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“O’me alone?”: Aristotle and the Failure of Autarky in Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*

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Introduction

Due to his “small Latin and less Greek,” Shakespeare’s knowledge of the Classics is generally assumed to have been mostly indirect, mediated by contemporary “Englished” renderings such as Arthur Golding’s 1567 *Metamorphoses* and Thomas North’s 1579 *Plutarch’s Lives* (itself translated from the French).¹ Regardless, Aristotelianism had permeated Western philosophical and literary traditions following its ‘recovery’ from Greek and Arabic texts into Latin in the 12th and 13th centuries. The profound influence of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* on early modern English literature is most evident in the epic poem *The Fairie Queene* by Edmund Spenser, one of Shakespeare’s literary contemporaries. Writing in the tradition of medieval allegory, Spenser casts the knights of the legendary King Arthur as exemplars of the “twelve private morall vertues, as Aristotle hath devised” in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Christianized and ‘Englished’ as Holiness, Temperance, Chastity, Friendship, Justice, and Courtesy.² While the play remained half-finished at Spenser’s death in 1599, a letter to Sir Walter Raleigh dated January 1589 names Arthur as the epic’s representative of “magnificence” (i.e. magnanimity), which “according to Aristotle [...] is the perfection of all the rest, and containeth in it them all” – a paraphrase of Aristotle’s own celebration of pride as “crown of the virtues; for it makes them greater, and it is not found without them.”³

The Aristotelian virtues with which Spenser adorns his imagined knights take on a somewhat more militaristic slant when applied to Caius Martius Coriolanus in Thomas North’s 1579 translation of *Plutarch’s Lives*. North’s account, the primary source for Shakespeare of the

¹ Ben Jonson, “To the Memory of My Beloved the Author,” in *Mr. William Shakespeares comedies, histories, & tragedies* (Isaac Jaggard and Ed. Blount, 1623), *STC* 2227, facs. edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902).

² Edmund Spenser, “A Letter of the Authors,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 1B, ed. M. H. Abrams et al., 7th edn. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 625.

³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), IV.3.1224a1-3. All further references to *NE* come from this edition.

details of Coriolanus's life and death, provides an explanation of the ancient Roman concept of *virtus*, appropriately 'Englished' for his audience: "Now in those dayes, valiantnesse was honoured in Rome above all other vertues: which they call *virtus*, by the name of vertue it selfe, as including in that generall name, all other speciall vertues besides. So that *virtus* in the Latin, was as much as valiantnesse."⁴ North's rendering of the Latin term, while limited in its suppression of the moral aspects of *virtus*, is well-suited to Caius Martius, whom he describes as "more inclined to the warres, then any other gentleman of his time," and who "outward esteemed armour to no purpose, unles one were naturally armed within."⁵ Martius's remarkable consistency – or, as many scholars have argued, lack of depth – follows from this stoic determination to exhibit "valiantnesse" or *virtus* without as within. As such, Coriolanus's apparent lack of depth and single-minded pursuit of autonomy make him the ideal subject of a test case for the viability of human self-sufficiency, which is the principal concern of this thesis.

Shakespeare's assimilation of the Corpus Aristotelicum in *Coriolanus* is perhaps less obvious than Spenser's in *The Fairie Queene*. However, F. N. Lees's observation that "*Coriolanus* contains blood, bone and sinew descended from the *Politics*" – and, as I will argue, *Nicomachean Ethics* – poignantly anticipates Shakespeare's localization of the Aristotelian 'corpus' in the relentless physicality of his least contemplative protagonist and the mutinous 'body politic' of early republican Rome.⁶ As is typical of early modern theatre, the imaginative world of the text, removed from its immediate sociopolitical context by distance or time (or both, in the case of Shakespeare's Roman plays), constitutes a transposition of the concerns of the playwright's present – namely, the nature of virtue and its exercise in both private life and

⁴ Thomas North, "The Life of Caius Martius Coriolanus," in *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes* (London: Vautroullier and Wight, 1579), 236.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ F. N. Lees, "Coriolanus, Aristotle, and Bacon," in *The Review of English Studies* 1, no. 2 (1950): 123.

political governance – into a safer discursive space: for Spenser, the world of King Arthur and his knights; for Shakespeare, early republican Rome. The issue of the individual’s place in (or outside of) society is the ultimate subject of Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*, the end of which – as, according to Aristotle, the nature of a thing is determined by its final cause or end – is a uniquely human question. *Coriolanus* is a case study in whether an individual is capable of self-sufficiency, that is, whether it is possible to be happy alone.⁷ In its protagonist’s failure to achieve the absolute autonomy that he desires, and his subsequent self-consumption as he dies at the hands of the man he figures as his mirror image, *Coriolanus* establishes the necessary dependence of the self on external nourishment and the impossibility of human existence outside of political society, thereby confirming Aristotle’s assertion of the political nature of man. I contend that Coriolanus’s failure to achieve the absolute autonomy he desires is not, as John Alvis, Carson Holloway, and Anny Crunelle-Vanrigh have argued, the result of his own various defects – of which there are undoubtedly many – but of Coriolanus’s fatal misunderstanding of human self-sufficiency.⁸

In this thesis I offer an Aristotelian reading of *Coriolanus*, protagonist and play, through which I suggest significant new insights about Shakespeare’s tragedy, both its implications in a 17th-century context and as it stands today. In doing so, I do not suggest that Shakespeare consciously incorporated and responded to Aristotle, nor even that he had himself read the philosopher in translation. Rather, Aristotle’s political and moral treatises, in their function as existential guidebooks on the origins of political society and an individual’s place within it, are

⁷ Aristotle, *Physics* II.2.194a28.

⁸ For an evaluation of Coriolanus’s character relative to that of Aristotle’s magnanimous man, see Alvis, “Coriolanus and Aristotle’s Magnanimous Man Reconsidered” (1978); Holloway, “Shakespeare’s Coriolanus and Aristotle’s Great-Souled Man” (2007); Crunelle-Vanrigh, “‘Seeking (the) mean(s)’: Aristotle’s *Ethics* and Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*” (2014).

valuable intertexts through and against which Shakespeare's more imaginative work may be analyzed. Moreover, while it is not traditionally considered a 'problem play,' *Coriolanus* has long been regarded by critics and audiences as among Shakespeare's least accessible works, in large part due to the protagonist's apparent refusal to participate in the dramatic life of the play. Through the introduction of the Aristotelian intertext, I attempt to render both play and hero (more) accessible. Lastly, I draw on representations of self-sufficiency in both texts in order to consider two larger questions: whether total isolation is practicable, or even possible; and, on the other side, whether social and political expression are 'merely' desirable parts of life, or rather necessary for survival. I will explore *Coriolanus*'s dialectic of dependence and self-sufficiency through three recurring themes that appear in both texts: family, food and the body, and divinity. I begin, however, by situating *Coriolanus* in the context of earlier Aristotelian readings of the play.

Chapter 1: Coriolanus and the *megalopsuchos*

Lees, in his 1950 article “Coriolanus, Aristotle, and Bacon,” suggests an affinity between Caius Martius, the irascible protagonist of Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*, and Aristotle’s magnanimous man. According to Lees, *Coriolanus* “exhibits the tragedy of a man of great martial gifts and a lofty but restricted sense of honour, potentially the embodiment of the finest spirit of his society but so crippled by an excess of pride and a pitiful lack of human feeling as to be unfitted for the life of a right social animal.”⁹ Lees’s assessment of Shakespeare’s “distinct assimilation of certain passages in the *Politics* of Aristotle” sought only to demonstrate the line of intellectual descent that, in his view, connected Aristotle with two of his most significant literary and philosophical inheritors (Shakespeare and Bacon). Still, Lees’s analysis provides an apt and thorough summary of the arguments upon which later scholars would elaborate: namely, Coriolanus’s excesses and deficiencies in violation of the Aristotelian mean; his unflinching pursuit of honor, interpreted as Roman *virtus*; and his inability to participate in the life of the fledgling republic as a “right social animal.” In particular, Lees’s observation that “Coriolanus . . . is studied alive in the living body politic, not cut away for separate dissection” vividly anticipates the symbolic dialectic of body/body politic, and the more sinister parallels of hunger/famine, cannibalism/class warfare, and amputation/exile, which have been the subject of much literary criticism in the last 50 years, and which for brevity must be examined elsewhere.¹⁰

⁹ Lees, “Coriolanus,” 114.

¹⁰ Lees, “Coriolanus,” 115. See, for instance, Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (1987); Burton Hatlen, “The ‘Noble Thing’ and the ‘Boy of Tears’: ‘Coriolanus’ and the Embarrassments of Identity” (1997); Delphine Lemonnier-Textier, “The Analogy of the Body Politic in Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*” (2007).

It is this ability to cut himself away from the body politic and survive the dissection, to transcend human society and in effect become “author of himself,” to which Coriolanus aspires – and Aristotle himself provides, or at least appears to provide, such a model of self-sufficiency in the form of the magnanimous man (V.3.36).¹¹ In her assessment of *Coriolanus*’s “Inordinate Passions and Powers in Personal and Political Governance,” Unhae Langis argues that “Shakespeare’s tragedy vividly dramatizes how incontinence and vicious conduct by its constituent citizens bring about the breakdown of the body politic and, in this way, reinforces the Aristotelian notion that the well-being of the state is dependent on the virtue of its individual citizens.”¹² The most virtuous man, in Aristotle’s view, is the *megalopsuchos* (literally ‘great-souled’) or ‘magnanimous man,’ who appears in Book IV of *Nicomachean Ethics* as the embodiment of the twelve moderate virtues coopted by Spenser in *The Fairie Queene*: temperance, liberality, magnificence, mildness, civility, amity, truthfulness, pride (magnanimity), ambition, courage, a sense of shame, and righteous indignation. The latter six Coriolanus appears to possess in spades, even to a fault (or, as the citizens rightly accuse, “to the altitude of his virtue” [I.1.30]). Of the former six, Shakespeare’s citizens, biographers, and critics alike have found him sorely lacking, with the notable exception of Rodney Poisson’s seminal and controversial “Coriolanus as Aristotle’s Magnanimous Man.”

Although Poisson evidently sought to redeem Shakespeare’s irascible protagonist through identification with Aristotle’s celebrated exemplar, the resulting portrait of the *megalopsuchos* as vicious and begrudging, prone to immoderate displays of rage, reckless courage, and exaggerated

¹¹ William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, ed. Lee Bliss, *The New Cambridge Shakespeare*, updated edn. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). All further references to the play are from this edition.

¹² Unhae Langis, “*Coriolanus*: Inordinate Passions and Powers in Personal and Political Governance,” *Comparative Drama* 44, no. 1 (2010): 5.

humility, would seem to contradict the very nature of Aristotle's virtuous ideal.¹³ Poisson's conclusion does not seek to deny Coriolanus's expression of qualities that he himself terms "most objectionable or even repellent to some modern readers," but rather reflects these qualities back onto the Aristotelian model, implicitly arguing that the magnanimous man possesses a similarly ambivalent, even intolerable character.¹⁴ Perhaps unsurprisingly, numerous scholars subsequently have disputed the criticism of *Nicomachean Ethics* suggested by this conclusion.

Several attempts have been made in recent years to complicate, problematize, or entirely negate Poisson's "Coriolanus as Aristotle's Magnanimous Man." John Alvis dedicated his 1978 article "Coriolanus and Aristotle's Magnanimous Man Reconsidered" to a direct refutation of Poisson's assessment of Coriolanus as, in Alvis's characterization, "an unqualified exemplar of magnanimity."¹⁵ While Alvis acknowledges that Coriolanus's "uncompromising pride and godlike presence point to a certain kinship with the classical ideal of the superlatively honorable man developed by Aristotle in Book IV of the *Nicomachean Ethics*," he faults Coriolanus for his lack of self-knowledge and his reliance on the esteem of others, in contrast with the autonomous confidence of the *megalopsuchos*.¹⁶ Consequently, Alvis regards Coriolanus as a "tragically defective imitation of Aristotle's magnanimous man."¹⁷ Other recent assessments of the role of the magnanimous man in *Coriolanus* have tended to agree with Alvis, and concern themselves with searching out this "defect." The explanations that have been offered for Coriolanus's tragic fate are various, and include his pagan ideology;¹⁸ a Roman misunderstanding of Greek

¹³ Rodney Poisson, "Coriolanus as Aristotle's Magnanimous Man," in *Pacific Coast Studies in Shakespeare*, ed. Waldo F. McNeir and Thelma N. Greenfield (Eugene, OR: University of Oregon, 1966), 210-24.

¹⁴ Poisson, "Coriolanus," 210.

¹⁵ John Alvis, "Coriolanus and Aristotle's Magnanimous Man Reconsidered," *Interpretation* 7, no. 3 (1978): 5.

¹⁶ Alvis, "Coriolanus," 4; 14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁸ Roy W. Battenhouse, "Shakespearean Tragedy: Its Christian Premises," *Connotations* 3, no. 3 (1993): 226-42.

models;¹⁹ an excess of pride or a lack of Machiavellian politic;²⁰ and his inability to achieve true self-sufficiency.²¹ While Alvis's interpretation rests on Coriolanus's supposedly "imperfect, and typically Roman, misunderstanding of what it means to be great-souled" – itself a pejorative mischaracterization of Roman conceptions of virtue – his 'reconsideration' identifies the key characteristic that links Coriolanus with the magnanimous man: self-sufficiency.²²

As Alvis observes, in Book IV of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle "locates magnanimity in the self-sufficient man who has no indispensable needs which he must depend on others to satisfy" – in Aristotle's words, a man who "ask[s] for nothing or scarcely anything" as he possesses "a character that suffices to itself."²³ It is this self-sufficiency, the eradication or denial of the external needs that necessitate man's participation in social life, after which Coriolanus hungers. Although critics have debated extensively the virtues and defects of the soldier's character relative to Aristotle's ideal, Coriolanus himself does not actively pursue virtue, nor any of the other qualities attributed to the magnanimous man. Coriolanus exhibits a single-minded obsession with autonomy, to the exclusion of all other Aristotelian virtues. Accordingly, the figure of the *megalopsuchos* that has dominated most Aristotelian readings of the play is useful to this study only as an apparent model of individual self-sufficiency – a model that, as I will demonstrate, is deceptive and liable to misunderstanding, even by critics of the play.

The characterization that Alvis offers of Aristotelian self-sufficiency as a "man who has no indispensable needs which he must depend on others to satisfy" seems to reflect Coriolanus's

¹⁹ Carson Holloway, "Shakespeare's Coriolanus and Aristotle's Great-Souled Man," *Review of Politics* 69 (2007): 353-374.

²⁰ Anny Crunelle-Vanrigh, "'Seeking (the) mean(s)': Aristotle's *Ethics* and Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*," *Cahiers Élisabéthains* 86, no. 1 (2014): 23-44.

²¹ Alvis, "Coriolanus," 23.

²² Alvis, "Coriolanus," 6.

²³ Alvis, "Coriolanus," 9; *NE* IV.3.1124b18-19; 1125a13.

own understanding of autonomy.²⁴ This definition does not, however, accurately represent Aristotle's view. Self-sufficiency (or autarky, from the Greek *autarkes*) in the Aristotelian sense does not refer to a single man or woman *in isolation*, but encompasses his or her intimate community, as Aristotle explains in Book I of *Nicomachean Ethics*:

For the final good is thought to be self-sufficient [*autarkes*]. Now by self-sufficient we do not mean that which is sufficient for a man by himself, for one who leads a solitary life, but also for parents, children, wife, and in general for his friends and fellow citizens, since man is born for citizenship.²⁵

Here, Aristotle reaffirms the central thesis of the *Politics* – that “man is by nature a political animal,”²⁶ an assertion to which I will frequently return – and places necessary limitations on the unsociability of his magnanimous man. While he may ask for little or nothing, the *megalopsuchos* is not a social recluse; on the contrary, as he values deserved civic honor above all else, Aristotle's ethical exemplar is the ideal citizen of a republic and an active participant in sociopolitical life.²⁷ In this crucial way, the magnanimous man is differentiated from the contemplative hermit-philosopher who appears in Book X of *Nicomachean Ethics* – though even he, as I will demonstrate, depends on the external, political world for survival.

Unlike Coriolanus, *megalopsuchos* displays a willingness to engage across class boundaries, combined with a healthy sense of the social propriety critical to both Shakespeare's and Coriolanus's social milieux: “He will associate differently with people in high station and with ordinary people, with closer and more distant acquaintances, and so too with regard to all other differences, rendering to each class what is befitting.”²⁸ The magnanimous man differs

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ *NE* I.7.1097b9-11.

²⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1905), I.2.1253a2. All further references to *Politics* come from this edition.

²⁷ *NE* IV.3.1124b18-19; 1125a13.

²⁸ *NE* IV.6.1126b35-1127a2.

radically in this regard from Coriolanus, whom North, translating Plutarch, describes as “churlishe, uncivil, and altogether unfit for any man’s conversation” on account of his “lacke of education.”²⁹ The majority of scholars, with the exception of Poisson, concur that Plutarch’s characterization of Coriolanus as uneducated and unsociable rejects any identification with Aristotle’s magnanimous man, and I find this analysis convincing. The question at issue here, however, is not whether the most virtuous man is capable of self-sufficiency, but whether *any* individual, including the magnanimous man, is capable of surviving and achieving fulfillment in isolation. I will not pursue this line of argument further, as it has been discussed elsewhere.³⁰

Through the qualification of *autarkes* cited above, Aristotle reconciles the self-sufficiency, *but not self-isolation*, of the magnanimous man with what is arguably the second most significant claim in *Politics*, and which Lees appropriately offers as a summary of the play: “he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god: he is no part of a state.”³¹ Even the *megalopsuchos* is not sufficient “on his own,” but only as part of an intimate community (i.e. his immediate family and close friends), and cannot eschew that one external need: human society. It is this critical distinction between intimate society and complete isolation that Coriolanus fails to recognize, and which leads to his death – the ultimate proof offered by the play of the political nature of man. Individual self-sufficiency is permitted only to those leading a wholly contemplative life – the very thing that the “churlishe” and “uncivil” Coriolanus most steadfastly refuses to do, and which Aristotle in Book 10 of *Nicomachean Ethics* reserves for the gods.

²⁹ North, “The Life of Caius Martius,” 236.

³⁰ For an examination of the role of virtue in Aristotle’s notion of self-sufficiency, see Anthony Kenny, *Aristotle on the Perfect Life* (1992); Stephen Leighton, “Aristotle’s Account of Anger: Narcissism and Illusions of Self-Sufficiency” (2002); Gabriel Richardson Lear, *Happy Lives and the Highest Good* (2004).

³¹ *Pol.* I.2.1253a26-28

Chapter 2: The Disordered Family

In *Politics*, Book I, Aristotle establishes the basic family unit (“parents, children, wife”) as the first stage and locus of political organization. Larger and more complex social structures are built through the extension of a single family and the eventual union of disparate families to form a complex hierarchical state.³² Tellingly, in his definition of the family as those who are “suckled with the same milk” Aristotle emphasizes both food and the maternal connection, the two external dependencies that come to represent Coriolanus’s reliance on the family in particular, and on human society as a whole.³³ Aristotle frames this first union in the language of dependence: as the precursor to any community, whether the nuclear family or a nation, “there must be a union of those who cannot exist without each other; namely, of male and female, that the race may continue” which is analogous to the necessary union “of natural ruler and subject, that both may be preserved.”³⁴

In *Politics* Book I, Aristotle defends his choice to write first on the origins of society before examining their later forms, as “he who thus considers things in their first growth and origin, whether a state or anything else, will obtain the clearest view of them.”³⁵ This is also my aim in treating at length the nuclear family, in which both the state and Coriolanus’s character find their beginnings. By analyzing Coriolanus’s relationship with the female figures in his life – his wife Virgilia, and his mother Volumnia – we can better characterize Coriolanus’s attachment to human society: the original interdependence of the male and female, writ large. In doing so, I

³² *NE* I.7.1097b10-11. For the equivalent early modern English theory of social organization, see Dod and Cleaver: “A household is as it were a little commonwealth, by the good government whereof, God’s glory may be advanced; the commonwealth, which standeth of several families, benefited; and all that live in that family may receive much comfort and commodity.” Robert Cleaver and John Dod, *A godly forme of houshold government for the ordering of priuate families* (London: Thomas Creede, 1598), 1.

³³ *Pol.* I.2.1252b18.

³⁴ *Pol.* I.2.1252a27-29.

³⁵ *Pol.* I.2.1252a24-25.

bring a fuller understanding of Aristotle's notions of political community and self-sufficiency to the discussion of *megalopsuchia* that other scholars have begun. Moreover, while previous scholarship has tended to focus either on the psychoanalytic possibilities of the family (e.g. Adelman) or the political implications of the Aristotelian intertext (e.g. Langis), this thesis considers both aspects – domestic and political – and their mutual interaction, localized in the figure of Coriolanus's mother. Alongside the confirmation that she represents of Aristotle's necessary "union... of male and female," and by extension the impossibility of womanless autonomy, Volumnia's disruption of the Aristotelian family can also be understood as providing an etiology for Coriolanus's antisocial aims.

In his theory of universal paternalism, Aristotle places man at the head of this household, and "each [man] gives law to his children and to his wives," and to his slaves.³⁶ Aristotle's account of the evolution of human society thus provides a 'natural' explanation for the place of a father figure as simultaneous head of family and state, the man responsible for the order and cohesion of the social framework, without whose unifying rule the state begins to unravel. So too in the social order of early modern England, in which "the family was seen as the secure foundation of society and the patriarch's role as analogous to that of God in the universe and the king in the state."³⁷ In Shakespeare's society and in the world of the play, man and his family function on three symbolic and literal levels: father-family, king-state, and God-universe. This layering both secures each dynamic by its association with the other two, and, for Coriolanus, entangles him in a web of social and political ties that oblige him to sever all in order to be free of one. For Coriolanus, autonomy means simultaneous separation from family, state, and belief:

³⁶ *Pol.* I.2.1252b22, quoting Homer, *Odyssey* IX.114-15.

³⁷ "The Early Seventeenth Century: Gender, Family, Household," *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Norton Topics Online*, accessed January 26, 2020, https://wnorton.com/college/english/nael/17century/topic_1/welcome.htm.

in short, the traditional grounds for human identity. Without these, a person becomes an outcast – the man whom Aristotle, quoting Homer, derides as “tribeless, lawless, hearthless one.”³⁸

This social order, and its analogous relationship to the state, was justified and maintained in early modern marriage and legal treatises such as T. E.’s *The Law’s Resolutions of Women’s Rights* (1632); John Dod and Robert Cleaver’s *A Godly Form of Household Government: for the Ordering of Private Families* (1598), which set up explicit parallels between private/household and public/commonwealth; and Robert Brathwaite’s *The English Gentlewoman* (1631), a manual on the virtuous behavior appropriate to each stage in a woman’s life: maiden, wife, and widow. The events of the play unfold in this dual context, against the backdrop of a society in which the private was public and each man acted as head not only of his own family and household, but also of a political microcosm analogous to, and indistinguishable from, the larger commonwealth. The intimate community of the family, which Aristotle establishes as necessary for the preservation of even the most virtuous man, becomes the stage for Coriolanus’s pursuit of absolute autonomy and the cause of his inevitable failure.

The inescapability of the nuclear family, consisting of both male and female parts, is realized in the figure of Volumnia, who becomes an all-encompassing feminine force as she repeatedly figures herself as both mother and wife to her son. Volumnia’s very name has been read as implying her covetousness: Anny Crunelle-Vanrigh suggests a tempting bastardization of the Latin *volo omnia*, ‘I want everything,’ although since the name appears in North’s translation, this implication is mere historical coincidence and cannot be attributed to Shakespeare.³⁹ Historically, the ancient Roman names Volumnus and Volumna were associated with hopes for the health of newborn babies (literally, the ‘well-wishers’), firmly localizing the

³⁸ *Pol.* I.2.1253a4-5, quoting Homer, *Iliad* IX.63.

³⁹ Crunelle-Vanrigh, “Seeking (the) Mean(s),” 27.

character of Volumnia in the world of helpless infants, entirely dependent on their mothers for care – a relationship that Shakespeare’s matron twists and corrupts.⁴⁰ Volumnia’s first line hypothesizes the incestuous union of mother and son, crudely proclaiming that “if my son were my husband, I should freelier rejoice in that absence wherein he won honour than in the embracements of his bed where he would show most love” (I.2.2-4). This characteristically militaristic claim, which prefigures her later delight in the extent of his injuries, is immediately followed by a reassertion of her true role as mother to Coriolanus, “the only son of [her] womb” (I.2.5). In Volumnia’s construction, the omnipresence of the female, and therefore the impossibility of an autonomous masculinity, is immediately presupposed.

While Caius Martius invokes Mars, the Roman god of war, as his divine benefactor, and later enacts this identification in his campaign against Rome “as if he were son and heir to Mars,” his mother calls upon Juno, vengeful wife of Jupiter and goddess of marriage and childbirth (IV.5.186-7). Volumnia’s identification with Juno, the divine mother of Mars, suggests an incestuous conflation of the (grand)motherly and the matrimonial, and serves to remind her son that even the divine gods, Mars and Jupiter included, were born from women (or at least, female deities) and are not ‘authors of themselves.’ Contrary to the theory expressed in medical literature and fiction from the ancient world to the Renaissance in which a child was born only from its father, for whose semen the mother acted as passive incubator – a view that Aristotle explicitly rejects in Book I of the *Politics* – Volumnia asserts the necessity of female participation in the continuation of human society, thereby denying Coriolanus’s pursuit of a masculine autarky uncorrupted by dependence on the female.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, “Volumnus,” in *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879).

⁴¹ See, for example, the Apollonic argument of paternal descent in Aeschylus, *The Eumenides*.

Volumnia's Oedipal confusion of maternal and marital roles is intensified by the de facto absence of Coriolanus's wife, Virgilia, whose absence is most apparent when she is physically onstage. The majority of Virgilia's lines are concentrated in Act I, Scene 2, in which she appears to succeed in holding her own against her dominating mother-in-law, and possesses a "voice of human sentience and nurturing" – "His bloody brow? Oh Jupiter, no blood!" (I.2.33) – in stark contrast with Volumnia's lust for wounds.⁴² In the succeeding acts, however, Virgilia's initial strength of character is almost entirely effaced, and she does not speak following Coriolanus's desired return near the beginning of Act II. Her new moniker is "my gracious silence," and that silence is thereafter filled by Volumnia's verbosity (II.1.168). In contrast with other Shakespearean (and Roman) soldier's wives – namely Portia, Calpurnia, and Cleopatra – Virgilia's relationship with her husband is never properly explored, and though they appear to share a genuine affection and intimacy, they rarely speak directly to one another and are never left alone on stage. Coriolanus's domestic life, the locus of internal exploration and intimacy for Shakespeare's protagonists, is absorbed and the opportunity for vulnerability denied by the Oedipal figure of his mother, whose very overbearingness is both symptom and cause of her son's desired separation from the stifling dependence she represents. In the words of Janet Adelman, Volumnia represents "the paradox through which the son is never more the mother's creature than when he attempts to escape her."⁴³

Such a dismissal of Virgilia's role is inevitably oversimplified. In her gendered reading of the play, Unhae Langis argues against the traditional interpretation of Virgilia as "the cipher character of the silent, submissive wife," and reads "her insistent femininity and protection of the

⁴² Langis, "*Coriolanus*: Inordinate Passions," 19.

⁴³ Janet Adelman, "Escaping the Matrix: The Construction of Masculinity in *Macbeth* and *Coriolanus*," in *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to the Tempest* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 130.

domestic sphere [as] Shakespeare's particular critique against Rome's hypermasculine ideology," embodied in the militaristic Volumnia.⁴⁴ While an attempt to redeem the role of Virgilia is overdue, Langis's reading is somewhat ahistorical; the role of the wife in *Coriolanus* is better understood in the context of the gender politics of Jacobean England, in which Virgilia's defining qualities – chastity, obedience, and above all silence – would have marked her as the feminine ideal of a society in which wives were legally subsumed by their husbands and iron muzzles were devised to gag talkative women. The inventors of the scold's bridle would likely have had much in common with Aristotle, for whom "silence is a woman's glory."⁴⁵ For Jacobean audiences, Virgilia represented a model of the perfect wife, whose "gracious silence" provides a foil for Volumnia's riotous and hypermasculine verbosity.

Stanley Cavell offers a similar, though generalized, interpretation of the active function of "silence [as] the expression of intimacy and identification; ... in his wife's case it means acknowledgement, freedom from words, but in a life beyond the social."⁴⁶ Virgilia's silence offers the possibility of a relationship that both conforms to social prescriptions and yet allows Coriolanus access to the "life beyond the social" that he desires. This wordless intimacy, however, is both paradoxical by nature – as marriage is incompatible with absolute isolation – and untenably brief, swiftly denied by the onward march of the action. The void created by the absence of a strong female partner, or for that matter a clear father figure, is filled by Volumnia, and as the nucleus of feminine influence in the play she becomes a Charybdis-like force, drawing her son inexorably back into the sphere of maternal dependence – and human society – despite his attempts to establish an autonomous masculinity.

⁴⁴ Langis, "*Coriolanus*: Inordinate Passions," 19.

⁴⁵ *Pol.* I.13.1260a30.

⁴⁶ Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 167.

The play's tangible discomfort with Volumnia's symbolically incestuous and overbearing role can be traced to the subversive position she occupies in a family devoid of the patriarch, who acted as head and cornerstone in the sociopolitical hierarchies of both early republican Rome and early modern England. While the play never explicitly confirms her status, North records that Coriolanus, "being left an orphan by his father, was brought up under his mother a widowe."⁴⁷ The absence of Coriolanus's father, which elevates the son to the paradoxical position of husband to his mother and father to himself, places Volumnia in the still more socially problematic role of head of the household. Volumnia's apparent solution to her husband's death, as in the case of Virgilia's passivity, is to fill the void and become both father and mother to her son, resulting in her problematic hypermasculinity. Volumnia thus becomes the play's definitive representative of the family, and the impossibility of Coriolanus's desired separation from her and is thrice magnified as the simultaneous separation from wife, mother, and father.

Langis offers Volumnia's social hermaphroditism as an explanation for her son's single-minded pursuit of military honors: Coriolanus is "the modified offspring and tragic issue of his mother's hypermasculinity, her way to overcompensate for the passive roles women play in civic and martial action, the means to attaining social honor" and her solution to the absence of a patriarch in the family.⁴⁸ More active, and arguably masculine, social roles for women were not unheard of in the ancient world, but this is not Sparta; Aristotle's assertion that "the male is by nature fitter for command than the female" provides a fitting logical basis for Dod and Cleaver's injunction against marital equality in *A Godly Form of Household Management*: "If she be not subject to her husband, to let him rule all household, especially outward affairs; if she will make

⁴⁷ North, "The Life of Caius Martius," 235.

⁴⁸ Langis, "*Coriolanus*: Inordinate Passions," 18.

her head against him, and seek to have her own way, there will be doing and undoing.”⁴⁹ This “doing and undoing” is realized in the form of the social and political chaos proceeding from Coriolanus’s unnatural separation from family and state, precipitated by Volumnia’s disruption of the Aristotelian, “Godly” family.

Virgilia and Coriolanus’s marriage, though suppressed in the play, seems to offer an alternative to this strictly patriarchal union, an alternative that was promoted in Shakespeare’s day alongside the model espoused by Dod and Cleaver. ‘Companionate marriage’ of the sort urged in “The Liturgy of Solemnizing Marriage” – i.e. the wedding vows – from *The Book of Common Prayer* (1559) emphasized “the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one [spouse] ought to have of the other” – even if that ideal of mutuality was somewhat undermined by the wife’s unrequited vow to her husband to “obey him and serve him.”⁵⁰ As I noted above, however, the wordless intimacy that husband and wife seem to share, and which would suggest something closer to the mutual affection of a companionate marriage, is both paradoxical – marriage being incompatible with Coriolanus’s version of self-sufficiency – and too briefly realized to offer a viable alternative to Volumnia’s disordered family structure. The play actively suppresses this more salutary alternative, which is incompatible with the misrule proceeding from Volumnia’s usurpation of the father’s position as head of the family.

Widows in Shakespeare’s England presented a uniquely dangerous problem for the social order. Following her husband’s death, a woman was no longer a *feme covert*, legally subsumed by her husband, but a *feme sole*, able to inherit land, manage an estate, create legal documents under her own name and initiate proceedings in court. The relative autonomy of the widowed

⁴⁹ *Pol.* I.12.1259a43-b1; Cleaver and Dod, *A godly forme*, 88.

⁵⁰ “The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 1B, ed. M. H. Abrams et al., 7th edn. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 554-55.

woman engendered in many a profound social anxiety, which is reflected in the numerous liturgical and advice books published in the 16th and 17th centuries that attempted to minutely regulate a widow's conduct and circumscribe her sphere of influence. Richard Brathwaite makes questionable use of classical etymology to speak to such widows in *An English Gentlewoman*:

Are you widows? You deserve much honor if you be so indeed. The name both from the Greek and Latin hath received one consonant etymology: deprived or destitute. Great difference then is there betwixt those widows which live alone and retire themselves from public concourse, and those which frequent the company of men. For a widow to love society, gives speedy wings to spreading infamy [...] for in public concourse and in court-resorts there is no place for widows.⁵¹

Volumnia, by contrast, is an active participant in the social and political life of the republic. She shuns Virgilia's desire to remain at home sewing – the unmistakable signifier of wifely virtue in Greco-Roman literature, from Homer's Penelope to Livy's Lucretia, the former of whom (Valeria jokes) “did but fill Ithaca full of moths” (I.3.76) – with playful exasperation (“Fie, you confine yourself most unreasonably” [I.3.77]) and swiftly abandons her more virtuous daughter-in-law to her confinement, as “she will but disease our better mirth” (I.3.104-105). Volumnia's blatant substitution of “mirth” – outside of the home and in company, no less – in place of the deprivation and destitution prescribed for widows defies both ancient Roman and early modern social norms, and sets her in opposition to the ‘natural’ order of Aristotle's design – a defiance that she passes on to her son, who sets himself in literal warlike opposition to the Roman state.

Volumnia is moreover an active participant in political affairs, the reserve of Rome's male elite. Sharing the role of pseudo-father figure with Menenius, Volumnia counsels her son on his behavior in the political arena with an inducement that makes her both origin and end of Coriolanus's military achievements: “My praises made thee first a soldier, so, / To have my

⁵¹ Richard Brathwaite, “The English Gentlewoman,” in *The English Gentleman and the English Gentlewoman*, 3rd edn. (London: John Dawson, 1641), 332.

praise for this, perform a part, / Thou hast not done before” (III.2.109-11). As if to stress her own active role in the political and military success she seems to partake in almost equally with her son, Volumnia physically acts out Coriolanus’s imagined prowess on the battlefield: “Methinks I see him stamp thus, and call thus: / ‘Come on, you cowards! you were got in fear, / Though you were born in Rome’” (I.3.32-34). Volumnia is, in many ways, the realization of an anxious moralist’s worst nightmare: a woman alone, the head of her household, disdainful of the domestic pastimes prescribed for aristocratic women, and so covetous of the occupations of men that she takes to playing the part of a sword-wielding soldier. The hypermasculine and politically active Volumnia represents as much danger to the social order as her son’s separatism represents to its cohesion.

The premise that the mother provides for her son’s oppositional and antisocial stance also functions on a psychological level. Volumnia’s conflation of maternal and marital roles has the effect of confusing the act of sexual union with the resulting act of reproduction, making the son into his own father, and providing an imaginative basis for Coriolanus’s paradoxical desire to be “author of himself” (V.3.36). The curious absence of Coriolanus’s father – which is never remarked upon, even to suggest his death – intensifies this impression, placing the son in the role of his own biological “author.” Numerous commentators, among them Adelman and Burton Hatlen,⁵² have identified an affiliation between Coriolanus’s incestuous self-fathering and the symbolic language of cannibalism and self-consumption that reflects the diseased anatomy of the play, and Stanley Cavell goes so far as to suggest that Coriolanus, in a sense, becomes and gives birth to his mother, paradoxically implying that whatever masculine energy the infant Coriolanus

⁵² Burton Hatlen, “The ‘Noble Thing’ and the ‘Boy of Tears’: ‘Coriolanus’ and the Embarrassments of Identity,” *English Literary Renaissance* 27, no. 3 (1997): 393-420.

“suck’st” from his mother originated with the father-son himself (III.3.130).⁵³ In effect, he suckles upon himself – the symbolic and untenable realization of Volumnia’s “Anger’s my meat. I sup upon myself, / And so shall starve with feeding” (IV.2.52-53). The identification of incest with a sort of cannibalism, self-fathering with self-consumption, suggests the play’s problematization of isolated self-sufficiency, in which one nourishes and is nourished by oneself. *Coriolanus* asserts the inevitable failure of such a model through the mixed imagery of starvation, cannibalism, and incest, with the ultimate effect of suggesting the fundamental *unnaturalness* of human isolation. A person alone cannot properly feed him or herself, cannot procreate, cannot sustain himself at any length, let alone achieve happiness in isolation.

⁵³ Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 155.

Chapter 3: Food and the Body Politic

Having treated Coriolanus's vain pursuit of masculine autonomy at the level of the family, I now expand outward to examine Coriolanus's desired separation from the Roman republic. For Aristotle, the political community (*polis*) "originat[es] in the bare needs of life, and continu[es] in existence for the sake of a good life" and towards the goal of self-sufficiency, for "the final cause and end of a thing is the best, and to be self-sufficing is the end and the best."⁵⁴ The play presents two models of self-sufficiency, neither of which is ultimately realized: first, the isolated, absolute self-sufficiency to which Coriolanus aspires; second, the self-sufficing state that Aristotle theorizes in *Politics* Book I as the ideal condition of a politically mature community.

Food, the most definitive symbol of human dependence on the external world, acts as a signifier of Coriolanus's reliance on external nourishment for survival. Human sustenance, whether grain or breast milk, is immediately established as the matter of the play by the initial riot over grain. The vow that opens the play, "rather to die than to famish," finds an ironic home in the protagonist's patrician household, in which the specter of starvation is localized in the figure of the insufficiently-nourishing mother (I.1.3). A starved mother cannot sufficiently nourish her child, and Volumnia's repeated references to breastfeeding are transformed by the assertion of her own lean cannibalism ("starve with feeding" [IV.2.53]). Coriolanus's infancy is characterized by dearth – symbolic, and perhaps even literal; in fact, as Crunelle-Vanrigh has observed, 'less' is the play's "governing suffix, as in 'senseless sword' (I.4.57), 'napless vesture of humility' (II.1.228), 'shunless destiny' (II.2.110)," etc.⁵⁵ *Coriolanus*'s quantifiers signal lack, absence, deficiency, in direct contrast with, and arguably prompting, Coriolanus's pursuit of

⁵⁴ *Pol.* 1252b28-29; 1252b34.

⁵⁵ Crunelle-Vanrigh, "Seeking (the) Mean(s)," 34; my emphasis.

(self-)sufficiency. And yet, “any acknowledgement of need – starting with the acknowledgement that he, like the crowd he despises, needs food – threatens to undermine his masculine autonomy, in effect returning him to the maternal breast from which he could never get enough.”⁵⁶ By food, as by pregnancy, Coriolanus’s dependence is localized in the body of the mother, who will come to stand for the allegorical body of the state.

The symbol of the insufficient mother unable, or unwilling, to feed her children is historically apposite, as *Coriolanus* bears obvious allusions to the Midland Revolt of 1607; indeed, the play’s first “‘company of mutinous citizens’ were almost certainly dressed as Jacobean labourers and artisans.”⁵⁷ The affiliation of early modern London and early Republican Rome is supposed by Shakespeare’s adaptation of the Plutarchan source, from a riot over unregulated usury to one over grain. This coded reference to the Midland Revolt supports an allegorical reading of *Coriolanus* in which “the play is about the body politic” – specifically, the body politic of Jacobean England, represented by an imaginatively adapted Roman Republic – “and about how that body is fed, that is, sustained.”⁵⁸ Volumnia the miserly mother takes on the proportions of the covetous patrician class to which she belongs, and which itself comes to represent the Roman state, in opposition to the plebeians who resolve “rather to die than to famish” under the Senate’s thumb (I.1.3).

The trope of breastfeeding also aligns Volumnia with the symbol of the Roman *lupa*, the mother wolf who suckled the twins Romulus and Remus. The former, having slain his brother, lent his name to the city he founded, just as Coriolanus receives his name from the city he conquered. The symbolic association of Volumnia with the Roman *lupa* may be extended to the

⁵⁶ Adelman, “Escaping the Matrix,” 147.

⁵⁷ Lee Bliss, “Introduction,” in *Coriolanus*, ed. Lee Bliss, *The New Cambridge Shakespeare*, updated edn. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 26.

⁵⁸ Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 145.

mother city, Roma, and provides an imaginative basis for the trope of animalism in the play, suggesting that if Coriolanus “suck’st” his “valiantness” from his mother, he also absorbed elements of her bestiality, which manifests in the bestial image of his own son tearing a butterfly with his teeth (III.2.130). The nominal association of the conqueror Coriolanus with the founder Romulus is significant for its confirmation of the idea that, had Coriolanus succeeded in conquering Rome and thereby “forged himself a name o’th’fire / Of burning Rome” (V.1.14-15), the new honorific surname would have been Romanus – or, if the identification of the breastfeeding Volumnia with the suckling wolf is followed to its logical conclusion, Romulus.⁵⁹ Thus the city’s founder, who built Rome in the aftermath of his brother’s murder, would lend his name to Rome’s destroyer, who completes the cycle of familial violence by declaring war on his homeland, symbolically “tread[ing ...] on [his] mother’s womb” (V.3.122-24).

Volumnia is Rome; in destroying the city, he would destroy her – and by extension, himself. “[M]other and motherland are the same: both represent an original ground of identity, a matrix out of which the self emerges,” and from which Coriolanus must excise himself in order to establish an autonomous masculine (non-Roman) identity.⁶⁰ In Adelman’s psychoanalytic reading, this excision represents a sort of C-section, cutting himself from the womb or belly that birthed him through the masculine violence of the sword and thereby removing himself at once from the matrix of his mother’s embrace and from the body politic of the Roman state.⁶¹ While the Freudian possibilities of the play are not the focus of this thesis, Coriolanus’s relationship with Volumnia, both literally as his mother and as allegorical representative of the state, is central to the construction of dependence in the play. The paradox of Coriolanus’s failure to

⁵⁹ Kenneth Burke, “‘Coriolanus’ And the Delights of Faction,” *The Hudson Review* 19, no. 2 (1966): 187.

⁶⁰ Hatlen, “The ‘Noble Thing,’” 410.

⁶¹ Adelman, “Escaping the Matrix.”

escape his mother's influence is representative of his paradoxical attachment to the *polis*, of which he is a creature: a political animal, that is, a man.

Volumnia's implications of incest, self-cannibalism, hypermasculinity, and familial violence are remarkable for their *unnaturalness*, in contrast to Aristotle's emphasis on the *naturalness* of the patriarchal family and the resulting political state. "The family is the association established *by nature* for the supply of men's everyday wants"; "mankind have a *natural* desire to leave behind them an image of themselves"; "if the earlier forms of society [i.e. the family] are *natural*, so is the state, for it is the end of them, and the nature of a thing is its end."⁶² This last assertion is critical to an understanding of the significance of Volumnia, and the intimate community she represents, in relation to the larger community of the Roman republic. The unnaturalness of Coriolanus's nuclear family radiates outward from the origin point of the mother, first to the son, and from both mother and son to the state, which, like the model of the patriarchal family, is characterized by the "union ... of *natural* ruler and subject."⁶³ The relationship between man and woman in the Aristotelian family mirrors that between master and slave, as "that which can foresee by the exercise of mind is *by nature* intended to be lord and master," and while all may partake to varying extents in the human virtues, "the slave has no deliberative faculty at all; the woman has, but it is without authority," and so man is placed *by nature* as ruler over them both.⁶⁴ Volumnia's usurpation of masculine authority repudiates the gendered hierarchy established, according to Aristotle, by nature, and Coriolanus's rejection of the political hierarchy parallels that of his mother, in an individualized manifestation of the state mirroring the family.

⁶² *Pol.* I.2.1252b12-13; 1252a27-28; 1252b30-32, my emphasis.

⁶³ *Pol.* I.2.1252a29, my emphasis.

⁶⁴ *Pol.* I.2.1252a32-33; I.13.1260a12-13.

The interrelation of these forms of social opposition and repudiation of the ‘natural’ order is supported by the emphasis on inheritance and imitative descent in the play, from Volumnia’s claim that her son’s “valiantness was mine, thou suck’st it from me,” to the similarity in temperament of Coriolanus and his butterfly-mammocking son (III.3.130). By that logic (i.e. if temperament can be inherited), a woman who thinks she can live without a husband – or even worse, in her husband’s place – will raise a son who thinks he can live without reliance on the social conventions that his mother shuns. A woman who refuses to be subject to her husband, the analogous head of state, will raise a son who refuses to be subject to that state: that is, a man intent on achieving autonomous self-sufficiency, at the cost of the destruction of the state he repudiates.

The general anxiety caused by Volumnia as a *feme sole* is particularly acute in light of the volatile disorder (Dod and Cleaver’s “doing and undoing”) into which she casts her household, and by extension, the entire state. In Jacobean England, as in Aristotle, the family and the state were indivisible analogous entities, each modeled after and dependent upon the other for their proper functioning. This parallel is made explicit in James I’s *The True Law of Free Monarchies; or, The Reciprocal and Mutual Duty Betwixt a Free King and His Natural Subjects*, in terms that both justify the anxiety about Volumnia’s usurpation and evoke Menenius’s parable of the mutinous members: “The king towards his people is rightly compared to a father of children and to a head of a body composed of divers members.”⁶⁵ Published by James VI as King of Scotland in 1598 and reissued upon his accession to the English crown in 1603, *The True Law* asserted James’s philosophy of royal absolutism, in which the king acted as both *pater patriae* and,

⁶⁵ James I of England, “The True Law of Free Monarchies; or, The Reciprocal and Mutual Duty Betwixt a Free King and His Natural Subjects,” in *The Workes of the most high and mightie Prince, James* (London: Robert Barker & John Bill, 1616), 195.

symbolically, *pater familias*, in conformity with that relation prescribed by Aristotle: “The rule of a father over his children is royal, for he rules by virtue both of love and of the respect due to age.”⁶⁶ The historical reality, however, in both Jacobean England and early republican Rome fell markedly short of this paternalistic ideal, as the play’s allusions to the Midland Revolt demonstrate.

A similar model is espoused by Menenius in his appeal to the citizens, characterizing them as unruly children who rebel against “the helms o’th’state, who care for you like fathers / When you curse them as enemies” (1.1.63-64). Though the context of Menenius’s simile is republican, not royal, his double-figuration of those in power as fathers to the people and nourishers (in a sense, mothers) of the city’s diverse members is powerfully reminiscent of the analogy drawn in James’s *True Law*. The defining role of the *pater* in this construction also brings into focus the societal discomfort with the matriarchy imposed by Volumnia, if ‘only’ at the level of a single family, and the social and political – and in the case of Coriolanus, psychological – disorder proceeding from this subversion of the king’s ‘true law.’

The political body figured in *The True Law*, of which Coriolanus is an unwilling part, develops a physical presence in the play: a starved and self-cannibalizing form, signaled by the unresolved mutiny of the members described in Menenius’s fable. While “[a]s a patrician, Coriolanus firmly subscribes to the dominant political conception of antiquity, the Platonic tripartite state hierarchically composed of rulers, soldiers, and workers/commoners corresponding respectively to the reasons, passions, and appetites of the tripartite soul,” his aspiration of autonomy is incompatible with his own participation in the political hierarchy.⁶⁷ As is appropriate to this anthropomorphizing of the state (mother as motherland), the ‘body politic’

⁶⁶ *Pol.* I.12.1259b10-11.

⁶⁷ Langis, “*Coriolanus*: Inordinate Passions,” 5.

requires a sort of sociopolitical symbiosis, in which disparate parts service the whole, “mutually participate,” in recognition that the existence of the part is dependent on the existence of the whole (I.1.86). In Aristotelian terms, “the state is by nature clearly prior to the family and to the individual, since the whole is of necessity prior to the part; [for] if the whole body be destroyed, there will be no foot or hand.”⁶⁸ Coriolanus will not – or more likely, cannot – accept this thesis, cannot acknowledge the dependence of his very existence on something beyond himself. “What alarms him is simply being part, one member among others of the same organism,” and his refusal to participate in the rituals of civil society, such as the public display of his wounds in exchange for the people’s voices, is in effect his own mutiny against participation in the body politic.⁶⁹

What Coriolanus fails to recognize is that the political community he repudiates is the only viable form of human self-sufficiency. This is not to say that Coriolanus, or for that matter Shakespeare, misunderstands the Aristotelian theory of self-sufficiency, for it is not possible to misunderstand something to which one has never been exposed. Even if the protagonist or the playwright had read Aristotle, they would be excused for mischaracterizing Aristotle’s concept of autarky. At first glance, the *megalopsuchos* who dominates *Nicomachean Ethics* appears to offer a model of individual self-sufficiency, as he expresses no external needs and possesses “a character that suffices to itself.”⁷⁰ However, the model of isolated self-sufficiency that Aristotle *appears* to provide in the magnanimous man is just that: the mere appearance of self-sufficiency. The qualification that Aristotle offers in *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I, that self-sufficiency refers only to a community and not to an individual alone, must inform any characterization of self-

⁶⁸ *Pol.* I.2.1253a18-20.

⁶⁹ Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 169.

⁷⁰ *NE* IV.3.1125a13.

sufficiency in Aristotle, including that ascribed to the magnanimous man. Without this more nuanced understanding – which could, of course, have been achieved through a close reading of *Nicomachean Ethics*, had he not been entirely adverse and unaccustomed to philosophical contemplation – Coriolanus aspires, in a sense, to become that self-sufficing community. He wishes to be a nation unto himself, to achieve autarky in the economic sense of a state that trades only within its own walls. In a reversal of his flight from his mother, Coriolanus wants to *be* Rome, and his characteristic Roman *virtus* (“valiantnesse” in North’s translation) provides some justification for this desire.

In the words of literary scholar Burton Hatlen, Coriolanus presents himself as “the very embodiment of *Romanitas*. Unflinching courage, absolute devotion to the state, and by implication disdain for a ‘Greek’ predilection for reflection over action – these are the attributes that define the ideal Roman.”⁷¹ Unquestionably, Hatlen’s analysis represents a clichéd and pejorative summary of Roman identity that conflates the character Coriolanus’s, and arguably Shakespeare’s, conception of *Romanitas* with ancient understandings of being Roman. However, as this appears to have been more or less Shakespeare’s own early modern understanding of *Romanitas*, Hatlen’s point is valid within the confines of the dramatic text. It is not so strange, then, for Rome’s best citizen, the embodiment of *Romanitas*, to imagine himself as the embodiment of Rome. And yet, “he cannot in fact ‘be Rome’ all by himself. To identify oneself as a Roman means to be part of something larger than oneself.”⁷² As Langis observes, “Coriolanus’s virtuous autarky and the republican polity are completely incompatible: as Aristotle explains in the *Politics*, ‘for men of preeminent virtue there is no law – they are

⁷¹ Hatlen, “The ‘Noble Thing,’” 399.

⁷² *Ibid*, 401.

themselves law.”⁷³ This is also the dilemma of an absolute monarch such as James I. Identity, especially national identity, is inherently relative and requires participation in a larger entity; Rome cannot be Rome without Romans.

Coriolanus rejects this dependence on the Roman people, the “mutable rank-scented meinie” that he so despises, through a more general repudiation of dependency (III.1.70). “Since to hunger is to want, to lack something, he hungers to lack nothing, to be complete, like a sword.”⁷⁴ When Coriolanus, raised upon the Romans’ shoulders before the gates of Corioles, asks of his companions, “O’ me alone? Make you a sword of me?” (I.6.76) he unknowingly admits what the tribunes will later accuse him of: “this viper / That would depopulate the city and / Be every man himself” (III.1.265-67). To be alone is to be complete, to reject the boyish dependence represented by the feminine influence of the mother and possess instead the masculine energy of the sword. His identification with a sword also hints at the consequences of such isolation: the human connections “that enmesh us in a web of relationships alone serve to make us human. Freed from this web, we become simply ‘things.’”⁷⁵ Coriolanus’s desired separation from humanity becomes a separation from being human; in isolation, he (it) is no longer a person, but a ‘thing.’ “In the phrase ‘Not to be other than one thing’ (IV.7.42), however, Shakespeare explicitly links Coriolanus’s stubbornness with the Stoic virtue of constancy, of being *unus idemque inter diversa*.”⁷⁶ Just as Volumnia revels in being a *feme sole*, Coriolanus’s obsession is with becoming *unus* – one alone, complete, a (masculine) nation unto himself.

In the context of Menenius’s parable of the members and James I’s body politic, the metaphor of the sword functions as both synecdoche (an individual soldier, Coriolanus) and

⁷³ Langis, “*Coriolanus*: Inordinate Passions,” 15; *Politics*, III.13.1284a12-13.

⁷⁴ Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 149.

⁷⁵ Hatlen, “The ‘Noble Thing,’” 419.

⁷⁶ Geoffrey Miles, *Shakespeare and the Constant Romans* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 121.

metonymy (the Roman army). Historically, as in John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*, the army was figured as the arm or hand of the state, because of its active function and because weapons are usually held in the hand.⁷⁷ Accordingly, the sword metaphor may be read in two ways: either as an expression of Coriolanus's wish "not to be other than one thing," a singular object embodying an autonomous masculinity, or as dismay at the realization that through his military service he has become an integral part of the state, indivisible and at its direction as a hand to a body.

The inescapability of the political micro- and macrocosms that confound Coriolanus's pursuit of autonomy in effect confirms the thesis of Aristotle's *Politics*: "Man is a political animal."⁷⁸ Implicit in this definition of man is the exclusion of nonpolitical (that is, by nature solitary) animals from humanity, among them any person who cannot or will not participate in the civil life of the state:

The proof that the state is a creation of nature and prior to the individual is that the individual, when isolated, is not self-sufficing; and therefore he is like a part in relation to the whole. But he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god: he is no part of a state.⁷⁹

This passage from *Politics*, Book I returns to the accusation of unsociability, voiced by the plebeians, that opens the play. What makes Coriolanus by Thomas North's account "churlishe and uncivil," so "that [the people] could not be acquainted with him, as one citizen useth to be with another in the cittie,"⁸⁰ and in Shakespeare's rendering "chief enemy to the people" (I.1.5-6) is his apparent ability to "pay himself" (I.1.24-25) – an expression of self-sufficiency that constitutes a rejection of the fundamental mutualism of the Roman state. For both Aristotle and Shakespeare's citizens, Coriolanus's refusal to participate in the prescribed rituals of political

⁷⁷ John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, trans. Cary Nederman, *Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁷⁸ *Pol.* I.2.1253a2.

⁷⁹ *Pol.* I.2.1253a26-28.

⁸⁰ North, "The Life of Caius Martius," 237.

society necessitates his eventual banishment from the city, and turns his surpassing (and therefore excessive) *Romanitas* on its head: far from “the ideal Roman,” Coriolanus *cannot* be a Roman, as being a citizen (*civis*) requires participation in the Roman state (*civitas*), from which it is etymologically and synecdochally derived. *Romanitas* is a condition of inclusion, while self-sufficiency – in Coriolanus’s view, though not in Aristotle’s – is the ultimate form of exclusion. Despite his apparent disdain for contemplation, Coriolanus appears to possess an implicit understanding of this Aristotelian formula. Since what he seeks is autonomy, i.e. detachment from the political spheres of the family and the state, he must become that which Aristotle sets apart from both: a man “who has no need [to live in society] because he is sufficient for himself ... a beast or a god.”⁸¹

⁸¹ *Pol.* I.2.1253a26-28.

Chapter 4: Animalism and Apotheosis

As Stanley Cavell has observed, “Coriolanus’s refusal to acknowledge his participation in finite human existence may seem so obviously the fact of the matter of his play that to note it seems merely to describe the play, not to interpret it.”⁸² The key word here is “finite”: if it is humanity’s dependence on external nourishment for survival that Coriolanus rejects, then he must repudiate that dependence by transcending its end: survival. There are two routes open to a human being for the transcendence of finite existence: immortality, or death. Coriolanus pursues the former, and in line with his own unnatural origins, raised at Volumnia’s knee, he attempts to make himself into something nonhuman, sacred, and by that token self-sufficient.

The bestial image in Act I Scene 3 of Coriolanus’s son “run[ning] after a gilded butterfly” which, when he catches it, “enraged ... set[s] his teeth and tear[s] it,” reads as a portentous vision of the violence and animalistic regression that is to follow (I.3.54-58). The act is praised by his hawkish grandmother, and is unsurprising for a boy who, Volumnia boasts, would “rather see the swords, and hear a drum, than look upon his school-master” (I.3.50-51). An affinity for savage violence runs in the family: the “mammocked” (I.3.58) butterfly is taken as promising evidence that he is “the father’s son” (I.3.52). The image of the butterfly appears once more in the final act of the play, but there it is the butterfly, a metaphor for Coriolanus, who enacts violence on the world. Menenius, master of metaphor, informs the tribunes of their mistake: “There is differency between a grub and a butterfly, yet your butterfly was a grub. This Martius is grown from man to dragon. He has wings; he’s more than a creeping thing” (V.4.9-11). The dragon with which Coriolanus is frequently identified, and identifies himself, occupied a liminal space between animal and divine in both ancient Roman and early modern European

⁸² Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 143.

culture. In the Greek mythological tradition later adopted by Rome, dragons (δράκων, *drakon*) were the monstrous descendants of the primordial gods (e.g. Typhon, son of Gaia, and his mate Echidna), usually evoked in order to be slain by demigod heroes, and represented as large, sometimes half-humanoid serpents in the corresponding artistic tradition.⁸³ The dragons of Christian Europe derived in part from this tradition, taking on similarly serpentine or lizard-like forms, and were mythologized as evil quasi-natural forces placed in opposition to legendary slayer-saints, the best known of whom (at least in England) is St. George.⁸⁴ The liminality of the dragon's supernatural power makes it a suitable symbol for Coriolanus's attempt to transcend human society by transcending his own mortality, and his metamorphosis in Act V from grub to butterfly, "from man to dragon," is emblematic of this attempt – in which he almost succeeds.

Coriolanus's symbolic transformation begins at the moment of his banishment from Rome, which is marked by a declaration of his characteristic misanthropy: "I banish you" (III.3.150). Coriolanus thus turns his banishment on its head, making this imposed exile the culmination of his own attempts to separate himself from political society. Departing from his mother, he likens himself to the dragon of Menenius's imagination: "though I go alone, / Like to a lonely dragon ... your son / Will or exceed the common or be caught / With cautelous baits and practice" (IV.1.29-33). Here, Coriolanus aptly recognizes the two possible conclusions to the play: either he succeeds in "exceed[ing] the common," transcending human society by transcending his very humanity, or he fails to achieve this pseudo-apotheosis and is caught by those he attempted to transcend, a false god struck down by the people. While there is a distinct strain of animalism throughout the play – Coriolanus is variously described as a dog, serpent,

⁸³ Daniel Ogden, *Drakon: Dragon Myth and Serpent Cult in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2.

⁸⁴ Ogden, *Drakon*, 383.

steed, lamb, bear, viper, butterfly, and male tiger – his self-identification with the “lonely dragon” is more fitting, as its supernatural power leads easily into Coriolanus’s more dominant association with divinity (4.1.30). This loneliness, moreover, should not necessarily be understood as Coriolanus’s lament for a lost sense of community; if Coriolanus does succeed in becoming a “lonely dragon,” he will presumably have attained the supreme self-sufficiency that is the prerogative of beasts and the divine – of which the dragon is both.

In Act V, Coriolanus’s superiority of nature is taken to the extreme of a symbolic apotheosis. Menenius, the harbinger of Coriolanus’s metamorphosis from man to dragon, augurs that the banished soldier will “be to Rome / As is the osprey to the fish, who take it / By sovereignty of nature” (4.7.33-35). Nature, as with Volumnia’s unnatural usurpation, is the focus of Coriolanus’s transformation from man to dragon, and from dragon to deity: “He is their god. He leads them like a thing / Made by some other deity than Nature, / That shapes man better” (4.6.94-6). Finally separated from Roman society by means of his mutual banishment, the protagonist of Act V is free to pursue in earnest the goal of autonomous, masculine (in the sense of martial) self-sufficiency. Though he leads an army of Volscians, he sits above them like a god, and appears to have achieved the excision from the body politic that he desired; he is not the soldierly arm, nor the patrician belly, nor even the princely head – he is another thing altogether, of a different, nonhuman nature. Volumnia’s invocation of Juno in Act I comes full circle in the final act of the play, as her son dominates the region “as if he were son and heir to Mars” (IV.5.186-7). The image of Coriolanus as a martial deity is progressively developed from the moment of his exile, and culminates in the vision, once again voiced by Menenius, of a vengeful god enthroned: “I tell you, he does sit in gold, his eye / Red as ‘twould burn Rome, and his injury / The gaoler to his pity” (V.1.64-66). The image is somewhat tempered by the language of

metaphor – “as if,” “like,” “as” – but only implies a transformation as yet incomplete; Coriolanus is in the process of metamorphosis, from human to god.

Coriolanus’s apotheosis also contains resonances of the political climate of early modern England. As Langis asserts, “it is Coriolanus’s very compulsion to be ‘author of himself’ that, the tribunes fear, will translate into excessive civic authority, were he to be consul. This ethical intolerance later comes to a head in his genocidal negation of the city which banishes him.”⁸⁵ Coriolanus’s rise to power evokes 17th-century Jacobean absolutism, as laid out in *The True Law of Free Monarchies*, and his clashes with the tribunes and Roman senate parallel the conflict between James I’s monarchical absolutism and Parliamentary privileges, which would come to a head in the execution of King Charles I in 1649. Coriolanus’s godly inheritance would also likely have reminded Jacobean listeners of the divine right of kings, the theory developed under James I in which the anointed monarch derived his authority directly from God, and was therefore subject to no earthly power.

A. D. Nuttall is correct to point out that, while “it is now fashionable to trace hidden reference to English contemporary politics in the Roman plays, [...] such reference is acknowledged to exist in negotiation with the overt depiction of an alien polity.”⁸⁶ The parallels between the historical reality of early republican Rome and the politics of Jacobean England are far from exact; nevertheless, Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* may be read as a sort of intermediary between the two, transposing the social and political concerns of Shakespeare’s present – James’s absolute monarchy vs. nascent parliamentary republicanism – into the safer discursive space of the Roman polity. The play’s Aristotelian resonances, while less explicit and arguably

⁸⁵ Langis, “*Coriolanus*: Inordinate Passions,” 10.

⁸⁶ A. D. Nuttall, “Action at a Distance: Shakespeare and the Greeks,” in *Shakespeare and the Classics*, ed. Charles Martindale and A. B. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 211.

unintended by the author, can be understood as suggesting a similar trans-historical concern with the relationship between an individual and political society, and the tantalizing yet problematic possibility of self-sufficiency.

In fact, Coriolanus's implausible pursuit of divinity as a means of escaping human dependence, and thereby achieving self-sufficiency, is almost realized in the final act of the play. Coriolanus's eventual apotheosis into Mars-like god is extensively foreshadowed in the earlier acts of the play: in Act II, "His sword, death's stamp, / Where it did mark, it took; from face to foot / He was a thing of blood, whose every motion / Was timed with dying cries" (II.2.101-4); in Act II, "You speak o'th'people / As if you were a god to punish, not / A man of their infirmity" (III.1.82-4). And indeed, the Coriolanus of Act V has realized these auguries, casting aside both his human infirmity and the very name that had marked his victory over the Volsces, and thereby his participation in the Roman political apparatus: "'Coriolanus' / He would not answer to; forbade all names. / He was a kind of nothing, titleless, / Till he has forged himself a name o'th'fire / Of burning Rome" (V.1.11-15). In this sense, Hatlen's analysis comes to fruition as he rejects all names, those markers of identity which "enmesh us in a web of relationships [and] alone serve to make us human," and in doing so fashions himself into "a kind of nothing" (V.1.13).⁸⁷ This notion of incorporeality also aligns Coriolanus with the wholly contemplative, self-sufficient vision of the gods that Aristotle presents in Book X of *Nicomachean Ethics*, to which I will return below.

Coriolanus, it should be acknowledged, *almost* succeeds in achieving the inhumanity prescribed by Aristotle in his stipulation of 'beast or god.' Indeed, he comes closer to attaining a form of divine self-sufficiency than many scholars of the play have been willing to admit.

⁸⁷ Hatlen, "The 'Noble Thing,'" 419.

Although, as Hatlen rightly contends, the destruction of Rome would constitute a destruction of his own origin and identity (mother and motherland) and therefore of himself, I disagree with Cavell's assessment that "Coriolanus's eye was red with the present flames of self-consuming."⁸⁸ While Coriolanus's violent death at the hands of Aufidius, the man he has figured – incorrectly, as Aufidius's Machiavellian betrayal reveals – as a mirror image of himself, can be read as an act of suicide or self-consumption, his death is not the ultimate locus of tragedy in the play. Rather, Coriolanus's eventual death is presented as the inevitable consequence, almost an afterthought, of Volumnia's success in prevailing with her son. The play seems to hold out the possibility that, had Volumnia not arrived to remind Coriolanus of his mortality, he would have completed his metamorphosis into god. Arrive, however, she does, and Coriolanus's fate is sealed by her appeal to his inalienable humanity, the ultimate obstacle to absolute self-sufficiency.

As with Aristotle's 'beast or god,' Coriolanus appears to possess an instinctual, almost preternatural understanding of the origins of his tragedy. Following an unusual and poignant stage direction – "he holds her by the hand, silent" – Coriolanus responds to his mother's final plea with a lament, ending in resignation, that provides a neat summary of the causes of his ruin:

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. (V.3.199-206)

Coriolanus's repetition of "mother" locates the reason for his surrender in the maternal bond, which Volumnia repeatedly invokes in her appeals to the "duty which / To a mother's part

⁸⁸ Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 153.

belongs” (V.3.183-84), no less as “there’s no man in the world / More bound to’s mother” (V.3.174-75). His reference to the “unnatural scene,” in which the mother kneels to her son in a reversal of his return from Corioles, harkens back to the unnaturalness of Volumnia’s usurpation of the male role and the instances of unnatural or insufficient feeding that pervade the play. Coriolanus’s unfinished apotheosis defies nature, as does his desired separation from human society, which can be traced back to his mother’s ‘unnatural’ contravention of the social order. And yet, Coriolanus’s apotheosis is curtailed by his nature, by his very humanness: his mother’s appeal to the fundamental bases of human identity, the bonds of family and nation (“this fellow had a Volscian to his mother; / His wife is in Corioli and his child / Like him by chance”), will indeed prove “most *mortal* to him.” Gods, at least in Aristotle’s construction, are self-sufficient because they have no family, no nation, no needs, and therefore no community that arises to serve those needs; Coriolanus’s surrender will be mortal to him *because* he is mortal.

Coriolanus’s full metamorphosis into incorporeal deity is also prevented by his characteristic disdain for contemplation. In Book X of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle characterizes the nature of divinity as wholly contemplative and the life of the hermit philosopher as the happiest: “the activity of God, which surpasses all others in blessedness, must be contemplative; and of human activities, therefore, that which is most akin to this must be most of the nature of happiness.”⁸⁹ The philosopher himself, however, is quick to warn of the impossibility for mortals of achieving the full contemplative self-sufficiency of the gods: “But, being a man, one will also need external prosperity; for our nature is not self-sufficient for the purpose of contemplation, but our body also must be healthy and must have food and other attention.”⁹⁰ This, to come full circle, is the purpose of “the family, [which] is the association

⁸⁹ *NE* X.9.1178b21-23.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 33-35.

established by nature for the supply of men's everyday wants."⁹¹ Human beings are by nature unsuited for the life of contemplation reserved for the gods, as they must eat and socialize and find shelter to survive. The family, as Aristotle explains, is the first expression of political organization, the result of man's political nature, which itself is the result of his dependence on the external world. A hermit philosopher may come close to achieving the contemplative life of the gods, by which he may lead the happiest life of any human being, but even he cannot be wholly self-sufficient. Coriolanus, by contrast, is as far removed from a life of cerebral meditation as it is possible to be, making his pursuit of such divine transcendence deeply ironic.

Book X of *Nicomachean Ethics* directly treats the question at the center of this thesis: whether it is possible for a human being to be self-sufficient, and by that token happy, on his or her own. "The final good is thought to be self-sufficient," Aristotle states in Book I, but this self-sufficiency does not entail the isolation of an individual, rather his or her participation in an intimate community consisting of "parents, children, wife [spouse], and in general ... his friends and fellow citizens, since man is born for citizenship."⁹² Coriolanus's inability to comprehend the social nature of Aristotelian self-sufficiency is his undoing, and his failure to achieve the isolated self-sufficiency he desires offers proof of Aristotle's central tenet: the political nature of man. If Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* may be understood as a test case for the viability of individual self-sufficiency, the conclusion is, unequivocally, the inability of a human being to survive, let alone be happy, in isolation.

⁹¹ *Pol.* I.2.1252b12-13.

⁹² *NE* I.7.1097b10-11.

Conclusion

Coriolanus's physical death, though brutal, is not a particularly moving end for a Shakespearean hero. Although he makes some attempt to resist his fate, Coriolanus's words of stoic resignation to his mother, "but let it come," seem to acknowledge and accept, even enact, a psychological death of their own (V.3.206). On the verge of divinity, Coriolanus is reminded of his inalienable humanity, the familial ties that bind and define every human being, and of the necessary limitations of his nature which prevent his deification. This instance is not strictly decisive; Coriolanus's symbolic apotheosis is as yet incomplete. Still, in a reenactment of her earlier vision of Hector's death, in which the nursing breast becomes the killing sword, Volumnia in effect kills her son, asserting his dependence on her as the deliverer of death as well as of life. Even in the instant of death, Coriolanus cannot be wholly free.

A number of critics have offered more positive readings of Coriolanus's death, among them Unhae Langis, who contends that "Coriolanus signals his release from honor measured by public opinion and exhibits the supreme instance of self-sufficiency achieved only at death."⁹³ Alvis, by contrast, sees the soldier's demise as a "bitter and pathetic conclusion without even the compensation of a self-recognition," as "his failure to avail himself of the chance for self-knowledge leaves to the audience the experience of *anagnorisis* which should have been his."⁹⁴ I find Langis's interpretation too optimistic for what is, after all, a tragedy; the conclusion that, in death, Coriolanus achieves the "supreme [...] self-sufficiency" he failed to achieve in life runs counter to what I would call the Aristotelian thesis of the play, which asserts the impossibility of absolute autonomy at any stage in a human life, not excluding the instant of death. ('Sufficiency' presupposes the existence of external needs; a corpse can exhibit no more self-sufficiency than a

⁹³ Langis, "*Coriolanus*: Inordinate Passions," 21.

⁹⁴ Alvis, "Coriolanus," 15; 16.

stone.) I also disagree with Alvis's assessment of Act V, which cites Aristotle's *Poetics* in denying Coriolanus the anagnorisis (self-recognition) worthy of a tragic hero. For Alvis, Coriolanus's affinity with the model of the tragic hero articulated in *Poetics* puts him in line with other "noble-minded yet imprudent heroes such as Oedipus, Creon, Prometheus, or Hippolytus" – and yet his death, lacking Aristotelian self-knowledge, falls short of their example.⁹⁵ Within these two extremes is my own view that the tragic impetus in *Coriolanus* is displaced, from his physical death to the more psychological one that proceeds it: that is, the instant in which he acknowledges – arguably for the first time in the play – his own tenuous humanity. Crucially, however, the tragedy of the moment is produced, not by the nature of the realization itself, but by the circumstances surrounding it.

Burton Hatlen argues in favor of such an interpretation of the play's tragic locus, in which "Coriolanus' tragedy proceeds from the fact that he becomes completely isolated without becoming self-sufficient."⁹⁶ I would rephrase this somewhat: Coriolanus becomes completely isolated *without realizing that complete self-sufficiency is not possible*, and tragedy proceeds from the moment when he finally acknowledges his inevitable participation in human society. Again, Aristotle is instructive: in conformity with the theory of tragedy articulated in his *Poetics*, this moment of realization and self-recognition comes too late for the protagonist, who is unable to reverse his course and reintegrate into the community he had banished. It is this Aristotelian anagnorisis – self-knowledge achieved *too late* – that destroys him, as it destroyed Oedipus and Othello before him. (In fact, Coriolanus's de facto mantra "say I play the man I am" [III.2.17] recalls Othello's plea in the aftermath of his own tragic anagnorisis: "speak of me as I am."⁹⁷)

⁹⁵ Alvis, "Coriolanus," 12.

⁹⁶ Hatlen, "The 'Noble Thing,'" 15.

⁹⁷ William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. Michael Neill, *Oxford World's Classics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), V.2.358.

Still, the simple recognition that participation in political society is inevitable does not *in itself* incite tragedy. The tragedy that inevitably follows anagnorisis arises from the fact that things have come to this juncture; the hero's recognition of the true nature of events is denied until it is too late to reverse course.

Having banished his homeland, enlisted and then betrayed his enemies, and disowned his own name along with his very humanity, Coriolanus cannot reintegrate into political society, Volscian or Roman. To return to Menenius's parable of the body politic, "The service of the foot, / Being once gangrened, is not then respected / For what before it was" (III.1.311-13). A diseased and amputated limb cannot then be reattached, for the health of the whole body, and without the body's nourishment the excised limb perishes. Despite his recognition and apparent acceptance of the impossibility of godlike self-sufficiency, Coriolanus cannot reclaim the identity he once denied. By way of his mother's intervention, he has failed to forge himself a new name from the fires of burning Rome; as a result, he is left without a name, without a home, ironically successful in his desire to become "a kind of nothing" (V.1.14). For all his extraordinary individual capacity, Coriolanus – like all human beings – must wither and die in isolation, a limb cut off from the nourishment of the body politic: family, society, nation. His physical death swiftly and inevitably follows his existential one.

Unlike Oedipus or Othello, it is the *circumstances* of Coriolanus's anagnorisis that *alone* engender tragedy, not the nature of the recognition (i.e. being human) in itself. The chief premise of Aristotle's *Politics* is the claim that humans are social creatures, who naturally form communities of kinship for the dual purpose of surviving and achieving happiness. At the heart of man's political nature is language, for "man is the only animal whom she [Nature] has

endowed with the gift of speech.”⁹⁸ Our capacity for language has moreover endowed us with the ability to express the moral dialectic so dear to Aristotle, “and it is a characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust, and the like, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state.”⁹⁹ Hatlen and Cavell, among others, have discussed the use – or rather avoidance – of expressive language in *Coriolanus*, to the effect that Coriolanus’s simple refusal or inability to communicate at any length with the outside world – for Plutarch, “altogether unfit for any man’s conversation” – may be blamed for his existential discomfort with political society.¹⁰⁰ Those characteristics of social life that Coriolanus rejects, however, are not in themselves adverse. The human capacity for complex thought and expression has given rise not only to families and states, but also to the entire canon of artistic and literary production stretching back millennia, with Shakespeare and Aristotle often listed among its key representatives. It is by no means tragic that a human life conducted in silence (that is, without any form of expression) is considered unfulfilling.

Coriolanus would see our inability to be completely self-sufficient as a limitation or failing of our species; in truth, if Aristotle is to be believed, political society may be the very source and basis for human happiness, as well as the only viable form of human self-sufficiency. As Gabriel Richardson Lear explains, “in addition to being the most final end of action, Aristotle claims that the human good, *eudaimonia*, is self-sufficient (*autarkes*; 1097b20), where this means that happiness is sufficient of itself to make a life desirable and lacking nothing (NE1097b14–16).”¹⁰¹ This represents an inversion of Coriolanus’s understanding of self-

⁹⁸ *Pol.* I.2.1253a10-11.

⁹⁹ *Pol.* I.2.1253a16-18.

¹⁰⁰ North, “The Life of Caius Martius,” 236.

¹⁰¹ Gabriel Richardson Lear, “The Self-Sufficiency of Happiness,” in *Happy Lives and the Highest Good: An Essay on Aristotle’s “Nicomachean Ethics”* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 47.

sufficiency, in which separating oneself from society and leading a life that lacks nothing should lead to happiness. By contrast, Aristotle offers political society as the cause, or method, and self-sufficient happiness as the effect: “When several villages are united in a single complete community, large enough to be *nearly or quite self-sufficing*, the state comes into existence, originating in the bare needs of life, and continuing in existence for the sake of a good life.”¹⁰² Aristotle’s theory of the *polis* is, admittedly, idealized; nevertheless, it is indeed through this progressive accumulation of reciprocal relationships that all or nearly all human communities are formed – communities that not only provide for the basic needs of life, but also contribute to the happiness of the collective, as individuals and as a whole, and may even achieve communal autarky, economic and/or existential.

Coriolanus demonstrates the fundamental dependence of human beings in the negative, asserting the political nature of man through the failure of the alternative – separatism, isolation, individual self-sufficiency. No man or woman is born with the capacity to survive without any form of dependence; if we succeed in independently feeding, sheltering, and otherwise maintaining our physical bodies, our incorporeal selves starve if denied the opportunity to socialize, build relationships, express, empathize, quarrel, love, and otherwise nourish our complex internal selves – what, for Aristotle, made humans “more of a political animal than bees or any other gregarious animals.”¹⁰³ Accordingly, forced isolation in the form of solitary confinement must be considered an inhumane punishment, as it denies one half of human existence, and the ability to socialize and similarly express ourselves becomes a universal human right, on par with the right to food and water.

¹⁰² *Pol.* I.2.1252b27-29, my emphasis.

¹⁰³ *Pol.* I.2.1253a8-9.

Still, the implications of the *Tragedy of Coriolanus*, unlike those of Oedipus or Macbeth, are hopeful. Coriolanus is an outlier in his staunch denial of human nature; most individuals are able to acknowledge and accept their necessary participation in a larger society without becoming entirely isolated from that society. The negative proof that the play offers for man's political nature can, and must, be turned on its head: there are few things as positive in the human experience as spending time with a friend with whom you share a common spirit, or feeling at home in the midst of your family, or reuniting with someone you love after a long period of separation. It is a tragedy that Coriolanus was denied these most human experiences in his pursuit to become independent, and by that token nonhuman. But the tragedy of Coriolanus is wholly avoidable, if only we acknowledge that we cannot survive, and moreover do not wish to be, alone.

Alvis's assessment that Coriolanus "leaves to the audience the experience of *anagnorisis* which should have been his" incidentally discerns a consequence of the play's tragic construction.¹⁰⁴ To borrow once again from Aristotle's *Poetics*, the play may offer some form of catharsis for the reader. *Coriolanus* certainly succeeds in arousing the feelings of "pity and fear" prescribed by Aristotle for the audience of a tragedy, and may also succeed in providing the purgation or clarification precipitated by the vicarious experience of glory, exile, isolation, and death, displaced onto a theatrical body.¹⁰⁵ The play's depiction of the factionalism and class conflict of early republican Rome may well have provided an outlet for Jacobean audiences caught between a burgeoning parliamentary republicanism and James I's absolute monarchy. It seems almost inevitable that the Londoners who attended the first performances of *Coriolanus*

¹⁰⁴ Alvis, "Coriolanus," 16.

¹⁰⁵ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Anthony Kenny, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), I.6.1449b26.

would have seen themselves in the plebeian rioters, dressed as Jacobean laborers, who stormed the stage to demand the redistribution of hoarded grain. In line with one interpretation of catharsis, Coriolanus may be seen as offering a moral lesson, along the lines of ‘do not attempt to exceed the common;’ it is a sad but perhaps unsurprising fact that *Coriolanus* has frequently been appropriated by anti-democratic political movements, from Stuart absolutism to the cultural propaganda of the Third Reich.¹⁰⁶ It is my view that reading straightforward morals in any of Shakespeare’s plays is a mistake. For me, and I suspect for many modern readers, the experience of reading or watching *Coriolanus* is an emotional rather than moral purgation. The extremes of inhumanity and isolation to which Coriolanus goes – not “alone, / Like to a lonely dragon [to] his fen,” but rather well-accompanied – provides the catharsis of having travelled to the ends of human capacity and, unlike the protagonist, returned intact to the society established for us by Nature (IV.1.29-30).

¹⁰⁶ Michael Dobson, “An Introduction to Coriolanus,” *Discovering Literature: Shakespeare and the Renaissance*, British Library, last modified 15 March, 2016, <https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/an-introduction-to-coriolanus>.

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