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**Editor:** Saikat Banerjee

Department of English

Dr. K.N. Modi University, Newai, Rajasthan, India.



## **Ironical Subversion in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus***

**Monali Chatterjee**

Assistant Professor  
NirmaUniversity, Ahmedabad

**Abstract:** Shakespeare's final tragedy *Coriolanus* depicts a quaint blend of the Greek tragedy and a vigorous projection of the manipulation of power. However, unlike other Greek tragedies and Shakespeare's plays, this tragedy offers a series of antitheses. Like a seasoned craftsman, Shakespeare dexterously works his way through a series of powerful contrasts and an array of ironical subversions. Like in a Greek tragedy, the hero scales the heights of extraordinary achievements but is faced with a sudden and brutal reversal of fate. Secondly, the paper attempts to scrutinize why Coriolanus despite being a hero is despised and deserted by a fickle populace. Thirdly, the ironical subversion of Coriolanus as a villain becomes prominent when his arrogance threatens dictatorship. An interesting instance of a more phenomenal subversion can be detected through Volumnia's conflict as a mother and as a responsible citizen of Rome. The bipolarity that exists between democracy and dictatorship has also been questioned by this ironical subversion throughout the play. The sound interplay of the text and its sources, nation or society and identity, estrangement and belonging, displacement and relocation, reverence and hatred, compliance and rebellion make the plot a more plausible story revealed through a well-contrived structure of intricate conspiracies piling up to the end. Moreover, the conspicuous contrast between appearance and reality endeavour to make the play a highly multi-layered but controversial text. The long train of interconnected events and multiple conflicts offer a fertile grounds for discussion and analyses. An attempt has been made through this paper to explore some of the various interpretations of this lesser discussed text in the context of its relevance in the present day.

**Keywords:** Tragedy, Roman play, Traitor, Mother, political mutiny, famine.



Written around 1608, *Coriolanus* is the last in the cycle of Shakespeare's Roman plays and historical tragedies. Shakespeare's creative Muse finds greatest expression in placing a war hero on the anvil of criticism and offering a disillusioned perspective of the same which is without much cynicism or despair. The play was written for an audience which constituted of people who were predominantly associated with the profession of law. As a result, *Coriolanus* might have been borrowed "Life of Caius Marcius Coriolanus" from *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* by Plutarch, the diplomat and popular biographer and translated by Sir Thomas North into English in 1575. (Dickson 45) However, other scholars have observed parallels between the plot of the play and the political intricacies in England during Shakespeare's times. The political subversion of early 17<sup>th</sup> century London, civil militancy and a continual conflict between King James and the Parliament find echoes in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* as the depiction of the struggle between the patricians and the plebeians. The political conflict of the play has offered a large scope of controversy. The play is set in the early years of Rome when it was struggling to achieve its identity of an important city, long before Rome acquired the eminence of a prosperous and powerful empire.

Even the form of the play has been subverted. Mangan points out:

The world of Rome is also a central character in *Coriolanus* seemingly a return to individual centred tragedy, it turns out to be something very different. Marcus Caius Coriolanus thinks of himself as an autonomous individual – the man of action standing alone with his integrity against the mealy mouthed and often corrupt voices of Roman politics. What he cannot see is the extent to which he identifies with and is identified with the very group he despises. There are many varieties of 'Roman-ness' in the play, and Coriolanus's ideal of Rome (which is selective false and 'noble' in a rigidly militaristic and authoritarian way) is so bound up with his own sense of himself that he is unable to tolerate the gap between his ideals and the chaotic reality of a Rome in which a bad harvest means rioting on the streets as the poor demand



food. Shakespeare's vision in *Coriolanus* focuses on an individual but only to affirm that the tragedy is that of a society. (Mangan 213-214)

The play has attracted limited popularity and critical attention due to the fact that much of the action has been propelled by the incidents without much focus on the intricacies of the characters. Hence, the reader or the audience can relate or identify with the characters, especially, tragic hero Coriolanus only on fewer occasions unlike the characters in Shakespeare's other powerful plays like *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *Tempest*. This makes *Coriolanus* seem more like a modern play.

According to Daiches, Coriolanus

meets his death the same boyish, bewildered, instinctive character he is at the beginning, and it is through this immaturity, almost in a sense, this innocence, that Shakespeare preserves throughout the play sufficient sympathy for him to enable his fall to be seen as tragic at all. Coriolanus is thus one of the most limited in scope of Shakespeare's mature plays. (Daiches 295-296)

The subversion can be seen here as the desired effect of sympathy towards a tragic hero is not evoked in the audience.

When the story opens, the plebeians of Rome are found to be complaining among themselves about the famine and the consequent dearth of corn that is given to them by the patricians who are the ruling class of aristocracy. The story also depicts in the backdrop, the historical event describing the aftermath following Tarquin's collapse (of whom there are several references in the text), the last ruler of Rome. However, the lack of food distracts the attention of the plebeians from the concerns of such political unrest and turbulence. This is perhaps the first instance of subversion that can be perceived in the play.

Subversion, here, may refer to the undermining of the power and authority of an established system or institution. However, if these instances of subversion are ironical in



nature its meaning may be extended to speculate upon instances that transpire to be a contrast of what is intended or expected. The examples cited duly above illustrate the same.

The aftermath of the famine provokes the common people to demand the right to decide their own prices for the city's grain supply. They suspect that the patricians have been hoarding all the grain. In order to pacify the "mutinous members" (Shakespeare 626). of the spirited crowd, the governing nobility, or patricians, offer the plebeians five representatives, or tribunes to be voices to their demands. However, Caius Marcius, an arrogant patrician soldier, despises lower classes (but not the proletariats)--and overtly expresses his contempt for them by calling them "dissentious rogues"(Shakespeare 627). This is yet another instance of subversion and the source of the conflict for the rest of the play. Coriolanus' excellence at warfare does not always translate into the nobility of his character.

Sicinius Velutus and Junius Brutus are the elected Tribunes to represent the commoners. Unlike Caius Marcius, they are not soldiers but wage their verbal battle against him. With their snide remarks against Caius Marcius, they conspire to rouse the fury of both the plebeians and Caius Marcius against each other. The two tribunes continually perceive Caius Marcius as their threat to their own political success and hence try to defeat the celebrated Roman general in other ways.

Since the beginning of the play the two Tribunes plot against Coriolanus with their strident, calculated words and moves. They despise him for his pride and for his scorn for the commoners. They suggest that he would seize all the glory from Cominius if the Romans defeat the Volsces. The ironical subversion becomes more prominent in the episode that follows. Caius Marcius returns triumphant almost single handed at Corioli against the Volscian army. The Roman senate honours him with the surname Coriolanus and he is promised the consulship if he will only humble himself to beg the citizen's voices in his support. He does this reluctantly, making his distaste quite obvious and Sicinius and Brutus seize the opportunity to turn the people against him. They persuade the other tribunes that if





they usher Coriolanus to the political arena by electing him Consul, he will get the other Tribunes eradicated.

After Coriolanus asks for the people's votes, the Tribunes use their war of words to incite the people against him, suggesting that he has only mocked at them while begging for their voices (or votes). The ensuing squabble in the marketplace causes the citizens to accuse Coriolanus of being a traitor and flies into a rage. This sabotages his opportunity to become the Consul and he subverts the expectations of the members of the Senate by undermining the honour. Despite his valour at warfare, Caius Marcius Coriolanus, the Roman general is too naïve to understand the Tribunes' political intrigues and loses his consul's office in Rome.

During warfare, the opponents combat one another. Though the fight maybe gruesome, but it is fair. In a political wars, Caius Marcius Coriolanus is not used to encountering dishonourable manipulative words, back-stabbing, treachery and deception. He is defenceless against them. Within only a few moments the political situation is subverted: instead of feeling inspired by his success, Sicinius and Brutus envy him and manipulate his flaws as a weapon to get him banished.

The subversions reach the climax when being rejected by Rome Coriolanus goes to Antium, where the Volscian forces are regrouping, and asks Aufidius, their commander and his chief rival to accept him as his ally or kill him. Aufidius offers him command of the Volscian army and Coriolanus agrees to lead them against Rome. The subversion takes place when Coriolanus becomes as successful and popular as their general that it rouses Aufidius' envy and he begins to contrive ways to accuse him of treachery.

The Volscians lay siege to Rome, and Coriolanus' friends plead with him to spare the city, but he ignores them. Coriolanus' mother, Volumnia, his wife, Virgilia and son Marcus make a second appeal: Virgilia's tearful appeal balanced by Volumnia's reminder to her son of his aristocratic duty finally dampen Coriolanus' determination to attack and take over the city.



The ultimate form of the ironical subversion which is also a dominant theme of the play is “the nature of the upbringing which caused this ice to form in Coriolanus’ soul” (Macleish and Unwin 33).

Volumnia had brought up her son in such a way that she “was pleased to let him seek danger where he was like to find fame” (Act 1, Scene 3). Instead of protecting her son Volumnia leads her son to destruction by pleading with him to not attack Rome. This is the ultimate instance of subversion in the play. Coriolanus knew that this would bring about his death.

Coriolanus:

O Mother, Mother!

What have you done? Behold, the Heavens do open,

The Gods look downe, and this unnatural Scene

They laugh at. Oh my Mother, Mother: Oh!

You have wonne a happy Victory to Rome.

But for your Sonne, believe it: Oh believe it,

Most dangerously you have with him prevailed,

If not most mortall to him. But let it come:

*Aufidius*, though I cannot make true Warres,

Ile frame convenient peace. Now good *Aufidius*,

Were you in my stead, would you have heard

A Mother lesse? or granted lesse *Aufidius*? (*Coriolanus* 1.3)

The ironical subversion is clear here:

Ideally a mother guards her child with her life but here she guards her city against the wrath of her son—thus bringing about doom upon himself.

As a result of his family’s entreaties Coriolanus signs a peace treaty and returns with his Volscian soldiers to Antium. Instead of a happy reunion with Aufidius the final subversion happens next. Aufidius accuses him of treachery, the two men quarrel and



Aufidius' men murder Coriolanus. Only now, with Coriolanus dead at his feet, does Aufidius (ironical or otherwise).

Even in terms of language, “Shakespeare characteristically combines, on one side, an earthy prose and a healthy contempt for authority, with, on the other side, a supple verse and a weighty invocation of authority” (Bate 98).

The parallels between individual and their society are clear. Coriolanus' inner disintegration of himself can be compared to the tumultuous society he belongs to. This further accentuates the subversion of the tragedy. Shakespeare had replicated this subversion from the ancient documented histories available in his day and the England of his time. Innes aptly points out that “*Coriolanus* is set at the beginning of Roman history when the structures of the Republic were being worked out, usually violently” (Innes 22). He observes that plays like *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Titus Andronicus* and *Coriolanus* “deal with the tumultuous events that see massive changes taking place in the state. They are concerned with the beginnings of Rome, the shift from Republic to Empire and then the disintegration of that Empire. Britain was itself on the way to becoming a major empire at the time Shakespeare was writing” (Idem.). Hence *Coriolanus* as a play greatly excited the imagination of the theatre going public in London since it depicted the history of what was until then the greatest empire known to western history.

Thus the play depicts an inspiring story of Coriolanus who represents the leader who never had to compromise, never had to consider the existence of political arts. He gets what he wants because of who he is—and when this fails to work as well in peacetime as on the battlefield, when instead of enemies to kill he has opponents to convince, his self-esteem collapses and his tragic fall begins. Coriolanus is a personal tragedy, a story of a military genius with no other talents destroyed by his inability to compromise. As in so many plays as in the lives of so many rulers, Shakespeare's point is that rank is nothing in itself without attention to its moral and human obligations.





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