

'CORIOLANUS'

Critical Observations

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The background

Coriolanus, the last of the so-called political tragedies by William Shakespeare, was written about 1608 and published in the First Folio of 1623. It is considered as the last of the Shakespeare's four Roman Plays. The others being Titus Andronicus, Julius Caesar and Antony and Cleopatra. For Coriolanus, Shakespeare went to an obscure period of Roman history, the early Republic of 491 BC. Shakespeare found the story of Coriolanus in Sir Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's Lives of the Nobles Grecians and Romanes. Shakespeare must have also consulted Livy's Roman Historie.

Plot outline

Caius Martius is an aristocratic Roman general with admirable military and combat skills

During the course of the play, he singlehandedly captures the Volscian city of Corioles, a deed for which he is given the surname "Coriolanus."

After returning from the battle for Corioles, Coriolanus is set to be named consul. In order to be elected consul, Coriolanus must "politic" for the voices (votes) of the common people.

But Coriolanus won't do this. He refuses to accept praise for his accomplishments. His pride makes him refuse to give a political speech, since he believes politics are theatrical and dishonest; and he curses out the common people and fails so miserably in his campaign that he ends up banished from Rome.

His first instinct is for revenge, and he partners with his longtime rival Tullus Aufidius to lead an army of Volscian troops against Rome. Ultimately, though, he is convinced to abandon this revenge by his wife, Virgilia, his son, Young Martius, and mostly his mother Volumnia, who humanize him.

In the city of Corioles, Coriolanus presents Volscian Lords with a formal peace agreement. At the protests of the Volscian lords, Aufidius and his conspirators kill Coriolanus.

Critical Observations

As T.J.B Spencer observes, to write Coriolanus was, "one of the great feats of the historical imagination in Renaissance Europe." Regarding the character, Coriolanus, A.C. Bradley has observed that "his faults are repellent and chill our sympathy". John Palmer calls him "a splendid oaf who has never come to maturity". His pride and virtue are aspects that add colour to his character. ("You blame Martius for being proud". II.i) He is dedicated only to one thing, his real pursuit: honour. He says, "I have some wounds upon me, and they smart / To hear themselves remembered"(I.ix). For him war is the measuring rod to count the bravery of a soldier. He does not like people to praise him or thank him. This, too, is a kind of pride. He accepts such words only from his mother. For him, humility is a kind of hypocrisy. For the patricians, he is almost an invincible war machine to create dread among the rivals inside and outside.

Philip Brockbank has opined that "much of the play is concerned with the way inhuman energies are generated from human commitments". Critics have even gone to suggest that the play is about Rome and Rome only. This is such a vitriolic play wherein which we find animal imagery in its best.

The play seems to presuppose a measure of sympathy for the one against the many, and for the patricians against the plebeians, an attitude perhaps native to this more exclusive, up-market auditorium. But Shakespeare's play makes it clear that the people of Rome are quite right to recognise that if they make Coriolanus consul, their hard-won right to representation in the state will be abolished. One should also admire Shakespeare's insight based on the link that he has established with the theme and his contemporary times. Throughout that period there were riots in Shakespeare's home county against what we would now call the privatisation of public land: agricultural labourers who under an earlier, medieval dispensation had been able to grow most of their own food, were now reduced to working for the landowners who had claimed the right to enclose what had formerly been common ground. With wages low and harvests poor many labourers were becoming dangerously hungry. A declaration issued by 'the Diggers of Warwickshire' shows, the leaders of isolated local disturbances sought to make common cause with one another, uniting in a shared demand that the state – the 'commonwealth' – should be organised for the well-being of all, rather than in the interests of the rich. This is exactly the impulse which motivates the plebeians and their tribunes in Coriolanus, and the connection between the grievances articulated in the play and those audible in the Warwickshire riots is underlined by one of Shakespeare's adjustments to his source. In Shakespeare's England, the commoners are angry about food shortages, accusing the patricians of deliberately hoarding grain to maintain its high market price. Shakespeare had himself been convicted

of hoarding grain a decade earlier, and in 1614 he got involved in a dispute about an enclosure project at Welcombe, which the Stratford Corporation opposed: this was subject matter he knew from both sides. (Michael Dobson, 2016)

Tony Parr has observed that Coriolanus is one of the most controlled and tightly organised of all his plays. "If we look at his handling of the four major points of climax in Plutarch's narrative- the hero's victory at Corioli, his banishment from Rome, the pact with Aufidius and the intercession of the ladies to save the city- we can see how he binds them into the overall structure to point the thematic development of the action." Throughout the play, there is only one figure- Coriolanus: he is the object of hatred, envy, fear and admiration.

References

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