Sympathizing with coriolanus

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“ What he cannot help in his Nature, you/account a Vice in him.” 1. This is the reason it is so difficult, and yet so necessary, to sympathise with Coriolanus. His virtues work in conjunction with his vices and for a modern reader, with little empathy for the autocratic, warlike states of the Romans or Jacobeans, Coriolanus appears scant more than a bloodthirsty tyrant with none of the poetical and emotional depth afforded to Shakespeare’s more canonical tragic heroes. However, a consideration of the values portrayed in the text – those of the nobility of war, the dangers of democracy and the deceptive power of words – and how the character of Coriolanus epitomises these values, allows one to recognise his emotional development and his worth to the state and thus truly sympathise with him. Coriolanus is perhaps one of Shakespeare’s most misunderstood characters, the primary reason being that he is also one of Shakespeare’s least poetic characters. Unlike Hamlet or Lear, Coriolanus is given little opportunity to wax philosophical, and therefore has none of the profound and emotive eloquence of his tragic predecessors with which to captivate the reader. 2. Furthermore, in Coriolanus’ few lengthy speeches, the images he draws upon are violent and unsightly. Consider the metaphors he employs when he addresses the soldiers at the gates of Corioles, in a speech that is a far cry from Henry V’s call to arms, 3. “ All the Contagion of the South, light on you,/You Shames of Rome; you Heard of Byles and Plagues,/Plaister you o’er, that you may be abhorr’d/Farther than seen, and one infect another/Against the Wind a Mile.” (I, v, 1-5) The contemptuous nature and lack of pleasing aesthetics in such language can be seen as alienating the reader from Coriolanus, and as he cannot win us with his eloquence as even a Shakespearian villain like Richard III or Iago can, it is difficult to understand him. However, if we take

into consideration one of the most important messages of the play – that mere words can be deceptive – we see that what Coriolanus cannot articulate he proves in the nobility of his actions, “ His Nature is too Noble for the World;/He would not flatter Neptune for his Trident,/Or Jove for’s power to Thunder; his Heart’s his/Mouth.” (III, i, 249-252) This is a virtue that sets him apart from the loquacious tribunes and therefore our sympathy is evoked when he is undone by their use of deceptive words to undermine his achievements in battle. This is recognised by Harley Granville-Barker who states: Throughout the play action and words are expressively keyed together…The actual spectacle of Marcius fighting singlehanded ‘ within Corioles gates’ is better witness to this prowess than any of the ‘ acclamations hyperbolical’ which he somewhat self consciously decries. 4. Whether it be the gentle manipulation of Menenius’ ‘ body’ metaphor or the overt subversion of the tribunes Brutus and Sicinius, Shakespeare makes it clear that shrewd language has undone the Roman State, and is a fickle basis of judgment. Hence it is because Coriolanus cannot speak falsely that he must be seen as exemplary and it is this integrity that wins our compassion. It is imperative therefore to judge Coriolanus by his actions, and decide whether, as a soldier, he can be sympathetic. This is where problems of context arise, as in modern times when war is neither romantic nor ennobling. Coriolanus’ sacking of Corioles and his desire to sack Rome makes him seem excessively violent, rash and single-minded. Indeed Coriolanus is given little scope beyond the battlefield – he is a soldier in all facets of his life as “ He has been bred I’th’ Wars since ‘ a could draw/A Sword.”(III, i, 313-314)Despite this claim, there is much evidence to suggest that Coriolanus exhibits the potential to go beyond his warrior nature. War

may not be romanticised in Coriolanus, but it is seen as necessary to the Roman state, and Coriolanus, as the arm of the state, is equally indispensable. That he is such a brave, albeit bloodthirsty, warrior in protecting Rome from the Volscians in Act 1 is where the tragedy lies – the Roman citizens' ungratefully dismiss his courage because he is impolitic. It is clear therefore that one of Shakespeare's messages in the play is that military heroism is a virtue, and thus " if Rome's conception of virtue is correct, then Coriolanus is the perfect man." 5. Despite the many differing views of Coriolanus' character offered to us throughout the play, what is conceded by his friends and foes alike is that in battle he is courageous, almost transcendent, " a Soldier/Even to Calve's Wish, not fierce and terrible/Onely in Strokes, but with thy grim Looks, and/The Thunder-like Percussion of thy Sounds." (I, v, 26-30)By taking into consideration the esteem attributed to war and warriors in both Coriolanus' and Shakespeare's time, it becomes apparent that Coriolanus' role in the play is that of a military hero, and his decision to relinquish this status in return for Rome's safety makes his downfall truly pitiable. That Coriolanus is foremost a soldier has led to the suggestion that he is emotionally undeveloped, and therefore it is difficult to feel any great empathy with someone whose personality beyond the battlefield is given so little insight. Coriolanus is " Not to be other than one thing, not moving/From th' Cask to th' Cushion, but commanding Peace/Even with the same Austerity and Garb/As he controlled the War" (IV, viii, 42-45) and it is therefore doubtful whether he matures throughout the play. At each crucial stage of the play – when he enters " What's the matter, you/dissentious Rogues" (I, i, 169-170), when he is banished " I banish you" (III, iii, 120) and when he dies " That like an Eagle in a Dove-cote, I/Flatter'd

your Volcians in Corioles./Alone I did it, Boy” (V, vi, 113-115) – he displays the same unremitting volatility and pride, suggesting Coriolanus makes no attempt to redress his character flaws, and thus we may feel his death is justly deserved. However, in the context of the world Shakespeare creates for Coriolanus where opinions and loyalties are easily swayed (epitomised by the fickle mob), Coriolanus’ refusal to change his character and beliefs should be seen as a virtue of constancy rather than a sign of emotional immaturity. This is recognised by Geoffrey Miles who writes that “ in a paradox characteristic of this intensely paradoxical play, the passionate traitor Coriolanus is Shakespeare’s most self-consciously ‘ constant’ character”. 6. Coriolanus’ refusal to betray his ideals in order to gain fame and popularity with the Roman mob is not a repudiation of self-development, but a single act of honesty in a world dominated by politics. Coriolanus therefore sacrifices not only the consulship but his life in his desperation to “ play/The Man I am” (III, ii, 15-16) and thus becomes a martyr to his simple cause – to be acknowledged for all that he is, a brave and noble soldier. In one of his most impassioned speeches Coriolanus cries, “ Let them/Pull all about mine ears, present me Death/On the Wheel, or at wild Horses’ heels, or pile/Ten Hills on the Tarpeian Rock, that the/Precipitation might down stretch below/The Beam of Sight; yet will I still be thus/To them.”(III, ii, 1-7) That he is indeed able to undergo so many ordeals while still keeping his pride, courage and honesty intact shows a far greater strength of character than many of Shakespeare’s other tragic heroes. The argument that Coriolanus is unsympathetic because he is emotionally stunted can be extended to incorporate the criticism that Coriolanus doesn’t acknowledge his humanity and therefore we, as the audience, cannot identify as human

beings with him. What has been described as constancy of character could alternatively be seen as a blatant disrespect for anyone or anything that is outside his own interests. Coriolanus himself declares “ 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.” (V, iii, 34-37). He thus proves this with his disregard for Menenius’ and Cominius’ appeals to their long-standing friendship. It can be argued that Coriolanus is willing to destroy his former compatriots and friends to satisfy his revenge but for the persuasions of his mother. His submission to his mother’s pleas however is evidence enough that Coriolanus’ compassion and mercy has greater depth than this limited argument will allow. G. Wilson Knight finds the ending of the play triumphant, as by allowing himself to be conquered by love Coriolanus has been purified. 7. Indeed, Coriolanus shows greater humanity than anyone else in the play as his desire for revenge is quashed by his reverence for his loved ones, as he commits the ultimate act of sacrifice – he dies so that his city and his family may live: “ Oh my Mother, Mother: oh!/You have won a happy Victory to Rome./But for your Son, believe it: oh believe it,/Most dangerously you have with him prevail’d,/If not most mortal to him.” (V, iii, 185-189)Perhaps the most common indictment of Coriolanus in modern times is his disregard for democracy and the common people; “ where is this Viper,/That would depopulate the City, and/Be every Man himself?” (III, I, 257-259) Coriolanus is unashamedly “ a very Dog to the/ Commonality” (I, i, 29-30) and his contemptuous words and his actions of withholding corn from the people alienates an audience imbued with the values of democracy and egalitarianism. Yet Coriolanus and his ideas of absolutism must not be judged against such modern political ideals, but against the kind of

democracy Coriolanus himself was faced with – that of the demagogues, Sicinius and Brutus. The perception of democracy in the Roman state is that it is erratic, ignorant and dangerous, as it would have been by Shakespeare's own audience. Thus it must be acknowledged that " the representation of the people is part of ' a dramatic design'" 8. in that Coriolanus may be seen as a necessary tyrant when the alternative is " the mutable/Rank-scented Meiny" (III, i, 63-64). In this way Coriolanus' contempt for the mob and desire to revenge himself upon them is justified for " in attacking them as the embodiment of inconstant opinion, he defines himself as consistent in standing by his fixed beliefs." 9. In using satire to undermine Coriolanus' enemies Shakespeare ensures that, although he may be difficult to like, he is superior to the other characters in the play. As Menenius remarks to the tribunes " in what Enormity is Martius poor in,/that you two have not in abundance?" (II, i, 17-18)The nature of Coriolanus' character is neatly described by Kenneth Burke, who writes " it is impressive how perfectly the chosen victim's virtues and vices work together, in fitting him for his sacrificial function." 10. Thus the very complexity of Coriolanus' character makes it difficult to sympathise with him, as the virtues that he embodies are of a different time, those of frankness, war, constancy and absolutism. However, it is for this very reason that we do sympathise with Coriolanus, as he alone personifies these virtues, but is defeated by the world around him, a world of guile, capriciousness and betrayal. In the same way, we, as readers, should not let the constraints of our time bias our ability to recognise Coriolanus' bravery, but also his personal growth and compassion. If we are able to look at the play contextually then the true tragedy in the betrayal and untimely death of Coriolanus is apparent and he is indeed a

sympathetic character. References1. W. Shakespeare, Coriolanus, (ed.) Andrews, J. F., London, J. M. Dent, 1998, I, i, 43-44All subsequent references from this play are to this edition. 2. A. Poole, Harvester New Critical Introductions to Shakespeare: Coriolanus, Hertfordshire, Harvester, 1988, p. 513. W. Shakespeare, " Henry V" in The Complete Works of Shakespeare, Vol. 2, Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions, 1999, IV, iii, 60-67″We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;/For he to-day that sheds his blood with me/Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,/This day shall gentle his condition:/And gentlemen in England now a-bed/Shall think themselves accurst they were not here; And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks/That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's Day." 4. W. Shakespeare, " Perspectives on Coriolanus in Coriolanus, (ed.) Andrews, J. F., London, J. M. Dent, 1998, p. 3155. G. Miles, Shakespeare and the Constant Romans, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996, p. 1566. Miles, p. 1497. Knight in B. King, An Introduction to the Variety of Criticism: Coriolanus, London, Macmillan, 1989, p. 298. King, p. 189. Miles, p. 15110. Burke in W. Shakespeare, " Perspectives on Coriolanus in Coriolanus, (ed.) Andrews, J. F., London, J. M. Dent, 1998, p. 333