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The Hero Who Wouldn't Be: Coriolanus and the Scene of Tragic Paradox

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Coriolanus is the most paradoxical of Shakespearean tragic heroes. Unsurpassed in valor and indispensable to Rome's military supremacy, he returns home after each conquest a garlanded hero praised by patrician and plebeian alike. During these moments of public triumph, Coriolanus's occupation of the coveted center appears all but guaranteed. Yet paradoxically it is precisely these moments of ceremonial fanfare and public recognition that Coriolanus cannot tolerate. To his patrician friends who seek to honor him, he can barely maintain his civility. And to the plebeians upon whom he depends for his election to the consulship he expresses unmitigated resentment. Ultimately his stubborn refusal to cooperate in even the simplest acts of ceremony brings about, not his triumph, but his ignominious downfall; he is spun abruptly from the public center and exiled from Rome altogether.

In refusing to accept the centralizing gesture of his fellows, Coriolanus seeks to reject the linguistic sign upon which all representation depends. It is the resentfulness of this gesture that Shakespeare's play focuses on. In denying to others the possibility that his actions should be linguistically represented, Coriolanus articulates, however negatively, the paradox of the originary sign. The sign makes possible the perception of the central object as desirable. But this very perception is at once also a dispossession; to desire the object is not to possess it. The individual's response to this experience of dispossession is resentment.

Coriolanus is sacrificed for this act of resentment. By taunting the plebes in the scene of his own centralization, he paradoxically invites his expulsion from the adulated center to the ignominious periphery. In this gesture, one senses a romantic desire to be free of the center altogether in order to find the peace of the solitary wanderer far from the demands of the public realm. But in tragedy this private desire never achieves the romantic resolution in which the individual triumphs over the tyranny of society. On the contrary, in tragedy the protagonist is overwhelmed by the limitations imposed by the social order. Despite his yearning to transcend these limitations, Coriolanus is ultimately unable to conceive his relationship to Rome other than in the traditional military terms that constitute his entire being. In the final act of the play, he returns to Rome to seek his revenge. Leading an army of Rome's mortal enemies, the Volscians, he encircles and prepares to vanquish the city that had once turned its back on him. Only the pleas of his mother finally save Rome from its otherwise assured destruction. But in listening to his mother, Coriolanus ensures his own destruction at the hands of Aufidius and his henchmen; he is accused of betraying the Volscian interest and murdered. Exiled by Rome and murdered by the Volscians, Coriolanus emerges as the victim of both public centers.

Because resentment is always directed at the center from the periphery, its thematization as a defining condition of the protagonist demonstrates an awareness that centrality is not given but depends rather on the surrounding periphery. To experience resentment, the protagonist must be aware of his peripherality with respect to the center. It is the thematization of this awareness that separates neoclassical drama from its classical precursors. Whereas the classical protagonist's centrality is assured merely by virtue of his appearing on stage, the neoclassical protagonist is conscious that his centrality, far from being self-evident, is mediated by the periphery from which he himself emerges. But this formal consideration is in fact a mirror image of Coriolanus's specific predicament. He resents the fact that his heroism, far from being self-evident, must instead be represented. Hence his stubborn but ultimately futile refusal to participate in all scenes that seek to represent this heroism. Shakespeare's genius is to turn the protagonist's resentful gesture of refusal into the formal fulfillment of the tragedy itself. Coriolanus is a hero who is in effect sacrificed for refusing to be represented as a hero. This is a very ironic vision of tragedy, and not surprisingly Coriolanus comes late in Shakespeare's oeuvre. In critiquing tragedy so thoroughly, Shakespeare exhausted its possibilities. At the end of his career, he was to turn to the romantic optimism of the late romances.

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Election to the Center

That Coriolanus deserves public recognition is not to be questioned. Cominius's long speech to the Senate in II, ii represents Coriolanus's worthiness to be elected to the consulship:

I shall lack voice: the deeds of Coriolanus
Should not be uttered feebly. It is held
That valor is the chiefest virtue and
Most dignifies the haver. If it be,
the man I speak of cannot in the world
Be singly counterpoised. At sixteen years,
When Tarquin made a head for Rome, he fought
Beyond the mark of others. Our then dictator,
Whom with all praise I point at, saw him fight,
When with his Amazonian chin he drove
The bristled lips before him. He bestrid
An o'erpressed Roman, and i' th' consul's view
Slew three opposers; Tarquin's self he met,
And struck him on his knee. In that day's feats,
When he might act the woman in the scene,
He proved best man i' th' field, and for his meed
Was brow-bound with the oak. His pupil age
Man-entered thus, he waxèd like a sea;
And, in the brunt of seventeen battles since,
He lurched all swords of the garland. For this last,
Before and in Corioles, let me say,
I cannot speak him home. He stopped the fliers,
And by his rare example made the coward
Turn terror into sport; as weeds before
A vessel under sail, so men objected
And fell below his stem. 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. Alone he ent'red
the mortal gate of th' city, which he painted
With shunless destiny; aidless came off,
And with a sudden reinforcement struck
Corioles like a planet. Now, all's his,
When by and by the din of war 'gan pierce
His ready sense, then straight his double spirit
Requick'ned what in flesh was fatigate,
And to the battle came he; where he did
Run reeking o'er the lives of men, as if

'Twere a perpetual spoil; and till we called
Both field and city ours, he never stood
To ease his breast with panting.
(2.2.82-122) ()**(1)**

This speech, which is the second longest in the play, reconstructs not only the events of the recent battle with the Volscians but the whole of Coriolanus's illustrious career as the "best" among Rome's fighters. Its function is to legitimate Coriolanus's "election" to the center, figured in the vacancy of the position of the consulship. Like an epic poet, Cominius is doing no more than represent to his audience the preeminent centrality of his protagonist.

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And his audience is more than ready to accept his endorsement. At this moment in the play, Coriolanus is the darling of Rome. Even the plebes, whom he despises and never ceases to antagonize, forget their feud with him and applaud him alongside his patrician friends. The tribune Brutus, who has good reasons for being less thrilled with Coriolanus's popularity than Cominius, offers this bitter commentary on Coriolanus's unthwarted accession to centrality:

All tongues speak of him, and the blearèd sights
Are spectacled to see him. Your prattling nurse
Into a rapture lets her baby cry
While she chats him; the kitchen malkin pins
Her richest lockram 'bout her reechy neck,
Clamb'ring the walls to eye him. Stalls, bulks, windows,
Are smothered up, leads filled and ridges horsed
With variable complexions, all agreeing
In earnestness to see him. Seld-shown flamens
Do press among the popular throngs, and puff
To win a vulgar station. Our veiled dames
Commit the war of white and damask in
Their nicely gawded cheeks to th' wanton spoil
Of Phoebus' burning kisses. Such a pother,
As if that whatsoever god who leads him
Were slyly crept into his human powers,
And gave him graceful posture.
(2.1.208-224)

In contrast to Cominius's straightforward encomium, Brutus's far more self-conscious remarks serve as a metacommentary on the scene of Coriolanus's representation. Where Cominius seeks merely to justify Coriolanus's centrality, Brutus thematizes the resentful position of the observer himself with respect to the central figure. From the point of view of the periphery the central figure is dependent upon the adoring spectators who surround him, a dependence that Brutus and his fellow tribune Sicinius will exploit to the utmost in order to plot Coriolanus's downfall. As Brutus observes, for a brief moment Coriolanus is like a god. All eyes are turned to catch a glimpse of this larger-than-life figure who has committed such heroic deeds; his every move appears touched by the grace of divinity. But because Coriolanus's centrality is dependent upon a fickle audience for whom the central figure holds only a momentary fascination, this dependence can be exploited. The final wry remark about the "whatsoever god who leads him" merely enforces this anthropological dependence. Coriolanus is enjoying the locus traditionally reserved for the gods. But it is his human powers and the human observers on the periphery that the politically astute Brutus is more concerned about. The god himself is relegated to mere "as if" status — that is to say, to a fiction. Whether the gods exist or not is irrelevant from Brutus's resolutely political viewpoint.

Despite Cominius's high praise for Coriolanus, Brutus's more self-conscious commentary suggests that Coriolanus's centrality is far from secure. For the truth is that military valor is appreciated only in times of war. In peacetime, the value of the military career is less apparent. The high point of Coriolanus's career come in those scenes immediately following the victory at Corioles. Named after the city he has vanquished, his fame and deeds are immortalized. Cominius's speech to the patricians is the crowning moment of his glory. But Rome is not forever at war. It is during peace that Coriolanus's tragedy emerges.

The deferral of violence is a peacetime occupation. When war breaks out, it is because nonviolent methods for deferring violence have proved unsuccessful. War is thus the supreme enactment of mimetic violence. In war, blow is exchanged for blow until one of the combatants falls. As a man of war, Coriolanus understands this most primitive form of mimesis. In fact he understands it all too well. Even in peace, he can focus on nothing but the violent mimetic center generated by the field of combat. The internal political problems of Rome — notably, the unrest among the plebes who have accused the patricians of withholding corn despite the latter's argument that it is in fact famine, not self-interest, that is responsible for the dearth — are mere irritations that Coriolanus regards as a distraction from the main business of fighting. If he could have his way he would deal with the plebeians in a far less compromising fashion:

> Would the nobility lay aside their ruth [compassion],
> And let me use my sword, I'd make a quarry
> With thousands of these quartered slaves, as high
> As I could pick my lance.
> (1.1.199-202)

We should not dismiss this threat as mere bravado. Coriolanus generally makes a point of standing by his word. The plebes and their political representatives, the tribunes Brutus and Sicinius, have every reason to fear Coriolanus. The possibility that he may become a real political force and be elected to the consulship is not something they cherish.

4

Not surprisingly, the sudden news in I, i that the Volscians have armed to attack Rome brings joy to the restless Coriolanus because he is now provided with an opportunity to shed what he calls the "musty superfluity" of peace (1.1.228). Shakespeare leaves us in no doubt about the underlying mimetic nature of the conflict with the Volscians. Coriolanus's desire to fight is mediated by his mimetic double, the Volscian leader Tullus Aufidius:

> Coriolanus:
> They have a leader,
> Tullus Aufidius, that will put you to't.
> I sin in envying his nobility;
> And were I anything but what I am,
> I would wish me only he.
>
> Cominius:
> You have fought together.
>
> Coriolanus:
> Were half to half the world by th' ears, and he
> Upon my party, I'd revolt, to make
> Only my wars with him. He is a lion
> That I am proud to hunt.
> (1.1. 230-38)

Again, Coriolanus is not exaggerating or bragging in these comments to his commanding officer. We must take seriously his monomaniacal obsession with Aufidius. The latter functions as a classic Girardian mimetic double. Aufidius is the only man capable of matching Coriolanus in battle. Therefore, all other things being equal, in a match that placed Coriolanus and Aufidius on the same side, Coriolanus would still rather fight against Aufidius than with him. Coriolanus's remarks to Cominius reveal his dependence upon Aufidius. Like Coriolanus, Aufidius makes his name by fighting. Aufidius is thus a mirror image of Coriolanus — both are professional fighters. But, more importantly, Aufidius mediates Coriolanus's desire by providing him with a concrete model to emulate. Aufidius's presence on the scene allows Coriolanus to generate a sense of self and, ultimately, a sense of value. The more times Coriolanus can vanquish Aufidius, the higher Coriolanus's stock will rise in the marketplace of military valor. According to Aufidius, Coriolanus has beaten him on twelve separate occasions (4.5.126).

We cannot, however, accuse Coriolanus of boasting. Coriolanus is in fact incapable of boasting. More than any other Shakespearean hero, Coriolanus is bound to his words by a kind of grim literality. The worst name he can think to call Aufidius when he encounters him on the battlefield is a "promise-breaker" (1.8.2). The same sentiment lies behind his extreme hatred for the Roman mob which he calls the "many-headed multitude" because it is incapable of sincerity, that is, of keeping its word. What Coriolanus despises is the mob's lack of individuality. Because sincerity requires a commitment to individual identity, the disappearance of this identity within the collective mob is by definition an act of insincerity.

Originary Sincerity

The basis of Coriolanus's obsessive attachment to sincerity lies in his refusal to accept the self's dependence on the public scene made possible by the origin of the sign. Without the sign the self is powerless because it cannot represent itself. But the return to the sign by the self is at once also a devaluation of the self because the very existence of the sign precludes the possibility of the self's monadic existence. Paradoxically, the "privacy" of the self is inseparable from the "publicity" of the center.

The concept of sincerity, so indispensable to modern discussions of language-use, is inseparable from the originary conception of the self. The self is constituted by the fundamentally paradoxical operation of attraction for and repulsion from the center. ()**(2)** In the first moment of attraction the self imagines itself at the center of the significance it desires. But in the second moment the self is thrust rudely from this imagined centrality and reminded of its own real peripherality with respect to the center. For the "reality" of the center is inaccessible; ultimately its existence is wholly internal to the scene of representation which, like God, is nowhere and everywhere at once. But the self cannot tolerate the inaccessibility of the center. In a defining gesture of resentment it imagines itself free of all paradox, the inheritor of ultimate freedom and transcendence.

5

The foregoing remarks provide us with a preliminary understanding of the originary paradox that underpins modern (Cartesian) conceptions of the "sincere" speaker. In the originary context, the condition of sincerity demands that the self fulfill its desire to become the sole occupant of the center. To be sincere is to enjoy unmediated access to the center, to forego the intervening obstacle of the public sign which serves merely to thwart the desires of the private self. But to forego the obstacle of the sign is, in the originary context, to forego the deferral of violence and return to the reciprocal violence of the mimetic crisis. In order to fulfill "sincerely" the desires of the self, it is necessary to forego language altogether. But the sign only emerges in the context of the deferral of mimetic conflict. To accept the sign is to defer, even if only for a moment, the reality of the object for its imaginary equivalent, the "being" conferred on the object by the sign. This being has two poles. On the one hand, the passage from the sign to the object sacralizes the object which is subsequently conceived to possess an independent and transcendent being or reality. But, on the other, being is in fact dependent upon the object's prior mediation by the sign. From the latter more minimal perspective, being is a mere signified possessed only in the individual's internal imagination.

Here we encounter the crux of originary sincerity. The sign — in order to be a sign — can only be conceived when it is accepted as formally independent of its referent. This separation is essentially unstable because it is fundamentally paradoxical. On the one hand, the criterion of sincerity demands that the sign be conceived as identical with its referent, that the self be identical with the central locus of its desire. But the sign is founded on the deferral of its referent. And so is the self. Because deferral is intrinsic to all language use, so is the possibility of insincerity. In the final analysis, it is always impossible to decide at the time of the utterance if the speaker is sincere or insincere. The uncompromising verticality of the sign prohibits the total reduction of this verticality to the horizontal indifferentation of the mimetic crisis. In the latter realm, unmediated by the verticality of the sign, subject and object merge into one. To collapse the sign into the referent in the name of sincerity is to invite the tragedy of indifferentation that is the mimetic crisis. For Coriolanus, language is anathema because it defers the conflict to which he is nonetheless mimetically drawn.

No doubt this mimeticism creates problems for an exclusively psychological or ontogenetic analysis of the play. For the latter in fact seeks to base its entire account on an unjustified commitment to the ontology of the self. But the self is coeval with the collective scene of mimetic interaction, apart from which its origin cannot be properly understood. By the same token, comedy and tragedy, if they are indeed to be regarded as fundamental categories of human experience, must be referred to their minimal origin in the scene of representation.

The pertinence of these theoretical remarks can be borne out by contrasting Coriolanus's tragic sincerity with Falstaff's comic bragging. In contrast to the latter, Coriolanus's fate is tragic precisely because he is unable to separate his private intentions from his public persona. What distinguishes the sincere tragic hero from the braggart of comedy is the fact that the language of the former is ultimately bound to the uncompromising truth of the mimetic center. His fateful trajectory reflects the tragic path of all mimetic desire; the hero unavoidably clashes with the rival desires of others. Their violent convergence on the center marks the moment when he is killed or expelled from the community which cannot otherwise safely contain his overreaching or uncontainable desire. No doubt the hero may try to defer his contact with the center for as long as possible — as Hamlet in fact seeks to do — but his tragedy is always that ultimately violence will prevail. In contrast, in the case of comedy we cannot accept the comic figure's language as truly sincere or serious because we cannot accept his legitimacy at the center. Falstaff is a braggart because he is incapable of the noble actions that alone would legitimate his usurpation of the center. As all tragedy makes clear, the price of true nobility is the disaster that overpowers the protagonist.

From the tragic viewpoint, the freedom inherent in the use of the sign is circumscribed by the unfreedom inherent to nonlinguistic mimesis. The idea of "tragic irony" comes from the sense that even the best laid plans are not free of the fate of mimetic conflict. The brilliance of Sophocles' Oedipus lies in the fullness of its articulation of this irony. Oedipus is an acute interpreter of the sign who strives to take maximal advantage of its inherent freedom. He consults and then acts on the words of the oracle by leaving Corinth to avoid the truth of its prophecy. In Thebes, he relieves the city from its subjugation by the Sphinx by successfully interpreting the words of the riddle. When Thebes is again struck with a crisis, he vows to act on the words of the oracle, pursuing its enigmatic instructions with all the vigor of a modern-day detective. But

the central irony of the play is that the freedom he gains from his use of language in fact only draws him closer to the violence that he strives to avoid. In seeking to leave his home, he in fact arrives at it. In seeking to avoid the crimes of patricide and incest, he in fact fulfills them. In seeking to save Thebes from the crisis, he in fact damns it.

Shakespeare takes this dialectic one step further. Whereas Oedipus is wholly unaware of his mimetic relationship to the scenic center, Coriolanus is obsessed with emulating the violence of the center. In the figure of Coriolanus, Shakespeare presents us with a hero fully transparent to the unfreedom of mimetic conflict. It is this transparency that makes Coriolanus's character so difficult to comprehend. Coriolanus's perverse refusal to participate in any scene in which his significance must be designated beforehand borders on the ridiculous. Such eccentric behavior seems more appropriate to the comic figure than to the tragic hero (one thinks of Moliere's misanthrope). No doubt this is the intuition behind Bernard Shaw's remark that Coriolanus is Shakespeare's "finest comedy." The source of this intuition, which must otherwise present a stumbling block to critics who seek to motivate their explanation for Coriolanus's aberrance by appealing to his perverse character, lies in the underlying anthropological structure of tragedy. Coriolanus — rather ostentatiously I think — becomes for Shakespeare a vehicle for undermining the sacrificial assumptions of tragedy itself. These assumptions have to do with the mimetic conflict at the heart of all tragedy. Coriolanus is mimetic to the point of divorcing himself from all forms of (linguistic) mediation. In Coriolanus we have an attempt to reduce tragedy to its most minimal ingredients: the scene of the originary mimetic crisis. The terseness and reticence of Coriolanus's language indicate a suspicion of all action that is linguistically mediated. Coriolanus cannot stand being represented other than in the actual arena of the battlefield which he erroneously assumes to be free of the mediating function of language. It is this error that contributes to his downfall.

6

Unsurprisingly, Coriolanus's most sustained lines come in his diatribes against the plebes, before whom he cannot contain himself. As Menenius observes, Coriolanus's "heart's his mouth:/ What his breast forges, that his tongue must vent" (3.1.256-57). One always has the impression that Coriolanus's resentful outbursts are a hair's breadth away from descending into actual physical blows. The security generated by the deferring structure of the sign is never guaranteed in Coriolanus whose hypermimeticism constantly threatens to undermine the sign's stability. When it comes to blows, Coriolanus is invincible and he knows it. He is both the most mimetic and the most taciturn of Shakespearean heroes. Significantly, we never catch Coriolanus in a soliloquy. Unlike Hamlet, Coriolanus's problem is never one of "thinking too precisely on the event." Coriolanus is not given to indulging the fictive powers of his imagination. Whereas Hamlet spends much of his time gleefully exploiting his paradoxical relation to the scandalous centrality of the other, Coriolanus never accepts anything other than centrality itself. Hamlet's greater self-consciousness of the center's permeability to the periphery encourages him to defer his appropriation of the center for as long as possible. If Hamlet would rather indulge his scenic imagination than actually usurp the reality of the mimetic center, Coriolanus would rather possess the violence of the center all for himself. It is no accident that the former is a consummate role player and joker, while the latter cannot even maintain the simplest facade of civility. Not that we should accept Hamlet's case as prima facie the ethically superior one. On the contrary, both protagonists ultimately succumb to the same tragic violence of the mimetic center. The difference is that whereas Hamlet suspends violence only to bring about greater violence by the play's end, Coriolanus's

more primitive relationship to the center prevents him from deferring his relationship to it long enough to unleash anything but the most localized form of conflict. While Coriolanus kills his rivals one by one, Hamlet must wait until a final blood bath.

The Public Scene of Representation

The path from the private realm of the individual imagination to the public one of social significance is mediated by language — that is, by the scene of representation. The major theme explored by Coriolanus is this tension between the private imagination and the public scene of significance. Coriolanus imagines himself — quite rightly — indispensable to Rome's military strength. But he also imagines himself — quite wrongly — as a "natural" inheritor to the scene of public significance. He has no doubt that he deserves election to the consulship of Rome. But what he doesn't realize is that his indisputable skill as a fighter is mediated not merely by other fighters or mimetic doubles such as Aufidius, whom he has no difficulty overcoming, but by the entire Roman community which includes both nobles and commoners. By dismissing the plebeian masses, he openly displays his resentment toward those upon whom he is also at once dependent. It is in fact this dependence that is the motivation for Coriolanus's resentment. What Coriolanus cannot stomach is the notion that his public significance is constituted by the participation of the plebes on the scene. Coriolanus is man of action who refuses to acknowledge the necessary mediation of his actions by the most general scene of all — that is, the scene of linguistic representation. The central irony of the play is that Coriolanus, despite his affected distaste for ceremony and ritual, in fact relies on this very same scene for public recognition.

For example, from the victory at Corioles, he earns his new name: Coriolanus. The public fanfare climaxes in this act of naming, an act that publicly acknowledges the significance of Coriolanus's heroic deeds by renaming him for the place he has successfully conquered. Usually we give to places the names of their founders or discoverers or conquerors, but in this case things go the other way around. Here significance derives not from the person but from the place. It is as if Shakespeare wanted to reify Coriolanus as much as possible. The latter has become so thoroughly immersed in his profession that his identity changes to match the product of his work. Henceforth he is known not by his birth name but by the city he has conquered; Caius Marcius's entire persona has been reduced to a single moment in his history as a professional soldier. There is no higher honor than to be named after the site of his most daring act of violence: his single-handed storm of the city of Corioles.

But Coriolanus continues to affect ostentatious distaste for all public ceremony. He only grudgingly accepts the war spoils from Cominius after the victory at Corioles. Likewise he expresses extreme discomfort when Cominius prepares to recount for the benefit of the Roman senate his daring acts of bravery. "When blows have made me stay, I fled from words," he says to Brutus (2.2.72).

Coriolanus cannot bear the limelight shed on him by the medium of language. Language generates our desire for the object by imposing on it the paradoxical form of significance in general. The linguistic referent is not merely a material object; it is also situated within the central locus of our desire on the scene of representation. By contrast, fighting, which

Coriolanus excels at, requires no preconstituted scene of representation. It is both the most mimetic and most unconstrained of human activities. In combat the only rule is dual or imitative mimesis. If you do not respond immediately to the other's raised hand by raising your own, you risk losing everything. Coriolanus does not fear the battlefield, because here his skill as a fighter allows him to dominate the stage. He in effect creates his own center simply by virtue of his unsurpassed fighting abilities. Like Michael Jordan in a basketball game, there is never any doubt whom to watch during the fighting.

7

Shakespeare underlines this fact by dividing the battle into six different moments or "scenes" in which Coriolanus is the central figure in all but one which, not a true combat scene in any case, represents rather the general Lartius securing the vanquished city. Like a modern-day film camera, the Shakespearean stage follows the progress of Coriolanus throughout the fighting. The first scene reveals him outside Corioles where he and Lartius have been stationed with a force in order to take the city. Coriolanus is impatient, and his main worry is that Cominius, who remains at the Roman camp to await the arrival of an external Volscian army, has engaged in battle before him. Coriolanus cannot bear the idea that he is not at the center of the action. Suddenly the gates open and the Volscians launch an attack on the Romans who are beaten back to their trenches. Coriolanus is furious at this setback and he curses the cowardice of his men, swearing that he'll put them to the sword if they do not stand their positions. The gates are reopened and Coriolanus unhesitatingly follows the Volscians into the city. His men stand back aghast at his fearlessness, refusing to follow him to what they think is certain death. But Coriolanus miraculously reemerges covered in the blood of his enemies. The astonished Romans take heart; the city is entered and taken.

But with the mission accomplished, Coriolanus is not satisfied. He knows that the fighting continues elsewhere and the constant noise of the battle alarum in the distance only increases his appetite for more conflict. Lartius gives Coriolanus leave to join Cominius's forces outside the city. The scene switches to Cominius who has been beaten back by the Volscians led by Aufidius. But when Coriolanus arrives on the scene, he immediately leads an offensive against the Volscians in which he encounters and overcomes their leader Aufidius. Once again, thanks to Coriolanus, the Romans are victorious.

Coriolanus thus easily emerges as the central figure in all the battle scenes. Wherever he appears, the fighting tilts in Rome's favor. But the depiction of such heroism is not designed merely to reveal Coriolanus's godlike strength. More pertinently, it reveals how dependent Rome is on Coriolanus. Without Coriolanus, Rome is nothing. In war there is never any question that Coriolanus must play a role in order to pander to preexisting institutions. On the battlefield, Coriolanus exists, to use the Hegelian terminology, for himself and in himself.

But outside the domain of war, things are not so clear-cut. Coriolanus is a man of action who shrinks from the mediation provided by the universe of words. His impatience toward all discursive commentary is the paradigm case of the anti-intellectual; while the policy makers stand around talking, he gets things done. But what Coriolanus doesn't realize is that

his wordless actions are not free of the mediating structure of the scene of representation. On the contrary, his actions are all the more tragic for failing to grasp the deferring structure of the sign which exists precisely to mitigate, rather than exacerbate, the mimetic conflict from which tragedy is always but a hair's breadth away. The more impatience he expresses toward linguistic mediation, the more mimetic his actions become and the more the conflict escalates. If Coriolanus could have his way, all disagreement would be settled by physical combat rather than dialogue.

There is a tiny incident that reflects the constitutive hypocrisy of Coriolanus's position. It takes place immediately after the Romans have taken Corioles and Cominius has publicly declared Coriolanus's heroism by bestowing on him the honor of his new name. Coriolanus remembers a good deed that had been done to him by one of the Volscian citizens who has now been taken prisoner. He begs Cominius for a favor, namely, the release of this prisoner. But when Cominius unhesitatingly grants the favor and asks Coriolanus for the man's name so he may be released, Coriolanus cannot remember it. Suddenly, Coriolanus finds himself forced to acknowledge the importance of a name. He has himself received universal recognition by being renamed, but now he cannot remember the name of a poor man who has treated him kindly and deserves his attention. Without the name, the man presumably is destined to be sold into slavery.

Tragic Paradox

Coriolanus is an example of the hero who refuses to be represented as a hero. But this refusal is not motivated by an overdeveloped sense of modesty or egalitarian morality. Coriolanus's unprecedented scorn toward the plebes should dispel any temptation we might have to attribute to him the ethic of a romantic revolutionary. On the contrary, in its dependence on valor Coriolanus's ethic is premodern rather than modern, Roman rather than Christian. What Shakespeare's play thematizes is the impossibility of maintaining this ethic in a world that has experienced the upheaval of the center by the egalitarian periphery. When the center is in principle accessible to everyone, centrality can no longer be justified, as it could in Homer's day, by being the "best" among fighters. What Coriolanus resents is the appearance of the plebes on the scene of his representation. For once centrality is no longer decided on the battlefield, it loses its significance for the fighter and becomes a mere plaything in the hands of the spin doctors. It is this more discursive, less violent form of heroism that Coriolanus fears and resents because it threatens his own more violent claim for sole occupation of the center.

8

This fear lies at the basis of Coriolanus's otherwise "perverse" refusal to accept any commendation. After the blows of battle have died away in I, ix, the soldiers throw their caps and lances in the air and cry out Coriolanus's name to the general fanfare of trumpets and bugles. But instead of being flattered by this display of approbation, Coriolanus has nothing but scorn for it:

> May these same instruments, which you profane,
> Never sound more! When drums and trumpets shall
> I' th' field prove flatterers, let courts and cities be
> Made all of false-faced soothing!
> When steel grows soft as the parasite's silk,
> Let him be made a coverture for th' wars!
> No more, I say! For that I have not washed
> My nose that bled, or foiled some debile wretch,
> Which without note here's many else have done,
> You shout me forth
> In acclamations hyperbolical;
> As if I loved my little should be dieted
> In praises sauced with lies.
> (1.9.41-53)

This is no doubt an alarming and extreme reaction, but our hypothesis can easily account for it. To Coriolanus, the scene of representation is anathema because it reminds him of his own dependence on it. As soon as the fighting is over, Coriolanus feels his power slipping away from him. The fanfare of which he is the object serves as an unwelcome reminder that his own significance is dependent, not on himself, but upon the designations of others. Paradoxically, all the ceremony and fanfare merely serve to remind him of his ultimate insignificance. His actions are constantly being hauled under the umbrella of a scene in which he himself has no power.

The most striking example of this paradox takes place in the election scene. Coriolanus stands before the senate who must approve his election to the consulship. Cominius comes forward to report in the long speech already cited Coriolanus's worthiness for the position, but Coriolanus, who cannot bear to hear his "nothings monstered" (2.2.73), abruptly leaves and Cominius is left to make his report without the latter being present. Once again, Coriolanus's absurd reaction to an innocent enough scene cannot be explained by attributing to him a deeply held modesty that is embarrassed by all forms of public commendation. On the contrary, modest behavior would require him to maintain his presence on the scene instead of rudely turning his back on it, particularly as he has been specifically asked by one of the senators to stay. What Coriolanus cannot bear is, not the praise itself, but the fact that this praise comes to him in mediated form. Coriolanus cannot bear to be represented by someone else, in this case by his friend and leader Cominius. The latter's words merely serve to aggravate him because they remind him of his own real peripherality. This peripherality is more obvious in the case of drama than in the purely textual scenes of, for example, the novel. For in the worldly context of dramatic performance, all eyes really are focused on Cominius rather than Coriolanus. For as long as Cominius speaks, Coriolanus only exists as a character in Cominius's narrative. His only choice is to evacuate the scene altogether. Hence his abrupt departure from the room.

Coriolanus is an Oedipus who has suddenly become aware of his presence on the scene of representation. Unlike Oedipus, whose crimes are committed in complete ignorance, Coriolanus is aware of his paradoxical relation to the scene in which he appears. Resentful of this dependence, Coriolanus seeks every means to free himself from it. Fighting offers him a partial release because he is not required to act a predetermined role over which he has no power but can instead create it for himself. The election scenes in Rome, however, are a different matter. In the case of Cominius's speech to the senators, Coriolanus becomes the protagonist of a narrative over which he has no power. Instead he is at the mercy of the narrator Cominius, who in effect becomes the author of Coriolanus's significance. Coriolanus's self is mediated by Cominius. The former has become a mere functionary of the latter's representation.

Coriolanus's election scene is the paradigm case of the neoclassical aesthetic's self-conscious relationship to the scene of representation. ()**(3)** Whereas classical protagonists are not aware of their scenic presence on stage, the neoclassical aesthetic is forced by the uncompromising reciprocity of Christian morality to justify the legitimacy of its central figures. But once centrality is no longer granted a priori, the center's dependence on the periphery becomes itself an object for thematization. The neoclassical protagonist cannot ignore, as the classical protagonist before him could, the dependence of his existence on the representations that constitute him. Coriolanus is Shakespeare's most thorough reflection on the incompatibility between the old classical ethic and Christian morality. Coriolanus, whose prototype is Achilles, craves immortality by being the best fighter in the world. But just when his apotheosis appears guaranteed, he is thwarted by the recognition that this immortalization is in fact a construct of the scene in which he himself is merely an actor. Coriolanus's uncompromising sincerity is a product of his resistance to the notion that he is in the final analysis a mere actor in a scene already constituted before his arrival.

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No doubt to our own postmodern sensibilities the radicality of this recognition is hard to grasp. Surely significance is inseparable from representation? How then can Coriolanus desire that it be otherwise? Indeed. But we must not confuse our own aesthetic sensibilities with those of a tragic neoclassical protagonist. The unwillingness of the latter to enter the world of pure representation is a vestige of the sacrality of the center which refuses to acknowledge its debt to the sign-using periphery. If Shakespeare is certainly aware of his character's "mere" fictionality, Coriolanus certainly is not. And the distance between the author and his protagonist is precisely the distance necessary to allow the latter to become a vehicle for the deferral of our resentment. Once the author becomes indistinguishable from the protagonist, the fictional world loses its capacity to indulge our desire free of the danger of worldly resentment. For once the protagonist becomes a mere thin facade for the actual author, there is indeed no reason why we should privilege his story over somebody else's.

The End of Tragedy

Shakespeare's play is ultimately an anthropological reflection on the dependence of the individual tragic protagonist on the constructions of his public audience. In Coriolanus's case, this dependence is figured in the three distinct parties — the nobles, the plebes, and the Volscians — who all participate in some manner in his expulsion and sacrifice.

In exposing the complicity of the group in the sacrifice of the hero-victim, the play thematizes the inadequacy of the old ritual means for deferring conflict. The emergence of an ethic based on the power of each individual to create significance for himself independent of preexisting ritual institutions, as reflected in the widespread success of Protestantism — and, more particularly for the socioeconomic sphere, in the emergence of the bourgeoisie — is at odds with the basic conservatism of ritual constraint. Why indeed should Coriolanus have to prove his military superiority before the masses in a ceremony that merely mimics the reality of the fight itself? What is the point of a ritual in which he must display the scars of his war wounds and request the support of the plebes? No one doubts for a moment his skill as a warrior. Nor would such doubt, if it did exist, interfere with the basic structure of the rite. As one citizen astutely observes, the ritual itself leaves no room for dissent. Even if the plebes wished to deny Coriolanus their "voices," the rules of the ceremony require them to respond in kind to his formulaic request: "if he show us his wounds and tell us his deeds, we are to put our tongues into those wounds and speak for them; so, if he tell us his noble deeds, we must also tell him our noble acceptance of them" (2.3.6-9).

It is often remarked that by willfully botching the ceremony Coriolanus merely demonstrates his immaturity when it comes to the political affairs of the state. The first rule of political office is to dispense with all sincerity. The successful politician reflects not his own desires, but those of his constituents. Coriolanus's refusal to pander to the plebes is put down to his failure to control his excessive egoism.

But Coriolanus's inability to go through the basic motions of the indoctrination ceremony for the consulship cannot be explained purely on the basis of egoism. Nor should we appeal to Shakespeare's "postmodern" awareness of the socially constructed nature of the bourgeois subject. Rather, what is at stake in this opposition between self and society is the conflict between two competing ethical systems. Once the individual is revealed to be an equal participant in the competition for the coveted difference of the mimetic center whence all significant differences emerge, then the old ritual guarantees that sacralize this difference as forbidden to human usurpation are rendered obsolete. Henceforth socially significant or hierarchical difference must be explained and explored by alternative — in particular, fictional and ultimately theoretical — means. The more universal appeal of the aesthetic over its ritual competitors is a consequence of its more minimal and thus more originary sympathies. Relative to ritual, the aesthetic scene has a much lower cultural overhead. Whereas ritual remains tied to the particular historical context of its believing participants, the aesthetic scene generates significance by virtue of its fictional content alone. This is not to say that aesthetic works lack historical or cultural specificity. On the contrary, their continued relevance is explained by their success as specific responses to the ethical dilemmas provided by human history. But the aesthetic scene privileges what ritual can never concede — the fact that sacrality is mediated by the imaginary scene of representation. In the most revelatory cases, as in Shakespeare, this fact is consciously thematized in the content of the work. Coriolanus explores the problem of the leader who has no scene to fall back on other than the one on which he is himself constituted.

In the climatic moment of III, iii Coriolanus responds to his expulsion from Rome by banishing his banishers: "I banish you" he declares in an attempt to throw back upon his banishers the self-same speech act of which he is the target (3.3.124). Confident in his ability to exist independently of the public scene of Roman sociopolitical life, Coriolanus declares his independence from the city:

> Despising
> For you the city, thus I turn my back,
> There is a world elsewhere.
> (3.3.134-36)

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But there is no world elsewhere for Coriolanus. On the contrary, he seeks his revenge not by deferring it to the transcendent world of the afterlife but by returning to Rome, this time with the Volscians at his side. His only thought is to vanquish the city that banished him. Coriolanus's momentary exile from the public center of Rome lacks the Aufhebung of a true solution. The latter would not in fact emerge until the romantics displaced the public center altogether by resituating it within the privacy of the individual. In contrast, Coriolanus, for all his individual heroism, can imagine no scene other than that provided by the traditional public center. His return to this center in order to destroy it once and for all is the archetypal fantasy of the resentful self. Coriolanus's tragedy lies precisely in his inability to think himself out of this paradox. He is conscious of it, but this consciousness remains fundamentally incomplete. It can only express itself only in a frustrated resentment toward all representations of his being. Rather than deferring mimetic violence, Coriolanus tragically succumbs to it. He repeatedly returns to the public center in the vain attempt to inhabit its imagined sacrality free of the mediating structure of representation.

Like Oedipus before him, Coriolanus is tragically destined to fulfill the violence of the mimetic center. To avoid this violence altogether for the "world elsewhere" of the solitary individual is a solution unavailable to the tragic figure whose dramatic presence remains strictly bound to the sacrificial context inherited from collective ritual (even if this context remains wholly fictional). The arrival of the romantic solution would spell the end of tragedy. Significantly, after Coriolanus Shakespeare turned from tragedy to the genre of romance. In this turn he seems to have intuited, well before his time, the power of the romantic revolution.

Notes

()1. All Shakespeare quotations come from The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare. Ed. Sylvan Barnet (New York: Harcourt, 1963).**(back) (1)**

()2. For a description of the originary emergence of the self, see Eric Gans, Originary Thinking (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993), pp. 18-20.**(back) (2)**

()3. See Gans, Originary Thinking, p. 151: "The neoclassical esthetic is uniquely characterized by what it adds to the classical: the representation of the scene of representation itself as the locus of significance of its content. The unquestioned exemplarity that separates the classical protagonist from the world of the spectator is no longer sufficient. Significance is no longer self-evident; it must be explicitly derived from the locus of the scene." **(back) (3)**

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