

The gendering of tragedy: honor in shakespeare's coriolanus



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Vengeance, chaos, uncertain honor and untimely death-whether describing the fall from grace of a noble king, impassioned General, or valiant warrior, each arises in the historically based tragedies of William Shakespeare.

Coriolanus, Shakespeare's account of the societal and self destruction of a Roman warrior paragon, proves no exception, depicting the demise that results from any character trait excess, even honor. This particular play introduces a further element of gender to fatal excess, providing, through the characters of Coriolanus and Volumnia, a theory on the relationship between masculine and feminine honor in Roman society, a relationship which, semantically intertwined and yet independent in actualization, leads to a conflict that necessitates the play's tragic outcome in order to restore this chief virtue to both characters.

In Coriolanus both sexes value honor above limb, life, and love. Volumnia, a Roman matriarch and the primary female character in the play, establishes this value immediately upon her entrance into the plot, stating, " If my son were my husband, / I should freelier rejoice in that absence wherein / he won honor than in the embracements of his bed / where he would show most love" (1. 3. 2-5). This son, Coriolanus, echoes his mother's verbal esteem for the virtue in action by leaving his wife and child whenever his station as honorable warrior demands, by welcoming the wounds consequent of those demands. Even the nobler of the minor characters reaffirm this value system. For example, Cominius, a Roman general and Coriolanus' father figure, states with regard to his honorable service, " I do love / My country's good with a respect more tender, / More holy and profound, than mine own life, / My dear wife's estimate, her womb's increase" (3. 3. 111-14).

Cominius, in this statement, declares not only honor's significance to Shakespeare's Romans but also the word's signification within their society—sacrifice for patriotic defense, the product and producer of the “country's good.” Both sexes share this definition, Coriolanus in particular expanding on it during the first act. When given his choice of Cominius' best men to fight alongside, Coriolanus proclaims:

This “ill report” to be feared represents the loss of one's honor in the sight of his peers, an honor that Coriolanus links the high estimation of, in this statement, to an equal regard for one's country. Tufts University professor Linda Bamber in her book *Comic Women, Tragic Men: A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare* supports a semantic fusion between the genders' perceptions of honor, noting the preference of not only the male but also the female, who represents a “fanaticism according to the dogma of ‘manhonor-fight,’” for a “bloody ambitious sort of honor” (91). Indeed, Volumnia demonstrates this very fanaticism in stating, “. . . had I a dozen sons, each in my love alike, and / none less dear than thine and my good Martius, I had / rather had eleven die nobly for their country than one / voluptuously surfeit out of action” (1. 3. 22-5).

While the definitions of honor held by the two main characters coincide, their socially prescribed methods for obtaining this honor differ considerably. The male in Roman society, represented by Coriolanus, gains honor principally through physical participation in battle, a method inscribed upon the male in early childhood. Coriolanus' son, for example, who in sharing his name represents an extension of the father to the audience, receives praise in the play's text for the emergence of his warlike qualities when he tears apart a <https://assignbuster.com/the-gendering-of-tragedy-honor-in-shakespeares-coriolanus/>

butterfly that had angered him in his pursuit of it (1. 3. 54-67). War, as the sole means of achieving masculine honor, further marks a patrician boy's entrance into manhood, a ritual recounted by Volumnia when she notes ". . . To a cruel war I sent / [Coriolanus], from whence he returned, his brows bound with / oak . . . I sprang not more in joy at / first hearing he was a man-child than now in first seeing / he had proved himself a man" (1. 3. 13-17). Through battle in their country's defense, men symbolically achieve true masculinity and the honor it entails, something Will Fisher shows by noting that, while Coriolanus lacks signifiers such as a beard, " he performs martial feats which quite literally confer masculinity" (155).

Despite its realization independent of the physical signs of puberty, this masculine honor, bestowed as a result of the sacrifice of the self, requires symbols upon the self, specifically Coriolanus' scars and cognomen, for Roman recognition. Cominius bestows the latter of these two symbols shortly after witnessing Coriolanus face and subdue an entire city alone, proclaiming, " For what he did before Corioles, call him, / With all th' applause and clamor of the host, / Caius Martius Coriolanus. Bear / th' addition nobly ever!" (1. 9. 62-5). Immediately upon his return to Rome with the noble addition, Coriolanus receives recognition of his honor's extent from the general populace, who, despite their hatred of his supposed pride and unkind tongue, find themselves unable to rightfully deny the services he has shown his country. Beyond his name, Coriolanus' scars, each a visual proclamation of flesh sacrificed, provide a further, perhaps more widely available, means for the soldier to prove his honor. Copp?©lia Kahn in her feminist analysis of Shakespeare's works supports this symbolism, noting

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that “[w]ounds signify martial prowess . . . The warrior who survives his wounds asserts the impregnability of the male body . . .” (153).

The Roman female, by contrast, must obtain honor through the gendered Other rather than the Self, through maternal and, indirectly, martial sacrifice as the physical and pedagogical mold of Rome’s mortal weapons. Kahn demonstrates this feminine role, arguing the existence of two “ constructions of the maternal,” the second of which is that “ a mother produces sons for the state, to which she owes them” (146). Women, to whom social scripts make participation in battle unavailable, realize their honor through association with and support of those without this restriction. While these men-as-honor-sources need not necessarily be sons, as in the case of Virgilia whose husband fulfills the role, for the widowed Volumnia the filial source remains the sole source from which to enact her patriotism. This role as mother sacrificing son to state manifested itself prior to Coriolanus’ birth when Volumnia “. . . help to frame [him],” continued during his infancy when she recalls to Coriolanus, “ thou suck’st [thy valiantness] from me,” and remains for the adult Coriolanus around whom the plays centers. In the final stage of his life, Coriolanus, able now to earn the battle honor for which his mother shaped him, achieves such that may reflect back upon its source, his outward recognition becoming the symbol of his mothers’ dues paid to her country and, consequently, her honor.

For Volumnia and the other honorable Roman women whom she represents, this leads to an inability to distinguish between honor and honors, as she receives a quantity of the former equal in proportion to the amount of the latter bestowed upon her son. Volumnia demonstrates her connection of the <https://assignbuster.com/the-gendering-of-tragedy-honor-in-shakespeares-coriolanus/>

two early in the play, stating, “ I, considering how / honor would become [Coriolanus]-that it was no better / than picturelike to hang by th’ wall, if renown / made it not stir . . .” (1. 3. 9-12). Renown, often the product of publicly granted honors such as the consulship Volumnia will later plead with her son to do all necessary to attain, receives the status among Roman women, in this statement, of that alone which confers worth upon honor. The desire for Coriolanus’ renown serves as the prompt of Volumnia’s later statement, “ O, he is wounded: I thank the gods for’t” (2. 1. 118), a statement the matriarch qualifies with “ There will / be large cicatrices to show the people, when he shall / stand for his place” (2. 1. 143-5).

Conversely, the difference in masculine and feminine honor actualization makes the distinction between honor and honors clear for Coriolanus, who will not sacrifice the former by begging for the latter. While he wears his wounds proudly and thanks Cominius for the “ good addition” of his surname (1. 9. 71), Coriolanus consistently rejects verbal, material, and societal rewards as a means of external compensation for internal sacrifice. For example, when offered his choice of the defeated Corioles’ spoils, the warrior remarks, “ I thank you, general, / But cannot make my heart consent to take / A bribe to pay my sword” (1. 9. 37-9). Menenius recognizes this rejection by Coriolanus noting, “ He’d rather venture all his limbs for honor / Than one on’s ears to hear it . . .” (2. 2. 74-6). This dismissal of outward praise by Coriolanus is something Lynn Enterline interprets as a socially acceptable means for the hero to obtain more of that which he denies himself (25), and Kahn echoes this belief, observing that even when Coriolanus “ rejects the praises wounds elicit, he does so in a way that

recalls them” (153). While each denial by Coriolanus does in fact reference the scars upon his frame, his motivation for this repetition stems more likely from the fact that the praise, not his wounds, bears a connotation of shame. Earned solely for his country, the depiction of Coriolanus’ wounds as a means for gaining self tribute marks a form of sacrilege for the noble warrior. Coriolanus’ own words regarding his unwillingness to praise himself lend support to this interpretation: “ To brag unto them ‘ Thus I did, and thus!’ / Show them th’ unaching scars which I should hide, / As if I had received them for the hire / Of their breath only!” (2. 2. 146-9).

This absolute adherence to honor on the part of Coriolanus confirms his role as the ne plus ultra of Roman warrior virtue, a character excess which disrupts the socially perceived harmony between the bestowing of honors and the recognition of honor, creating the conflict that leads to Coriolanus’ expulsion. Standing for consulship, Coriolanus cannot, as noted, subdue his honor, specifically by exchanging the mannerisms prescribed for the protection of his country for those best suited to further himself, “ doff[ing] his hat, kneeling, bowing his head in humility” (Kahn 155). In addition, neither the plebeian nor the patrician classes of Rome measure up to Coriolanus’ ideal of honor. Presenting their country with demands for comestibles rather than sacrifices for its safety, the commoners are, according to him, “ curs, / That like nor peace nor war . . . Where he should find [them] lions, finds [them] hares” (1. 1. 166-7, 169). His fellow soldiers fare no better in his estimation, accepting retreat to their trenches rather than accompanying him within the enemy’s walls and thereby incurring description as “. . . a plague . . . / The mouse ne’er shunned the cat as they

did budge / From rascals worse than they” (1. 6. 42-5). This combination of an excess of honor in Coriolanus and a lack of absolute honor in Roman society leads the tragic hero to hold no value for societal opinions, refusing to yield to the will of either class when standing for consulship. As a result Coriolanus’ political enemies, Sicinius and Brutus, seize upon both his forsaken humility and righteous hatred of the plebeians in order to play on public fears that the commoners will suffer under his government.

This results in a treason trial, during which both Rome’s patricians and plebeians refer to Coriolanus as “ Martius” while requesting or allowing his exile, stripping him of both the lexical emblem and patriotic root of his honor. This revocation of Coriolanus’ honored cognomen initiates in the accusations of Sicinius, “ Martius would have all from you, Martius, / Whom late you have named for consul,” is echoed by all the commoners present in their proclamation of, “ Yield, Martius, yield!,” and even extends to those held highest in his affection with Menenius declaring, “ Help Martius” (1. 3. 196-7, 217, 228). Sicinius and Brutus meanwhile succeed in their demands and, with little protest from Coriolanus’ own class; the people pronounce a verdict of banishment. Although the later lines of Coriolanus’ fellow nobles restore to him his title, the link between the moment of declared exile and the stripping of his name signifies the connection between loss of statehood and loss of honor.

Despite this loss of statehood, Coriolanus refuses to change the composition of his character, declaring upon his exit from society, “ While I remain above ground, you shall / Hear from me still, and never of me aught / But what is like me formerly” (4. 2. 51-3). However, he now lacks a higher power to

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surrender himself to in the pursuit of honor, and therefore, must, in order to restore this honor, displace it onto the land of equally honorable enemy, the Volsces. Upon learning of this enemy's approach in the first scene, Coriolanus states, " They have a leader, Tullus, Aufidius that will put you to't. / I sin in envying his nobility, / And were I any thing but what I am, I would wish me only he" (1. 1. 226-9). Coriolanus further refers to this adversary as ". . . a lion / that I am proud to hunt" (1. 1. 223-4), evoking the same bestial metaphor he used to deny honor to the plebeians in order to demonstrate the great measure of this quality in Aufidius. This honor possessed by Aufidius and acknowledged by Coriolanus confers honor upon the land Aufidius serves in its gain, a fact which enables the hero to enact his patriotic redirection there. Upon approaching the place, Coriolanus states, " My birthplace hate I, and my love's upon / This enemy town. I'll enter. If he slay me, / He does fair justice; if he give me way, / I'll do his country service" (4. 5. 23-6). The service to which Coriolanus vows must take the form of an attack upon his own country, not only to meet the requirements of vengeance through retribution equivalent to Rome's crime, but also to truly avail a land whose worth hinges upon the conquering of that state.

Ultimately this attack brings Coriolanus, described as the " the oak not to be wind-shaken" (5. 2. 106), into conflict with both the seed "[w]herein this trunk was framed" (5. 3. 23) of his honor, his mother, and its original root, his country. Cominius demonstrates this conflict within Coriolanus by stating, " Coriolanus' / He would not answer to, forbade all names. / He was a kind of nothing, titleless . . ." (5. 1. 10-12). Having shed the emblem of honor bestowed upon him by Rome but having not yet forged an equivalent in

service to the Volsces, Coriolanus' honor has failed to fully reinstate itself through displacement. It thus occupies a precarious position, particularly within the hero who still thinks of his homeland in terms of possessive modifiers even while his allegiance is sworn to another: “. . . for I will fight / Against my cankered country . . .” (4. 5. 95-6, Italics mine). His wife and mother, sent as petitioners to his mercy, mirror this patriotic conflict, posing the following question:

The conflict for the women, however, rests not between two countries but rather between their fatherland and their patriarch, and this conflict, according to Bamber, results in the separation of Coriolanus from his mother, the two now “ mortal antagonists” (92). Volumnia seeks a compromise that in sparing herself and her country, would prove “ poisonous” to Coriolanus' honor by forcing his betrayal of the Volsces to whom his mother holds no allegiance (5. 3. 135).

Unable to reconcile this familial and patriotic conflict with his newly sworn loyalty, Coriolanus willingly concedes to death, an outcome that allows for the recovery of both masculine and feminine honor. Raised in a militaristic society, Coriolanus knows that a much lesser offense than that his dedition would pay Aufidius warrants death, and yet he ceases his siege of Rome in spite of this knowledge. Analyzing the final scene of Macbeth, Curtis Brown Watson presents the following argument: “ By an honorable and fearless death men could redeem, in large measure, the misdeeds of a lifetime. Even criminals [in Elizabethan times] went to the scaffold with a display of iron nerves which drew the admiration of the spectators” (340). Coriolanus, fulfilling his role as tragic protagonist, nobly welcomes his end in a manner <https://assignbuster.com/the-gendering-of-tragedy-honor-in-shakespeares-coriolanus/>

that would have been familiar to and cathartic for an Elizabethan audience, proclaiming, “ Cut me to pieces, Volsces. Men and lads, / Stain all your edges on me” (5. 6. 110-11). In this action he redeems both his attack on Rome and betrayal of the Volsces, providing a full restoration of his honor. A Lord of the Volsces declares this restoration moments after Coriolanus’ death, stating, “ Let him be regarded / As the most noble corpse that ever herald / Did follow to his urn” (5. 6. 141-3). Even his chief enemy, Aufidius, at whose command he dies, concedes, concluding the play with:

In a parallel procession, Volumnia receives honor from the Romans, having exchanged her prescribed role for an inward honor independent of Coriolanus by verbally defending the state. Menenius notes upon the matriarch’s return with tidings of peace, “ This Volumnia / Is worthy of consuls, senators, patricians, / A city full; of tribunes, such as you, / A sea and land full” (5. 4. 52-5). Consuls, senators, and patricians describe social scripts for male citizens, and Volumnia’s martial feat allows her to both enter this domain and assume a masculine method of honor actualization. Julian Charles Young provides the following description of Sarah Siddons acting the part of Volumnia in a 1789 performance of *Coriolanus* at the Theatre Royal:

Young here depicts how Siddons portrayed Volumnia’s sense of honor through body language, an element outside of Shakespeare’s text to which his intended audience would have had access. The combination of this image with the Romans’ speeches upon her return demonstrate a restoration of honor, both internally felt and externally recognized, to Volumnia, equal to that her son had held in the play’s opening scenes.

While the outcome of the play is decidedly tragic for both its male and female protagonists, one having lost his life and the other her only child, out of this tragedy both characters arise, whether in casket or in body, with honor restored to them both in the eyes of their society and the Elizabethan audience. More importantly, the characters nobly accept the consequences of this restoration, rectifying both Coriolanus' fatal excess and Volumnia's deficiency, creating a balance which allows for the fulfillment of the Aristotelian tragedy convention of catharsis for readers and playgoers alike.

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