conspired to engineer the conditions which led to this truce being broken. On a holiday, celebrated with public games, it was suddenly proclaimed that all Volscians within the city should ‘avoid out of Rome before sunset’.<sup>47</sup> Plutarch reports the background to Rome’s expulsion of the Volscians in the manner following:

Some think this was a craft and deceit of Martius, who sent one to Rome to the Consuls, to accuse the Volsces falsely, advertising them how they had made a conspiracy to set upon them, whilst they were busy in seeing these games, and also to set their city afire.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *The Arte of Warre*, p. xc.

<sup>45</sup> *The Arte of Warre*, p. xc.

<sup>46</sup> Alan Lehman, ‘The Coriolanus Story in Antiquity’, *The Classical Journal*, 47.8 (1952), p. 332. Lehman writes of Coriolanus’ inclusion as a model strategist in Sextus Frontinus’ *Stratagematon*, a guide to military tactics not altogether dissimilar from *The Art of War*.

<sup>47</sup> Plutarch, p. 251.

<sup>48</sup> Plutarch, p. 251.

North's translation of Plutarch provides marginal notes, summarising key elements of the narrative. In the margin adjacent to the text above is written: '*Martius Coriolanus' crafty accusation of the Volsces*'.<sup>49</sup> The note, with its description of Coriolanus' 'crafty' manipulation of circumstances, recognises a key aspect of Plutarch's characterisation. Despite the qualification ('Some think') prefixed to Plutarch's account above, Coriolanus' reported cunning awakens the historian's indignation:

Martius [. . .] did by craft and deceit bring the Romans into wars against the Volsces, causing the Volsces maliciously, and wrongfully to be suspected, that went to Rome to see the games played.<sup>50</sup>

The degree of intrigue alleged by Plutarch is striking: the passage recalls the tactics of some of the best Shakespearean schemers. At the start of *Richard III*, the arch-Machiavel Richard of Gloucester gleefully soliloquises about 'inductions dangerous', rumours designed to 'set my brother Clarence and the King / In deadly hate the one against the other' (*Richard III*, 1.1.32–35). Richard's accomplished villainy is effected through methods identical to those ascribed to Coriolanus by Plutarch. Shakespeare's rejection of such rich source material must be regarded as an active decision. Plutarch constructs a character almost entirely at odds with the Coriolanus depicted by Shakespeare, who emblematises a firm, reductive moral code set against a contrasting Machiavellian schematic of moral variability.

For Shakespeare, then, Coriolanus could not be represented as he is by Plutarch. Shakespeare's Coriolanus is terrible, certainly, but he is a unique representation of moral certainty, an archetype of military heroism. Unlike the Coriolanus recognised by Plutarch, Livy and Machiavelli (who seeks to create advantageous divisions between the plebeians and patricians), Shakespeare's Coriolanus visits a general and indiscriminate revenge on Rome. Despite factionalism in Rome, it is the city as a corporate entity whose ingratitude he seeks to punish.<sup>51</sup> Shakespeare ensures that Coriolanus' exile is attributable not to plebeian hostility, but to a governmental system which validates plebeian voices and regulates the determination of civic virtues. Coriolanus complains to Aufidius of the 'dastard nobles', who, he says, 'suffered me by th' voice of slaves to be / Whooped out of Rome' (4.5.74–77). His grievances are directed against a systematised failure to observe absolute values, and the ultimate responsibility for this failure rests with the nobility. Shakespeare rejects Plutarch's

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<sup>49</sup> Plutarch, p. 251.

<sup>50</sup> Plutarch, p. 260.

<sup>51</sup> It is in this regard that Menenius' fable of the belly in the opening scene warrants particular attention. The polis is indeed regarded as a single organism composed of various parts. See also note 30, above.

depiction of a canny strategist in order to stress the contrast between two incompatible conceptions of virtue, the one idealistic and unitary, the other pragmatic and mutable. These conceptions carry associations: martial action is contrasted with politic words, and the old maxim claiming that actions ‘speak louder’ is put to the test.

Shakespeare’s depiction of democracy is unflattering: opinion responds to demagoguery with unconsidered eagerness. Shakespeare’s glaring mistrust of slippery political rhetoric does not, however, constitute a refutation of its importance, despite the claims of some critics. A. P. Rossiter claimed that ‘we must swallow our democracy, and, if we would grasp the play, accept it that the political convictions of Marcius are *right*. [...] Shakespeare cannot conceive of sovereign power in the hands of the people’.<sup>52</sup> To illustrate his claim, he cited a speech made by Coriolanus prior to his exile about the destructive consequences of political intractability:

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 th’ other. (3.1.111–15)

Rossiter’s choice of illustrative quotation is puzzling, however, since it does not describe the pitfalls of a democratic process dependent on mutual concession, but rather the first stirrings of civil war and a failure to employ the peacemaking ‘If’ identified by Touchstone as a real and valuable political recourse. Identical sentiments to those expressed by Coriolanus above are given by Shakespeare to both Octavia and Enobarbus in *Antony and Cleopatra*, a play in which the popular will is as nothing (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 3.4.30–32, 3.5.12–14). To read *Coriolanus* as a promotion of political and moral absolutism is to overlook acute ironies carried by the narrative.<sup>53</sup>

### **Coda: Slippery turns**

Expelled from Rome, Coriolanus finds himself in a state of moral isolation which separates him from both home and family. Details supplied by Shakespeare of the

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<sup>52</sup> Rossiter, pp. 243–44.

<sup>53</sup> ‘There is a *prima facie* case for holding that an ideology of civic activism was incompatible with either the institutions or the beliefs of a territorial monarchy’, admits J. G. A. Pocock, before presenting strong counter-arguments. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 334.

warrior's domestic life — beloved mother, wife and son — make this isolation the more poignant. The play requires us to recognise a warmth of feeling which resists interpretation along ideological lines. When Coriolanus vows to disburden himself of *all* external influences, it is above all a struggle against familial affection. 'Wife, mother, child, I know not', he tells Menenius, who has come to plead mercy on behalf of Rome (5.2.78). When wife, mother and child all come to him, along with the Lady Valeria, he intends to remain resistant to familial bonds:

I'll never  
Be such a gosling to obey instinct, but stand  
As if a man were author of himself  
And knew no other kin. (5.2.34–37)

The degree of isolation envisaged by Coriolanus is frightening, and the ambition it articulates is inhuman. It is also futile. The decisive embassy does not appeal simply to Coriolanus' sense of familial attachment, but is also designed to address his belief in solid, stable virtues. His words, on the approach of the delegation, are important: 'Let it be virtuous to be obstinate', he prays. This prayer, designed to reinforce his commitment to a single purpose and unitary belief, instead indicates a crisis in the protagonist's convictions. It expresses a wish, and a partial recognition that his professed virtues, consistency and conviction, are merely obstinacy and wilfulness by other names. Coriolanus expresses a desired virtue in terms which denote behavioural perversity.

Volumnia has chosen her co-petitioners carefully. Coriolanus' wife, Virgilia, is prized not only as she is loved, but because her habitual silence represents a resistance to the verbal insincerity ubiquitous in Rome.<sup>54</sup> Young Martius, Coriolanus' son, is an image in miniature of Coriolanian values. But it is not solely familial bonds which convince Coriolanus to abandon his project of revenge. The presence of Valeria forbids such an interpretation. Volumnia insists that she, too, is recognised as an archetype of virtue. 'Do you know this lady?' she asks, prompting a reverential acknowledgement from her son:

The noble sister of Publicola,  
The moon of Rome, chaste as the icicle  
That's candied by the frost from purest snow

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<sup>54</sup> Virgilia has only one-and-a-half lines in this scene. Coriolanus has previously described her affectionately as 'My gracious silence' (2.1.161). See Plotz, p. 823. At 1.3.78, she is also described as 'another Penelope', fulfilling an archetype of patient constancy.

And hangs on Dian's temple—dear Valeria! (5.3.63–67)

Valeria, for Coriolanus, is a symbol of static, inviolable virtue. His description of her relies upon associative imagery, the substitution of a corporate entity for an idea. The influence of familial affection complements — or is complemented by — an appeal to Coriolanus' moral sensibilities. Coriolanus is compelled to concede where he had previously resisted. This concession, he knows, is a fatal sacrifice of principle. 'O my mother, mother, O!' he cries:

You have won a happy victory for Rome,  
But for your son, believe it, O believe it,  
Most dangerously you have with him prevailed,  
If not most mortal to him. But let it come. (5.3.186–90)

For the first time, Coriolanus equates verbal persuasion with military force. The final two scenes of *Coriolanus* reinterpret earlier scenarios. Volumnia, Virgilia and Valeria are welcomed to Rome with the triumphal fervour which had previously greeted Coriolanus. Meanwhile, Coriolanus is once more entering the gates of Corioles, 't'appear before the people, hoping / To purge himself with words' (5.6.7–8). When the gates of Corioles close, Coriolanus lies dead within them.