Transcending Tragedy: Shifting Tragedy From the Individual to Society at Large In Shakespeare's Coriolanus

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Transcending Tragedy: Shifting Tragedy From the Individual to Society at Large In Shakespeare’s Coriolanus

Over the course of a lifetime everybody will experience tragedy. These moments are often the most potent learning experiences that a human being can have. For this reason it is no wonder that these powerful experiences have been for centuries immortalized in literature. Beginning in ancient Greece the genre of tragedy has its roots in the theater and was often portrayed as a myth of some sort. As the genre evolved Aristotle became the primary source to define the genre. Among the many rigorous parameters that he placed on the genre was the idea that tragedy exists solely in the individual. For many famous tragedies this is absolutely true. From Sophocles’ unchangeable destiny in Oedipus Rex to the taboo love portrayed in Seneca’s Phaedra it is the protagonist that ultimately meets with a tragic end. While this is the generally accepted mode of tragedy this paper will undertake to show how William Shakespeare surpasses the limits that were set on the genre by analyzing The Tragedy of Coriolanus.

Set in a burgeoning Roman empire, the play takes place after the fall of Tarquin and is semi-historical in that aspect. Much of the conflict that is portrayed in Coriolanus takes place between the different Roman classes -the plebeians and the patricians- during the transition of the Roman government from monarchy to republic. It is in this setting that the audience follows the decisions of Coriolanus and witnesses the enormous downfalls that accompany that characters unrelenting pride. It is specifically through the portrayal of pride that Shakespeare
explores the boundaries of tragedy showing pride as a major flaw, not just in Coriolanus, but in many other characters that surround him. In doing this, Shakespeare constructs a tragedy that illuminates the destructive effects that society can have on itself by influencing its leaders. While on the surface, the tragedy that occurs in Coriolanus appears to be a warning of the hazards of pride in the individual, a closer examination of the text will reveal that the tragedy is not entirely the fault of Coriolanus and that it occurs on much broader scale. Though Coriolanus is commonly seen as a tragedy centered on the downfalls of pride in the individual this essay will show how Shakespeare transcends the boundaries that Aristotle established in tragic drama by taking away the emphasis of tragedy in the individual and placing it on society as a whole.

At the onset of the play it would be easy for one to view the tragic pride of Coriolanus as a trait that is entirely his own. This idea is typically grounded in the vicious contempt that he displays towards the plebeians as he bitterly condemns them as useless and famously refers to them as “fragments” (1.1.212). Moreover, another view on this idea can be seen looking through the eyes of the plebeians themselves. As the play opens the reader is exposed to the ideas of a group of citizens voicing their disapproval of Coriolanus. In this dialogue the vices of Coriolanus are detailed. Viewed through these derision it easy to see how Coriolanus often seen as an unlikable character. Chief among the people’s complaints is the pride that their country’s most feared warrior appears to extol:

SECOND CITIZEN. Consider you what service he has done for his country?

FIRST CITIZEN. Very well; and could be content to give him good/ report for it, but that he pays himself with being proud . . .
SECOND CITIZEN. what he cannot help in his nature, you account a/ vice in
him. You must in no way say he is covetous” (1.1.25-36).

This passage clearly shows that the people do not take kindly to the antipathy that comes as a
result of Coriolanus’ pride as well as showing that they certainly do not look to themselves as
guilty of planting the seed in his heart. Because these lines are foremost within the text they are
likely to convey and establish the identity of Coriolanus as someone who innately possesses the
fatal flaw of pride. If the play stopped here this interpretation could very likely be true; however,
as the play progresses it becomes readily apparent that there exists a flaw within the value system
of the Roman republic. This flaw suggests that perhaps the pride that consumes Coriolanus was
not solely developed by him alone. Katherine Stockholder alludes to this destructive kind of
nurturing when she conjectures that Coriolanus is merely playing the part that the people
themselves thrust upon him: “So great is Coriolanus’ need to maintain the image, reflected in
hatred or admiration, of autonomous patriot and warrior . . . that he ironically becomes braggart,
traitor, and boy”(229). With this idea in mind it is easily seen how the disdain with which the
plebeians regard Coriolanus is nothing more than a by product that they themselves created
through their admiration of him as a great war hero. This shortcoming reveals part of the vicious
circle that ultimately leads to Coriolanus’ downfall and nearly their own.

One of the first instances that Shakespeare breaks down the idea of tragedy in the
individual is when he suggests that Coriolanus’ overbearing pride was not unique to his own
personality. This can be seen as Coriolanus’ wife, Virgilia, and his mother, Volumnia, are
excitedly discussing his return from battle with Rome’s nemesis the Volscians. Volumnia,
showing an immense pride of her own, reveals to Virgilia that even when Coriolanus was young
she held the trait of pride in higher esteem than even the life of her child. After hearing her mother-in-law’s extreme point of view Virgilia exclaims: “But had he died in the business, madam; how then?” (1.3.16) Volumnia, through her retort displays her true nature and with it reveals the likelihood that the cultivation of Coriolanus’ extreme pride had been in developmental process for the duration of his life: “Hear me profess/sincerely: had I a dozen sons, each in my love/ alike and none less dear than thine and my good/ Marcius, I had rather had eleven die nobly for their/ country than one voluptuously surfeit out of action/” (1.3.18-21). As revealing as this scenario already is as to the manner in which Volumnia raised her son, she takes these notions even further, dispelling all doubt that she did not have a large hand in shaping the tragic flaw that encumbers her son when, to Virgilia’s horror, she exclaims: “Away, you fool! It more becomes a man/ Than gilt his trophy; the breasts of Hecuba,/ When she did suckle Hector, look’d not lovelier than Hector’s forehead when it spit forth blood/ At Grecian sword contemning” (1.3. 36-39). Commenting directly on this aspect of the effects of motherly nurturing Coppelia Kahn asserts that that Volumnia: “By thrusting him from dependency and thrusting onto him a warrior self of her own devising, Volumnia effectively murdered the babe in Coriolanus, the loving and vulnerable self within him” (172). Seeing how much value Volumnia placed on pride and then instilling it in her son throughout his formative years it is obvious to ascertain that Coriolanus’ fatal flaw did not come wholly from himself. Furthermore, by portraying the flaws of Volumnia’s parenting in this she also can be viewed as a tragic character thus breaking the mold of the classic tragedy drawing attention away from the flaws of Coriolanus and diverting it to others around him.

While the adverse effects resulting from the intimate relationship that is common
amongst a mother and son is easily seen as influential in nurturing the prideful disposition of Coriolanus, the evidence against Rome’s societal flaw does not stop there. Another destructive relationship can be found in analyzing Coriolanus’ relationship to Roman republic at large. The political leaders of Rome all show an almost sacred admiration for Coriolanus, and in so doing add to the building up of his pride to unknown heights. Of course the result of this admiration cultivates in him contempt for the lower Roman classes. It is in this relationship between Coriolanus and the Republic that the paradox of pride and Roman society is revealed and it is in this paradox where the tragedy of Coriolanus truly falls. In these relationships it can be seen how Shakespeare calls into question Aristotle’s definition of tragedy as they show the broader nurturing aspects that Roman society had in cultivating the pride that is Coriolanus’ tragic downfall. This, self-undermining, societal flaw reveals the real tragedy of the play; a society that is heavily reliant on the extreme pride and dominance of its warriors, yet rejects and condemns the affects that often come, hand in hand, with such pride. The tragic process that makes this societal flaw can be followed in the play. Coriolanus, after displaying exemplary bravery in battle, is called to the floor of the senate to be recognized and praised for his valor the general of the Roman army Cominus:

“he stopp’d the fliers;/ And by his rare example made the coward/ Turn terror into sport . . . / his sword, death’s stamp,/ Where it did mark, it took. . . / alone he enter’d/ The mortal gate of the city, which he painted/ With shunless destiny; aidless came off,/ And with a sudden reinforcement struck/ Corioli like a planet: now all’s his:” (2.2.99-110)

This high amount of praise, though merited, adds to Coriolanus’s pride and eventually leads to
the next step in the process which is shows itself through the contempt that Coriolanus has for all whom he deems beneath him. When the senate decides to make Coriolanus a consul to the people he, as tradition dictates, goes –begrudgingly- to seek the approval of the masses. Unable to hide his contempt for the people and their traditions he arrogantly states: “What must I say? / ‘I Pray, sir’ –Plague upon’t! I cannot bring/ My tongue to such a pace: -- ‘Look, sir, my wounds! Kesler 6

/ I got them in my country’s service, when/ Some certain of your brethren roar’d and ran/ From the noise of our own drums.”” (2.3.45-49 ). This display of antipathy on the part of Coriolanus completes paradox as it causes the people to develop great disdain for their great war hero even though he performed for them a very necessary service by shedding his blood to preserve their peace. As the people are brought to a realization of the scorn with which they were treated by Coriolanus they are quickly incited to reject the man who defends their liberty. Brayton Polka illuminates this paradox even further in his article about contradiction in the Roman world. In it he takes a somewhat fatalistic view of the Roman way of life suggesting that the paradox that has just been analyzed is only part of a far greater contradiction: “They do not know what renders their lives contradictory. The Romans know no escape from the contradictory . . . as both patricians and plebeians, in their endless opposition to each other, claim oneness with Rome. . . . But the tragedy of Coriolanus, the tragedy of Rome, is that there is no world elsewhere, beyond Rome, for the Romans” (n.page). Polka’s theory shows that Rome was a self-undermining society and lends credence to the idea that Coriolanus is a portrayal of tragedy on broader societal scale.

Polka’s idea is interesting as it’s insight gives reason as to why Shakespeare would want to reconstruct the classic tragedy in the first place. Because Coriolanus was one of his later
tragedies it could be surmised the Shakespeare was more willing to question and play with the classic idea of tragedy. This is especially true if he saw, like Polka suggests through his analysis, a greater flaw in Roman society as a whole. Derek Traversi in his book *Shakespeare: The Roman Plays* adds to this assumption noting the differences that existed between Shakespeare’s earlier tragedies like *Julius Caesar* and his later ones like *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*. The latter, he asserts “belong to the dramatist’s last years and combine an acute understanding of historical process with the illuminating presence of a distinctive tragic vision” (9). He continues to add weight to the idea that Shakespeare was more likely to toy with the classic constructs of tragedy as he points out that in the Roman tragedies Shakespeare was, in a way, collaborating with Plutarch the author of *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* asserting that though Shakespeare used his material to base his plays off of he found ways to make them his own:

“the dramatist, in following his original closely, was in fact developing his own conception, being fully himself. . . . the poet was free to reserve himself for his deeper purposes, to slip in with unobtrusive mastery the transforming word or image required to illuminate the dramatic presentation of motive or to bring out the full implications of his developing action” (9-10).

These affirmations of Shakespeare’s willingness to revise and place his own distinct mark on the earlier versions of the tragedies gives credence to the idea that, in Coriolanus, that mark was the de-emphasizing of the tragic flaws of the individual and placing them on the whole of Roman society.

By transcending the classic ideals of tragedy Shakespeare once again shows that his work has richness and depth that is unrivaled. By shifting the focus of tragedy from the individual to
society as a whole Shakespeare redefined the meaning of the word by allowing the implications that surround tragedy to be included in the tragedy. This redefined view of tragedy allows for a much greater significance to be placed on Coriolanus as the lesson that the tragedy conveys can ultimately be applied on a much greater scale. Instead of being cautioned about his or her own pride the reader is now more aware of the devastating repercussions the outside influence can have on a person and society. By prescribing the tragedy away from the individual and to society at large Coriolanus works to broaden the readers understanding of their own influence to the world around them.

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