Justice, Honor, and Heroic Virtue in Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*

**Introduction**

In the long tradition of complaints about the tendency of poetry to collude with power and promote injustice, few have been so eloquent as that of William Hazlitt. In an essay from *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays*, he indicts poetry in general, and *Coriolanus* in particular:

The language of poetry naturally falls in with the language of power. The imagination is an exaggerating and exclusive faculty: it takes from one thing to add to another: it accumulates circumstances together to give the greatest possible effect to a favourite object…. The principle of poetry is a very anti-levelling principle. It aims at effect, it exists by contrast. It admits of no medium. It is everything by excess. It rises above the ordinary standard of sufferings and crimes… So we feel some concern for the poor citizens of Rome when they meet together to compare their wants and grievances, till Coriolanus comes in and with blows and big words drives this set of "poor rats," this rascal scum, to their homes and beggary before him. There is nothing heroic in a multitude of miserable rogues not wishing to be starved… but when a single man comes forward to brave their cries and to make them submit to the last indignities, from mere pride and self-will, our admiration of his prowess is immediately converted into contempt for their pusillanimity. The insolence of power is stronger than the plea of necessity… The whole dramatic moral of *Coriolanus* is that those who have little shall have less, and that those who have much shall take all that others have left. ¹

The “language of poetry falls in with the language of power,” in Hazlitt’s account, by virtue of its appeal to the fear of our own weakness and the strength of our self-love. In reading poetry, we are drawn to whatever seems to possess power in the hope that it might be imparted to us through osmosis. The supposed weakness of the imagination and the passions to the attractions of power is cast by Hazlitt in explicitly political terms: poetry is “right royal,” and the imagination “aristocratical,” while the understanding is “republican” in the sense of partaking of the logic of popular rule.² The understanding democratizes our attention by distributing it equally amongst a wide array of objects. But
poetry, in his view, gives the passions full sway, narrowing the range of our moral attention by directing it to one favorite object and blotting out the sight of all else.

Even more disturbing, Hazlitt suggests, is that what is true of poetry is true of life as well. “The history of mankind,” he notes, is “constructed upon the principles of poetical justice; it is a noble or royal hunt, in which what is sport to the few, is death to the many, and in which the spectators halloo and encourage the strong to set upon the weak, and cry havoc in the chase, though they do not share in the spoil.”

Having once joined up with the hunters, even as fictive spectators, we are left with a taste for watching the strong kill the weak for cruel sport. The fact that these comments are made in a volume of essays on Shakespeare suggests that exposure to poetry is, however, not necessarily to be avoided. In fact, as Hazlitt suggests elsewhere, there is no escape from poetry, except in the minimal sense of the knowledge that there is no escape from poetry: “Man is a poetical animal: and those of us who do not study the principles of poetry, act upon them all our lives.”

Only the study of poetry (happily for him, the very activity in which he is engaged) teaches us to avoid acting upon its principles.

Hazlitt’s notion that, if it were not for the study of poetry, people would live according to the cruel principles of what he defines as “poetical justice” is certainly flattering to scholars of literature, since it suggests that our work constitutes the sole bulwark against the otherwise unchecked sovereignty of such dubious justice. Many contemporary scholars, however, would suggest that far from being biased by default in favor of excess and the claims of power, that, in fact, poetry has its own set of internal resources for making equitable judgments, encouraging the democratic diffusion of moral attention, prompting corrective self-inquiry, and countering the excesses of power. Some
scholars, most prominently, Martha Nussbaum, have even suggested that poetry represents a normative resource for enhancing ethical and juridical practices of judgment, as well as our everyday and philosophical understandings of justice.  

Recent work on poetic judgment and justice in the scholarship on classical and Renaissance epic, and in moral and political philosophy, has begun to suggest new ways of understanding the demand for justice as it pertains to poetry (and, more broadly, to literature). Such questions have not yet carried over into Shakespearean studies, despite a steady stream of works on Shakespeare written from the normative (as distinguished from the historical or topical) perspective of moral and political philosophy, and some recent revival of interest in the theme of justice in Shakespeare. Here, my concern is not only with the theme of justice, but with questions about the poetic enactment of justice as well. I take up this topic in the context of a discussion of Coriolanus, a play that has long served as a lightning rod for complaints about the capacity of poetry to further injustice.

Hazlitt’s critique of Coriolanus on the grounds that it promotes the cause of heroic and aristocratic honor and greatness at the expense of humanity and justice is not an isolated phenomenon. In the past twenty years, however, some critics have turned this reading of the play on its head, asserting that Coriolanus constitutes an “attack on… bellicose policies,” “adamning indictment of socioeconomic inequality,” and Shakespeare’s “most emphatic denunciation of heroic values.” Coriolanus is notorious for its pejorative account of the fickle and easily duped plebeians, much of which is registered in the complaints of the aristocratic Coriolanus, who refers to the Roman plebs as “slaves” (1.1.198) whom he would slaughter if given the chance.

Is Coriolanus really as grimly unrelenting as it may seem in its depiction of the
impassable divide between the few and the many? How are we to interpret its depiction of the political dangers of relying on norms of humanity (1.1.15-21), compassion (1.1.196-199) and “charitable care” (1.1.64), and its equally skeptical account of a politics that relies on heroic pride, ambition and honor as fuel for political action and proof of fitness for office?

In what follows, I argue that Shakespeare suggests a third alternative to an aristocratic politics of honor and virtue, on the one hand, and a democratic politics of citizen dignity and necessity, on the other.¹¹ The alternative suggested is less than edifying. Coriolanus shows how hybrid substitutes for virtues – such as Volumnia’s “noble cunning” (4.1.9) or her calculated blend of “honour and policy” (3.2.42) -- can be used to create the false impression of a mean between “high” and “low” modes of political action, thereby blurring the gap between them without overcoming it. “Honour and policy” means honor or policy. The practitioner of “honour and policy” may adhere to either on the basis of what the situation demands. Policy in this new sense is “honorable” because it promotes the advantage of the political actors (male or female) who practice it, not because it represents a commitment to virtue.¹² Notions such as “noble cunning” and “honour and policy” suggest a Machiavellian parody of moderation, rather than an Aristotelian mean between the politics of necessity and the politics of nobility.¹³ In Coriolanus, then, honor does not provide a bridge between the two, as it does to some extent for Aristotle.¹⁴ I argue that while Coriolanus does not suggest a compromise between partisans of aristocracy and democracy, it engages the arguments of both in an equitable manner, rather than simply lauding the greatness of the few or the goodness of the many. More broadly, I suggest that Coriolanus enacts justice, in a sense,
by attempting to do justice to multiple, rival accounts of justice (including justice as the
right of the stronger, justice as mutual advantage, and justice as the common good), some
of which we are likely to find unappealing in normative terms. Rather than attempting to
transcend what Hazlitt terms “the ordinary standard of sufferings and crimes,” the play
invites the critical exercise of judgment concerning that very standard, and calls attention
to the partial, limited nature of political accounts of justice.

It has rightly been observed that in Coriolanus, “honor not justice provides the
political foundation.”15 As such, the play offers an ideal context in which to consider the
question of what happens when norms of honor are treated not just as supererogatory
adornments to justice, but as “part of the core set of values [endorsed] for political
purposes.”16 In suggesting that the consideration of Coriolanus in this light might enrich
contemporary discussions of questions about the political significance of norms of justice
and honor in the context of Western liberal democracies, I do not intend to imply that the
play poses such questions in terms that are identical with our own. Thus, I raise questions
about the reading of Coriolanus as a drama about the emergence of liberalism and the
identification of Coriolanus as a paragon of possessive individualism and “radical self-
interest” -- an argument which neglects the evidence that Coriolanus relentlessly acts
according to the dictates of his honor against his self-interest.17 I suggest, however, that
arguments for Coriolanus as a “liberal hero” are not wholly misleading.18

First, I present some of the most important political issues addressed in the critical
debate about Coriolanus. Secondly, I discuss the play’s representation of political life
from the perspectives of the aristocratic politics of honor, the democratic politics of
popular representation, and the Machiavellian politics of “honour and policy.” Finally, I
suggest ways in which reading *Coriolanus* can contribute to current debates concerning the qualities of character that Hume refers to as the “shining virtues” and, more broadly, what Sheldon Wolin calls “the tension between the heroic and the political.”

**Coriolanus: Political Science on Stage**

In his famous essay on “Hamlet and His Problems,” T.S. Eliot observed that while “*Coriolanus* may be not as ‘interesting’ as *Hamlet…* it is, with *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare's most assured artistic success.” Very few scholars have endorsed Eliot’s contrarian judgment as to the artistic primacy of *Coriolanus* in the Shakespearean canon. Generally speaking, *Coriolanus* has been singled out not for its “artistic success” but for its success in addressing questions of politics. It has been asserted that *Coriolanus* is Shakespeare’s “only great political play,” and even that it is “the most brilliant political play ever written.” The political nature of *Coriolanus* has not always been seen as its strength. A recent theatrical critic of *Coriolanus* goes so far as to suggest that in the absence of vivid staging and performances, the play “has all the vitality of a staged reading of a monograph from a political science journal.” Its insistent focus on political questions has led more than one scholar to conclude that “[*Coriolanus*] may never mean much to people who have not been accustomed to think critically about politics.”

It is quite striking, then, that until recently, readers looking for a book length comprehensive account of Shakespeare’s political thought in *Coriolanus* had access only to chapters and articles, none of which offers a close reading of the play in its entirety. In 2006, this gap in the scholarship on Shakespeare’s political thought in *Coriolanus* was remedied by Jan Blits’s book length reading of the play, which has been followed by other works that address the political aspects of *Coriolanus*. 
Despite the wide range of critical disagreement about the nature of Coriolanus as a political actor, some consensus exists on two points: first, that Coriolanus is primarily driven by honor, and secondly, that he is ill-suited for political life in a republic, which demands a public show of humility and humanity and deference to common norms of justice, in addition to an equally public display of honor. Coriolanus’s incompetence as a political actor is no less striking than his excellence as a military hero. Among scholars of the play, his unfitness for politics is taken as something of a given. As Stanley Cavell observes, “From a political perspective, the play directs us to an interest in… whether, granted that Coriolanus is unsuited for political leadership, it is his childishness or his very nobility that unsuits him.” Blits argues that Coriolanus is unsuited for political leadership because he is at once too concerned with virtue (in the sense of the noble) and not virtuous enough (in his neglect of prudence and base appetite for vengeance): “Coriolanus regards only the noble as good. In effect a moral idealist, he has no concern for prudence.” In other words, he is characterized by both a serious concern for noble virtue and a less than noble rage for punishing others for their failure to live up to his standard of virtue.

The conflict between Coriolanus’s desires for virtue and vengeance is, I suggest, best understood as a comment on the two faces of honor, rather than a conflict between honor (which is bound to the city) and moral virtue (which attempts to transcend it). Honor aspires to virtue (and, as the commonplace would have it, can imitate virtue if necessary) but, once offended, it can just as easily attach itself to vengeance. The suggestion of the potential alliance of honor with virtue is the exception in Coriolanus rather than the rule. More frequently, honor is associated with pride in ascribed identity.
and lineage (and hence, with membership by birth in the “honour’d number” [3.1.71]) or the achievement of glorious deeds in battle (“deed-achieving honour” [2.1.172]). In the former sense, honor binds Coriolanus to the past and to the fate of being authored by it. The insistence of honor upon vengeance is a means of honoring the demands of the past, and of binding oneself to execute its claims in the present. In the latter sense, “deed-achieving honour” seems to hold out the promise of forging a new name for oneself that reflects one’s accomplishments (2.1.172) and a resource in the defense of personal liberty. The lineaments of the first face of honor, however, are readily detectible in the second, because it is assumed that only those possessed of honor in the first sense are capable of “deed-achieving honour” and, more importantly, of recognizing it. To be honored by those not capable of deed-achieving honor is, in effect, no honor at all.

As long as only those who are themselves of “the honour’d number” are the ones who have a voice in elections, the economy of honor works. Those among the “honour’d number” honor the honorable by electing them to office, thereby confirming their own honor in the process, and policing the boundaries of membership that allow for the maintenance of their system of rank. The minimal role of the plebs in this process is to gratefully accept the honor that is symbolically conferred upon them by their ceremonial role in the election. When those who are not of the “honour’d number” are given a political (rather than a purely ceremonial) voice in this process, as they are in Act I, disorder sets in. Honor cannot be translated uncorrupted into political action if it must sully itself by deferring to the judgment of those who are presumed to be incapable of honor. To do so would be to overturn the principle of honor, which disdains craft and compromise, and depends for its existence upon the recognition of distinctions and rank.
As the plebs recognize, the election ritual at which Coriolanus balks implies that they, too, are among the honored number, if only for the moment in the electoral process that their voice is being solicited. Coriolanus’s haughty rage that these rats and slaves should be suffered not only to be fed but to be treated as if they, too, were citizens (which, of course, they are) and his inability to fake possession of the humility and humanity that he lacks, means that he is unable to use his honor in the service of the common good. He cannot “temp’rately transport his honours / From where he should begin and end but will / Lose those that he hath won” (2.1.222-224). By honoring its heroes with tributes and offices, the city effectively lays claim to the heroic actions that merited the honors it distributes. This system of exchange depends upon a relation of reciprocity. The hero wards off enemies, thereby sparing the city from destruction; the city offers him honors in recognition of and out of gratitude for services rendered. The hero’s pride is enhanced by his reception of honors from his city, but not so enhanced that he is inclined to stop serving the city altogether because he has reached a state of self-sufficiency. The city must satisfy the hero’s desire for honor, but that satisfaction cannot be so complete that it allows the hero to forget his dependency upon the city to feed his appetite. Ideally, the economy of honor (according to which the plebs share in the honor of the patricians through their “noble acceptance” of noble deeds) allows for the formal circulation of symbolic recognition throughout the body politic. The alternative to accepting this fiction of shared nobility entails monstrosity:

FIRST CITIZEN: Once, if he do require our voices, we ought not to deny him.
SECOND CITIZEN: We may, sir, if we will.
THIRD CITIZEN: We have power in ourselves to do it, but it is a power
that we have no power to do; for 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. Ingratitude is monstrous, and for the multitude to be ingrateful were to make a monster of the multitude...(2.3.1-11)

The comment of the Third Citizen implies that the plebs, in showing gratitude for Coriolanus’s heroism in battle, would themselves be partaking, in a sense, of the nobility which they are honoring. The acceptance of Coriolanus’ noble deeds, in other words, is represented as being itself “noble.” The concept of “noble acceptance” seems to bridge the gap between the nobility of Coriolanus and the beholders of his nobility, who are in a position to accept his deeds as proof of the legitimacy of his claim to office. But according to what common standard of nobility can the deeds of Coriolanus and the acceptance of them by the plebs be assessed?

By calling attention to the simultaneously severe and low standard of virtue applied to the many (according to which the mere avoidance of ingratitude is imagined to constitute “nobility” and ingratitude is not just a vice but a monstrosity), Shakespeare suggests that there is, in fact, no common standard by which the “nobility” of the aristocratic Coriolanus and that of the plebs are to be mutually judged. No one would think of judging Coriolanus by the undemanding standard of the gratefulness with which he accepts proof of others’ deeds; he is judged for his actions, not for his reception of the actions of others. If the plebs’ formal public acceptance of his noble deeds (which is meant to translate into their approval of his election as consul) is to be praised, it must be so according to some other, lesser standard of “nobility” rather than a measure common
to all. There is no seamless continuity between noble feats and the “noble” or, at any rate, necessary acceptance of them by the people, and the resultant election of Coriolanus to the office of consul.

Although the Roman republic holds that “valour is the chiepest virtue and / Most dignifies the haver” (2.2.84-85) it demands from aspirants to office in addition to their demonstration of valor a conspicuous display of humility. As part of the ritual of election, the senate’s candidate for consul appear before the people in a “vesture of humility” (2.1.232), display the wounds he had won in battle and ask for the people’s voices. Such a ritual, although technically a formality, proves in the case of Coriolanus to serve as an insuperable barrier to entry. He has not been educated to ask for what he sees as being rightfully already his possession but rather to demand it by right of desert. The democratic language of humility and necessity is alien to him. He cannot find a way of mutually accommodating the demands of his character (which amount to the demands of his personal honor) and the demand that he show “democratic humility” in making even a token display of deference to the will of his fellow citizens. The price of obtaining the popular voice for his election to consul is not only to don the vesture of humility and display his wounds but also, as the First Citizen points out, to “ask it kindly” (2.3.75). Even as a formality, the ritual imposes symbolic constraints of upon the claim to rule by right of some combination of birth-conferred natural right and “deed-achieving honour” (2.1.172). The barrier to entry standing between Coriolanus and political office has two dimensions: honor and humility. The display of wounds would imply that his honorable deeds had been performed for the sake of those beholding them, while the “gown of humility” (2.3.41) would represent his need for the approval of the people, and his
acceptance of that neediness.

In sum, Coriolanus is simultaneously pointed toward the city in his desire for honor and away from it in his unrealized desire for honor above and beyond that which the city has to confer. When read through a lens focused exclusively upon the character of Coriolanus, then, the play appears to be an unrelentingly tragic commentary on the limits of politics. This reading of Coriolanus is not inaccurate, but it is incomplete. I suggest that Coriolanus offers multiple, conflicting accounts of the tension between the individual (and his or her pursuit of virtue) and the city in political life, not all of which are tragic. It is true that the play depicts a political crisis that is resolved only in the minimal sense that the city does not end up being destroyed by its former hero. But readings of Coriolanus as a “depressing” portrait of a chaotic political sphere populated by “characters with confused political values” tend to neglect the significance of the fact that it also contains an account of a political triumph, albeit a triumph achieved at a prohibitive – indeed, a tragic -- moral cost. Coriolanus is tragically at odds with political life, but Coriolanus is not the only politically significant character – nor the only heroic figure -- in the play.

There are, in fact, several different types of political actors in Coriolanus. While they have different “political values,” none of them are notably “confused” about what those values are. The play initially calls our attention to the plebeian Roman citizens who, as a result of their agitation for food, receive representation in the form of the tribunate. A related (but morally inferior) sub-type of political actor is represented by the tribunes Brutus and Sicinius, whom Shakespeare treats as a symptom of a problem with popular representation, rather than an independent phenomenon. The patricians are represented by
Menenius, who fails in his condescending attempts to placate the plebeians and his entreaty to Coriolanus to spare Rome from destruction. Finally, we have Volumnia, who gradually emerges as a political actor throughout the play and eventually ends up being celebrated by the people of Rome. Her emergence as a political actor culminates in her triumph as “the life of Rome” (5.5.1). As I shall discuss, she represents an alternative form of virtue more suggestive of Machiavellian virtù than of Aristotelian magnanimity.

At the beginning of the play, however, the only two political options seem to be that of aristocratic and heroic honor (the ethos of which centers on notions of desert, but also on inheritance) vs. the democratic demand for humanity (which centers on notions of necessity and citizen dignity and abstracts from the issues of distinction and desert).

**Honor and the Politics of Humanity**

*Coriolanus* begins with an account of people facing the most primal problem of scarcity imaginable: a lack of food so severe that those afflicted will die from it. Yet the play does not begin in something akin to a state of nature. The group assembled is a “company of mutinous citizens,” not a horde of “poor, bare, forked” animals. The citizens (all of whom are armed) have assembled to take action to redress this problem. Before taking action, however, they deliberate concerning their options. Their options are not really “options” at all – they can quietly famish, or die protesting that the fact that they have been made to famish. The choice is between death and death -- but famishing is not the same as dying. The latter is death with a difference, death with some dignity attached to it. The scarcity that has put the citizens in the position of choosing between dying, on the one hand, or famishing, on the other, is not represented as being a
mysterious phenomenon. It has a source, and that source is a human enemy. The First Citizen (who is the first speaker in the play) reminds his compatriots of what they already know: “you know Caius Martius is chief enemy to the people” (1.1.6-7). This enmity is framed in political, not personal or tribal terms. Coriolanus is enemy to “the people” (my italics) as such, not to “us,” or even “people like us.”

At stake in the protest of the plebeians is not only their struggle to achieve some pathetically minimal level of security for themselves and their families, but also the fact that they are improperly being perceived as “poor citizens” (1.1.14). Their complaint is not framed in terms of the wrongs that have been done to their well-being and sense of human dignity in the trans-political sense, but about the wrong that has been done to them in their collective capacity as “the people” (1.1.7) or “the commonalty”(1.1.27) – about the wrong that has been done to them as citizens. The First Citizen observes that “We are accounted poor citizens, the patricians good” (1.1.14-15). The index of citizen goodness or badness is not the capacity to participate in politics through the exercise of judgment and the holding of offices, but the primal issue of who gets access to food. “Good citizens” get access to food in excess; “poor citizens” are left to starve.

Significantly, the First Citizen indicts the “good citizens” on the basis of their perceived lack of humanity, not on the basis of their denial of the civic rights granted to Roman citizens under the name of Roman libertas. The First Citizen does not express a hope for just redistribution on the basis of the recipient’s desert, but for humane relief according to the giver’s supererogatory virtue of humanity: “If they would yield us but the superfluity [of corn] while it were wholesome, we might guess they relieved us humanely; but they think we are too dear: the leanness that afflicts us, the object of our
misery, is as an inventory to particularize their abundance; our sufferance is a gain to them” (1.1.16-21). The citizen suggests that if the patricians would release grain to their plebeian counterparts before that grain rotted that the patricians could be seen as acting “humanely.” Humanity is a virtue pertaining more directly to friendship than justice, and the patricians, it would seem, are not good friends to the plebs. But humanity, as the word suggests, is a transpolitical virtue bespeaking a sort of friendship towards creatures like oneself, rather than Roman citizens as such. There is no law dictating humane treatment of one’s fellow citizens in Rome, and no regular observance of a supralegal standard of humane generosity in the absence of such a law. The plebs are thus dependent upon the capricious favor of the patricians, and, when that fails to yield them any favor to speak of, their own capacity to take political action.

According to the First Citizen’s account, the patricians are guided by a concern for self-preservation (since they are being asked merely to yield up the superfluity of grain, rather than that necessary to feed themselves or their own families). Self-preservation is not an issue for them in the way that it is for the plebeians; they can literally and figuratively afford to attend to higher things. As we are soon to find out, the patricians regard the plebeians as being subhuman “rats” (1.1.161; 1.1.248) who are only interested in such appallingly humble things as food to sustain life, unlike their aristocratic counterparts who pride themselves on preferring honor to life.

The political centrality of the controversial concept of the “conflict of the orders” to the first act of the play cannot be overstated. Rome is divided into two orders that are effectively two different kinds of human beings. The fault line between them is honor. On one side, are those capable of honor, who are correspondingly endowed with virtue and
power. On the other side, are those incapable of honor. What holds them together?

Within the political logic of the aristocratic republic, there are two possible means by which a degree of political concord could be secured: the system of distributing symbolic respect and recognition through public honors that I have already discussed, and, just as importantly, the friendship and love of the “honour’d number” for those not among that number. Within the aristocratic republic, honor and civic friendship are supposed to work in tandem, with honor allowing for distinctions between friends, and civic friendship imparting a fiction of commonality between the friends thusly distinguished.⁴⁰

Menenius attempts to placate the plebs on the grounds of the putative fatherly love and charitable care that the patricians feel for the plebs, and the responsibility of the apparently unloving gods in creating the famine. His intent is to inculcate a sense of political impotence through an evocation of the language of friendship and the rhetorical construction of a common body politic. As the First Citizen indignantly points out, however, it is a peculiar sort of love that manifests itself as cannibalism.

MENENIUS: I tell you friends, most charitable care
Have the patricians of you. For your wants,
Your suffering in this dearth, you may as well
Strike at the heaven with your staves as lift them
Against the Roman state; whose course will on
The way it takes, cracking ten thousand curbs
Of more strong link asunder than can ever
Appear in your impediment. For the dearth,
The gods, not the patricians, make it, and
Your knees to them, not arms, must help. Alack,

...you slander

The helms o' th' state, who care for you like fathers,

When you curse them as enemies.

FIRST CITIZEN. Care for us! True, indeed! They ne'er car'd for us yet....

If the wars eat us not up, they will; and there's all the love they bear us.[1.1.64-85]

The tenor and substance of the First Citizen’s complaint that the patricians “ne’er cared for us yet” contrasts rather sharply with that of the second group of plebeians who are agitating on the other side of the city. We hear the report of this second group from Coriolanus. In his account, the plebs are unconcerned with citizenship and justice: “They said they were an-hungry, sigh’d forth proverbs -- / That hunger broke stone walls; that dogs must eat; / That meat was made for mouths; that the gods sent not / Corn for the rich men only” (1.1.204-207).

Here, the plebeians’ appeal is made not on the basis of the claims of civic friendship (and the virtue of humanity proper to the treatment of friends) or political justice in the sense of civic rights proper to Roman citizens. The plebs’ appeal to pity is made on behalf of abstract “hunger,” pleading “dogs” and “mouths” as much as it is on behalf of the plebs themselves. They evoke the indiscriminate beneficence of the gods as a source of legitimacy for their complaint, rather than any positive standard of justice. It is this seemingly unpersuasive complaint, however, that is represented as having proved efficacious in terms of prompting political change. Coriolanus reports on the change as a portent of political disaster to come. He notes that the plebs were granted “tribunes to defend their vulgar wisoms, / Of their own choice,” (1.1.214-215) the grant of which
will “in time / Win upon power, and throw forth greater themes / For insurrection’s arguing” (1.1.217-219). The pre-political or transpolitical qualities of humanity, pity and charity, which are invoked by patricians and plebs alike (although it is clear that they do not share definitions of these terms), are represented as holding little promise as means by which the plebs can be protected from the predations of the patricians, much less principles by which they might form a political whole. The complaints of the First Citizen suggest that formally and openly acknowledged enmity (which is the principle informing the fact of representation), rather than pretended love is the political ground upon which the patricians and plebeians must establish a relationship.

Representation, in the form of the tribunate, marks the abandonment of the notion that the patricians care for the plebs out of friendship. If the plebs were indeed members of a political body that was bound together by self-love extending to all of its incorporate parts, representation would not be necessary. The least honored members of the body (such as the toe, to which Menenius compares the plebs) would not have to be “represented” before the head or the heart, for instance, since the head or heart would recognize an injury to the toe as an injury to the whole of which each was a part. In the absence of the commonality, sympathy and presumed equality native to friendship, representation functions as a formal substitute through which the claims of the plebs can be asserted and defended.

The establishment of popular representation similarly threatens the system of distributing honors, which secures at least some symbolic commonality between the patricians and the plebs in the exchange of noble deeds for noble acceptance. The tribunes stand in between the noble doers and the noble acceptors, suggesting that what is
at stake is not shared honor, on the one hand, or civic friendship, on the other, but rights, charters and liberties. Coriolanus recognizes that popular representation is a threat to the existing order of Rome within which he (and his patrician peers) have flourished. In what may be his only acute political insight in the play, Coriolanus recognizes that the claims represented by the tribunes are claims to honor as well as claims to justice. He recognizes as well that if the definition of honor is extended to reach beyond those entitled to it by birth or deeds, thereby including those lacking in desert in both senses, that the republic can only look forward to further insurrection in the form of democratization. Honor expanded to all is honor denied and reduced to equal dignity, a principle which does not invoke desert and which does not, in and of itself, lend itself to distinctions based on rank and virtue.

Finally, representation does not hold out the promise of greater humanity and friendship of the sort falsely proferred by the patricians. The tribunes pointedly assert themselves as defenders of the people’s interests, liberties and the law, not dispensers of charitable care or their “country’s friend[s]” (3.1.216) which Menenius urges them to be. They do not even bother feigning warmth or love. Through his depiction of the flaws in the patrician politics of fake friendship, the inflexible politics of honor and the inadequacies of popular representation, Shakespeare creates a lacuna in the space where a middle ground between patrician and plebeian politics should be. This is the space occupied by Volumnia, who tries to convince Coriolanus that honor justifies – and even requires – the exercise of a policy aimed at pleasing the plebs.

Honor Rightfully Understood
In Act 3, after Coriolanus’s disastrous outburst in front of the plebs and their tribunes, Volumnia assumes the role of a political expert on damage control, and a teacher who is tasked with reminding her student-turned-would-be-political actor of what he is supposed to already know. She points out to Coriolanus that, contrary to his indignant suggestion that his honor would be fatally compromised by giving even a symbolic show of deference to people he considers to be beneath him, honor (rightfully understood) actually demands such gestures.

Coriolanus is generally represented by criticism as a figure who can only act and speak as a soldier and whose downfall lies in his inability to domesticate his military virtues into more politically palatable qualities of character. Yet if we look at the passage in which Volumnia and Menenius are reproaching Coriolanus for having been “something too rough” (3.2.24-25) with his wildly impolitic treatment of the tribunes, we find that Volumnia’s criticism of Coriolanus is that he has failed to act as a soldier would in this instance and that he has been “absolute” in politics in a way that he would not be in war:

You are too absolute.

Though therein you can never be too noble,

But when extremities speak. I have heard you say,

Honour and policy, like unsever’d friends,

I’th’ war do grow together: grant that, and tell me,

In peace what each of them by th’other lose

That they combine not here. [3.2.39-43]

Coriolanus has no adequate rejoinder to this argument. All he can offer by way of
response is “Tush, tush!” (3.2.44), but Menenius remarks that Volumnia’s question to Coriolanus is “a good demand” (3.2.45). Volumnia presses the issue, asking Coriolanus why, if he is willing to practice dissimulation in wartime, is he not willing to extend that practice in peace, with the implication being that politics, like war, is also governed by the imperatives of necessity.

If it be honour in your wars to seem
The same you are not, which for your best ends
You adopt your policy, how is it less or worse
That it shall hold companionship in peace
With honour, as in war, since that to both
It stands in like request? [3.2.46-51]

The full recognition of necessity – as the condition in which “extremities speak” --- must entail an acknowledgment of the need for honor to keep company with policy. Nobility can be “too absolute” in the context of necessity; it must deign to practice craftiness in the form of policy.

Volumnia tries to frame this advice in terms of knowledge that he has already accepted in a different context, putting it to him as something that she has already heard him say. She is merely giving his own insight back to him, and suggesting that he recognize that what applies in war applies in peace. Peace, like war, is a condition in which extremities speak, and honor must adapt itself to accommodate those extremities. Seeming like something that one is not is necessary if one is to achieve the “best ends.” Here, honor is not like moral virtue (which disregards consequences and does the moral thing in spite of them); this new version of honor defers to the effectual truth -- the best
end rather than the morally best. Knowing that Coriolanus believes that the field of war, not the political forum, is the proving ground of honor, she is asking him to view politics as a state of war, which, according to his own logic (in which war is the playing field for the gods), would represent an elevation of politics, rather than a reduction of it.

Once peacetime politics are reconstrued as war by other means, the practice of policy (meaning craftiness, cunning machinations and deceit) becomes not only tolerable, in Volumnia’s account, but downright honorable. Honor can’t achieve distinction in war if it won’t consort with its “unsever’d friend,” and absent distinction, what is honor? She points out that she herself “would dissemble with my own nature where / My fortunes and my friends at stake requir’d / I should do so in honour” (3.2.62-64). That she herself would “dissemble with [her] own nature” under the pressure of necessity is meant to make an impression on Coriolanus because, as she has reminded him, she is no less spirited (3.2.29) and honorable than he is.

The contrast between Volumnia’s ultimate political triumph and Coriolanus’s attempted flight from politics is made especially striking because Shakespeare indicates that both Coriolanus and Volumnia begin with the same raw material of spirited hearts inclined to anger (3.2.29). Where they differ is in their use of their brains. Volumnia points out to Coriolanus that although she has a heart that is no more inclined to comply with the demands of others than that of her son, she also has a “brain that leads my use of anger / To better vantage” (3.2.30-31). Coriolanus, in contrast to his mother, is guided and defended not by his brain but by his heart (1.9.37; 3.1.255). Near the end of the play, he openly asks Volumnia not to “allay my rages and revenges with / Your colder reasons” (5.3.84-86).
Coriolanus finds it difficult to tolerate his mother’s onslaught, but he finds it just as difficult to refute her. He is reduced to asking: “Why force you this?” (3.2.52). Her response is simple, direct and action-oriented:

Because that it now lies upon you to speak
To th’ people; not by your own instruction,
Nor by th’ matter which your own heart prompts you,
But in such words that are but roted in
Your tongue, though but bastards and syllables
Of no allowance to your bosom’s truth.
Now, this no more dishonours you at all,
Thank to take in a town with gentle words
Which else would put you to your fortune and
The hazard of much blood. [3.2.52-61]

The conquest of one’s own town in time of peace by deceitful words, she suggests, is comparable to the conquest of an enemy town in a time of war by “gentle words.” The deception of one’s countrymen, it would seem, is like gentleness towards foreign enemies. Gentleness, in this context, is valuable not because it spares the lives of others, but because it spares oneself from being exposed to fortune and hazard. It a way of reducing risk through rational control. Volumnia’s version of honor is willing to traffic with policy – and, just as importantly, to appeal directly to the people.

Given the portrait of Volumnia that we find in Act 3, it is not surprising that a considerable variety of scholars have taken note in passing of the fact that she has some of the attributes of Machiavellian virtù. The political significance of Shakespeare’s
decision to endow Volumnia with Machiavellian attributes is especially striking in light of the widely agreed upon identification of the figure of Volumnia with the city of Rome as a whole. Even though the suggestion that Coriolanus’s mother bears a more than passing resemblance at points to a Machiavellian *politique* predated Shakespeare, more recent critics have still found it remarkable or even troubling on occasion. Brian Vickers points out that “the lessons in political lying that Volumnia gives her son” represent “violations… of such ethical norms as honesty, sincerity [and] accountability” but Shakespeare leaves no doubt as to the political efficacy of Volumnia’s violations of such ethical norms. What, then, are the political implications of Shakespeare’s representation of Volumnia as “a dramatic analogue to the playwright himself” who causes Coriolanus to “ac[t] out her scenarios” before ultimately usurping his authority and status as the savior of Rome?

For one thing, it suggests the primacy of the political actor as she who works (and teaches) primarily behind the scenes, but who is capable, should the need arise, of supplanting the place of her student if the need should arise. Rare is the teacher of politics who is faced with the opportunity of necessity of replacing her student as a political actor. In *Coriolanus*, we are presented with a new model of the political actor as a mother and teacher, rather than a soldier. Secondly, it suggests the necessity of appealing directly to the audience to whom the playwright is ultimately accountable for the success of her project (this is the dramatic equivalent of democratic republican accountability). Volumnia’s ultimate triumph as “the life of Rome” is celebrated by *all of Rome*, including the plebeians upon whom she had previously lavished so much vitriol, who welcome her back to Rome with great joy (5.4.50-64 -5.5.8). Her triumph leads Menenius
to suggest that Volumnia’s success may have been brought about by the prayers of the people (5.4.56-58). As a result, he gives popular prayers more credit than he had prior to her triumph. At the end of the play, she is lauded as the most important political actor in Rome who is “worth of consuls, senators, patricians, / A city full; of tribunes… / A sea and land full. (5.4.54-56).

Volumnia’s triumph, it should be noted, does not serve the cause of nobility, but that of necessity. She acts to preserve the bare existence of Rome, the most basic political necessity of all. The political “value” for the sake of which Coriolanus has to be sacrificed (necessity) is not lofty and edifying, but neither is it “confused.” The means that are used to serve the end of necessity (deception, contrivance and violent execution) are similarly ignoble, but, Shakespeare suggests, nonetheless roughly effective. The character who adopts them ends up becoming “the life of Rome” (5.5.1) while the character who disdains such practices as being beneath him ends up as a battered corpse lying literally beneath the feet of his archrival Aufidius (5.6.129-30). In Act 5, Volumnia “takes over” and “crushes Coriolanus’s will to pursue the path he had chosen.”

Ultimately, Volumnia and Coriolanus are “mortal antagonists” within an agonistic dramatic and political structure. To put it crudely, Volumnia (and the “values” that she represents) wins, to the point that Coriolanus, who knows all too well about her less than noble principle of “honour and policy” describes her nonetheless in Act 5 as “the most noble mother of the world,” (5.3.49) suggesting perhaps that his standard of nobility is somewhat more flexible than it was prior to Act 3.

Alongside its portrait of a figure who will not bend or stoop to the base requirements of political life, then, the play offers an account of a figure who takes pride
in her strategic ability to bend, stoop and even kneel (5.3.56) as the occasion requires. She retains the language of honor, but expands them to accommodate the exercise of policy. In Act 5, when it is politic for her to do so, she proposes yet another understanding of honor (in which honor attains nobility by abjuring crude vengeance [5.3.154-155]) but this renunciation of vengeance occurs under the aegis of policy, not mercy or humanity. The final conflict between the demands of nobility and those of necessity is eased and obscured through artful innovation rather than heroic virtue (unless such artful innovation is itself a new, rather modern version of heroic virtue).

**Shakespeare and the “Shining Virtues”**

In his *Treatise of Human Nature*, David Hume offers the following observations on the morally ambiguous nature of heroic virtue:

> Heroism, or military glory, is much admired by the generality of mankind. They consider it as the most sublime kind of merit. Men of cool reflection are not so sanguine in their praises of it. The infinite confusions and disorder, which it has caused in the world, diminish much of its merit in their eyes… But when we fix our view on the person himself, who is the author of all this mischief, there is something so dazzling in his character, the mere contemplation of it so elevates the mind, that we cannot refuse it our admiration.49

Today, heroes (and admiration of heroes) are thought to be politically problematic.50 Given the choice, many liberal democrats might prefer to refuse the hero and his supererogatory virtues and actions their unqualified admiration but, Hume suggests, admiration of heroes can overtake even persons of “cool reflection” against their better
judgment. Admiration is more erotic than prudent: “we cannot refuse [the person of the hero] our admiration [my emphasis].” Contemplative admiration of the hero’s character and the elevation of mind afforded by it translates all too readily into something like worshipful awe. Such awe may serve as a source of action, but that action can take the form of an uncritical imitation of the hero. Thus, the privileging of the heroic subject and his or her virtues is thought to foster “an archaic ethic of emulation” as opposed to “reasoned reflection on the right [and] just.”

More frequently, honor is criticized by liberal democrats on the grounds that it fosters inequality, and hence, threatens justice. The elevation of heroic individuals who are demonstrably capable of morally, politically or aesthetically supererogatory virtue and action over their less heroic peers (who have given no evidence of being similarly endowed) as objects of emulation may threaten the democratization of virtue aimed at by protoliberal and liberal thinkers who sought to establish that everyone would be subject to the same minimal requirements for virtuous action. The democratization of virtue, in this sense, is also the moralization of virtue, or, in other words, the attempt to subject unpredictable virtù to the demands of moral constancy implicit in “equal opportunity” virtues that are available to all persons considered as equal moral subjects.

Since the time of Hobbes’s fairly decisive blow against the heroic ethos in the Western tradition (which was reinforced by Locke), some thinkers (such as Hume, Tocqueville, Nietzsche and Arendt) have grappled with that ambiguity in attempting to counter the trend towards the denunciation of (or abstraction from) heroic qualities of character which assumed special prominence in the Early Modern period. Despite Hume’s ultimately less than sanguine view of heroic virtue, he still offers a defense
(albeit a somewhat equivocal one) of “courage, intrepidity, ambition, love of glory, magnanimity and all the other shining virtues of that kind” because the dreaded alternative to the “shining virtues” all of which “have plainly a strong measure of self-esteem in them” is humility.\textsuperscript{52} Hume considers the not-so-shining virtue of humility tantamount to a moral vice and a political liability.\textsuperscript{53} Whereas Hume seems to posit a conflict between the humble and the political, Tocqueville is more concerned with “the tension between the heroic and the political.”\textsuperscript{54} For Nietzsche, that tension is more like an absolute opposition, since he views heroism as being not only non-political but necessarily anti-political. For Arendt, the political actor is the ultimate heroic “doer of great deeds and speaker of great words,” namely, the Homeric Achilles.\textsuperscript{55}

In the past twenty-five years, quite a few scholars and thinkers have taken up where Arendt left off in effectively trying to resurrect and refurbish Achilles (or, in some instances, a chastened, rehabilitated, non-gender specific version of him) as a politically relevant figure. It has been argued that courage, honor, ambition, spiritedness, the desire for glory (often in the form of fame), pride and a principled willingness to take supererogatory risks (especially on behalf of unpopular causes) are potential sources of virtue (or helpful adjuncts to it) and important aspects of political action, which should be educated and directed towards good ends, rather than extirpated or simply denied. The proposed revival of the “shining virtues” seems to be at least partly aimed at reducing the deficit of poetry and grandeur attributed to liberal democracy by even its friendly critics, but in a few instances, the objective is openly framed in terms of a revival of aristocratic virtues, without, it would seem, adequate reflection upon the potential moral costs of such a revival, or acknowledgment of instances in which elitist honor norms do not
complement — and actually threaten -- those of democratic dignity. Most commonly, the elitist ethos of honor (which is familiarly recognized to depend upon the construction in-groups that are ranked according to honor, and the exclusion of those who are outside of the ranking system altogether) is criticized on the grounds of its perceived moral inferiority to the egalitarian ethos of equal dignity that replaced it.56

It is not only liberalism and egalitarianism, however, which have made the aristocratic ethic of honor a less attractive opportunity for moral, affective or political investment. While the devaluation of heroic honor, in particular, as a desirable or even a legitimate source of political action is characteristically associated with protoliberal and liberal thought, it is important to remember that the early modern reassessment of the value of heroic virtue did not begin with Hobbes, although he is rightly singled out for his critique of heroism founded on honor and pride. As Albert O. Hirschmann has observed, the seventeenth-century “demolition of heroism” was pursued on a number of different fronts by philosophers and literary figures alike: “All the heroic virtues were shown to be forms of mere self-preservation by Hobbes, of self-love by La Rochefoucauld, of vanity and of frantic escape from real self-knowledge by Pascal. The heroic passions were portrayed as demeaning by Racine after having been denounced as foolish, if not demented, by Cervantes.” 57 While the single most influential early seventeenth-century literary inquiry into the moral psychology of heroic virtue is arguably that of Cervantes, I suggest that the most explicitly political treatment of heroic virtue – and its relation to honor and justice -- in the early modern period is found in Coriolanus.

A problem arises, however, when we try to figure out exactly what sort of heroic virtue it is that Shakespeare is evaluating. Is Coriolanus a pre-modern hero, closely akin
if not identical to Achilles, as Seth Benardete and many other scholars would have it?\textsuperscript{58} Or is he, as Michael Walzer suggests, a “liberal hero”?\textsuperscript{59} What exactly is a liberal hero? How are we to imagine that a liberal hero ended up in a play written in 1608? According to Walzer, “the liberal hero, author of self and social roles, is a mythic invention: it is Shakespeare’s Coriolanus, that aristocratic warrior and anti-citizen, who claims (and fails) to live ‘as if he were author of himself and knew no other kin.’”\textsuperscript{60} The operative word, however, is “fails.” In Act 5, he tries to sever all ties with nature, famously claiming that “I’ll never / Be such a gosling to obey instinct, but stand / As if man were author of himself / And knew no other kin” (5.3.34-37). Coriolanus surrenders to the claims of kinship and nature (and his mother’s will) that he finds so repugnant in this speech shortly after making it. He claims freedom from nature, then bows down before it.

The understanding of the honor-driven Coriolanus as a liberal hero points towards an interpretation of liberalism as a doctrine that, in some respects, is consistent with, rather than hostile to the claims of pride and honor.\textsuperscript{61} In this reading of liberalism, explicit claims to rights appear as implicit claims to honor, rather than primarily as claims to justice. The reading of Coriolanus as a liberal hero does not work if liberalism is viewed primarily in terms of interests, distributive justice and possessive individualism. If however, liberalism is viewed from the perspective of its initiatory moment of liberation from nature, then there is something to the notion of Coriolanus as a liberal or, at least, a failed protoliberal. He contemplates the prospect of self-authorship – and even fantasizes about it -- but he cannot bring himself to act upon it. Most problematic of all in the reading of Coriolanus as being a protoliberal hero (rather than, as Blits correctly suggests, a figure who is constitutionally divided between opposing commitments) is his
repeated sacrifice of his “own truth” in deference to his mother’s will. In terms of his relationship with his mother, Coriolanus can scarcely be said to be exclusively governed by proud independence, principle, or even his own mind. In two decisive instances, (3.2 and 5.3), he offers some initial resistance to his mother but then collapses under the pressure of her authority to the point that Coriolanus appears to be Volumnia’s “puppet” or even her “slave.” This tendency to abandon the demands of his *thumos* for independence in order to defer to his mother (and, by homologous extension, to the city of Rome) at decisive moments makes it similarly difficult to read Coriolanus as *Achilles redivivus*.

If we attempt to read Coriolanus as a version of the Aristotelian magnanimous man (as has frequently been attempted in the scholarship on *Coriolanus*), we are faced with equally compelling challenges. Coriolanus’s tendency to cave in to his mother’s demands appears to be not just a matter of failing to live up to the Aristotelian standard of self-sufficiency, but an outright contradiction to those standards. He is not measured with regard to political honors (as is the Aristotelian *megalopsuchos*); he actively scorns them but also, it would seem, craves them. Scorn, no less than love, is the opposite of equanimity. Crucially, Coriolanus states his willingness to scorn his native city, and turn traitor not on the basis of a commitment to virtue but over a trifle. In 4.4.13-24, Coriolanus pointedly compares his decision to withdraw his “love” from Rome and redirect it toward the “enemy town” (4.4.24) to a quarrel between friends over a trifle and the decision of two enemies to turn “dear friends” (4.4.21). This is the only extended statement that we receive on the logic of Coriolanus’s decision to turn on Rome and there is no mention whatsoever of offended virtue. Instead, he imagines himself and Rome in
terms of bosom friends quarreling over nothing and “fellest foes” (4.4.18) turned friends over “some trick not worth an egg” (4.4.21) and concludes, “So with me” (4.4.22).

In *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare offers us a coolly skeptical account of the relationship between honor and liberty by showing us that the liberty sought after by honor-loving individuals may depend upon keeping others deprived of liberty. It is difficult to make a case that the tribunes’ suspicion of Coriolanus on the grounds that he will take away the liberties of the plebs (2.3.212-213) is unwarranted. Part of what Coriolanus seems to love about liberty is that it leaves him free to dominate others; his fantasy of liberty entails freedom from all obligations to the rights of others, including their right to life. Left to his own devices, he openly admits, he would kill his fellow Romans (1.1.196-199), leaving one to wonder what it means to love a city while being willing to slaughter many of its inhabitants. The political unfreedom of others is, to his mind, the condition of his own liberty. To be sure, honor defends the liberty of its own, but “its own” may consist solely of one’s self. The liberty of “the honour’d number” is not the liberty of their fellow citizens, much less the liberty of human beings more generally. Shakespeare harbors few illusions about the extent to which the love of liberty can be made to benefit those most in need in liberty, as opposed to those who already have liberty and fear that they will lose out if liberty is extended to others.

Ultimately Shakespeare’s complex, measured, and generally equitable account of heroic virtue raises questions about the sanguine supposition that the relation between those possessed of an appetite for distinction through extraordinary displays of the “shining virtues” and liberal democratic politics can ever be anything other than strained. In the context of even such a minimally democratic form of political life such as the
Roman republic, Coriolanus’s honor is (tragically) robbed of its political potential to serve the cause of justice as the common good because it is not coupled with either humility and humanity, on the one hand, or the cunning ability to feign such virtues, on the other.

In calling attention to the morally and politically untenable nature of a politics governed by norms of honor, Shakespeare indicates a problem which would eventually be both addressed and obscured by the modern politics of democratic dignity. His account casts just as many doubts, however, on the argument that political life and even justice itself can survive without being supplemented by supererogatory heroic virtue. It is this very tension between the requirements of honor and those of justice that political education attempts to overcome; in this sense, Volumnia’s peculiar education (which almost amounts to a parody of the notion of education as corruption) of Coriolanus is a failure. Viewed from the perspective of her own self-education, her innovative concepts of “honour and policy” and “noble cunning” allow for her own success in saving Rome, but that success is purchased at the expense of nobility and honesty. In its skeptical consideration of the alternative models of political understanding and action represented by Coriolanus and Volumnia, the play itself presents its audience with an opportunity for a political education, and a lesson in justice. Contra Hazlitt, Coriolanus equitably distributes blame and praise amongst patricians and plebs alike. The “dramatic moral” of Coriolanus is not just that those who have little shall have less. It is also the ethically and politically ambiguous suggestion that those who have much can keep what they have and acquire more by deferring — or appearing to defer — to the needs of those of who have little. Political dramatists, like their theatrical counterparts, needs must be democratic
republicans in this minimal sense.

Throughout the play, Shakespeare grapples with the fact that Rome needs Coriolanus while not ignoring the fact that it cannot tolerate his presence for long. He can and should be employed but if that employment goes wrong, the play coldly acknowledges, he (and, it would seem, those like him) must be sacrificed for the sake of the city’s common good. Rome, like Volumnia, must give up her sons if necessity calls for it. In the end, Shakespeare’s critique of the hero as would-be-political actor lends weight to the “suggestion that there is no place in democratic politics for a [person] who would act only on the grand scale, in the great crises.”

Coriolanus is skeptical about the political merits of ambition, and hence, does not posit a necessary link between ambition and statesmanship. The play does, however, anticipates later political thoughts by suggesting that democratic republican politics can benefit from honor-driven individuals by making them compete against each other, thereby limiting the damage that any one such individual might do if left unchecked to pursue their desire to rule others. Untempered by a dose of humility and humanity, however, it is unclear how such persons can serve the cause of justice as the common good without taking lessons on how to conceal that desire from Machiavelli.
1 William, Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays* (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1818), 85.

2 Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays*, 85.

3 Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays*, 89.


10 This and subsequent quotations are from Coriolanus, ed. Philip Brockbank, Arden2 (London: Methuen, 1976).

11 On the politics of honor vs. the politics of citizen dignity see Charles Taylor: “For some to have honor…it is necessary that not everyone have it. Honor is intrinsically a matter of ‘préférences.’… As against this notion of honor, we have the modern notion of dignity in a universalist and egalitarian sense… or of citizen dignity. The underlying premise here is that everyone shares in it.” Multiculturalism and The Politics of Recognition (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992), 27. The universalist notion of dignity is not found in Coriolanus, but a version of “citizen dignity” (such as that suggested by Roman libertas) is. For a consideration of Taylor’s concept of citizen dignity in the context of Athenian politics, see Joshua Ober, The Athenian Revolution: Essays on Ancient Greek Democracy and Political Theory. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996), 87 and 101-102.


13 I borrow the phrases “the politics of nobility” and “the politics of necessity” from Lee Ward, “Nobility


14 See Ward, “Nobility and Necessity,” for a discussion of honor as a bridge between nobility and necessity.


18 Walzer, “Liberalism and the Art of Separation,” 324. Such arguments imply that the affirmation of possessive individualism must follow from the denunciation of heroism as night from day, but as Albert O. Hirschmann suggests, “denunciation of the heroic ideal was nowhere associated with the advocacy of a new bourgeois ethos.” See The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before Its Triumph, 20th Anniversary Ed. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997), 12. Terry Eagleton implies that Coriolanus is at once a “bourgeois prototype” and a figure akin to the Homeric Achilles, a move accomplished by collapsing both Coriolanus and Achilles into the category of possessive individualists (*William Shakespeare, 73-74*). Eagleton’s suggestion that Coriolanus, like the Homeric Achilles, is a “possessive individualist” implies that possessive individualism is a preliberal (in fact, it would seem a Homeric) phenomenon. This view depends upon the confusion of honor (which disdains the pursuit of security, possessions, and self-preservation) with interest.


26 Alvis, _Shakespeare’s Understanding of Honor_; Platt, _Rome and Romans_; Cantor, _Shakespeare’s Rome_, 36; Paul N. Siegel, _Shakespeare in His Time and Ours_ (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1968).

27 Cavell, “Who does the wolf love,” 2.

28 Blits, _Spirit, Soul, and City_, 31.

29 At points in the play, honor is envisioned as a substitute for virtue. The familiar notion that honor can act as a substitute for or a supplement to virtue is on display in Act I. When Aufidius is contemplating his next battle with Coriolanus, he observes that “Mine emulation hath not that honour in’t had: for where / I thought to crush him in an equal force, / True sword to sword, I’ll potch at him some way, / Or wrath or craft will get him” (1.10.12-16). On honor and virtue, see Suzanne Smith, “Shakespeare and the Politics of Honor: Purpose and Performance in _Julius Caesar._” _Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy_ 33 (2006): 243-280.

30 As James Boyd White observes, Coriolanus “fights for Rome, from which he receives honor and deference in return. But this arrangement works only so long as Rome functions as a unit; when the city
divides into formal political factions through the establishment of tribunes representing the poor.

Coriolanus himself becomes an item of political dispute.” See *The Edge of Meaning* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001), 8. The introduction of popular representation suggests that the body politic cannot be held together by civic friendship (the political equivalent of self-love).

31 Humility entails the recognition that one is not a god. Brutus tells Coriolanus that he speaks “o' th' people /As if you were a god, to punish; not / A man of their infirmity” (3.1.79-81).

32 Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, 143.


34 Coriolanus claims that he has been brought to the brink of being elected as consul by “mine own desert… /…but not mine own desire” (2.3.66-67). It is Volumnia who indicates that it is her fondest desire that he should occupy the place of consul (2.1.196-199). After Coriolanus is honored by Rome, Volumnia tells him that although she has “lived to see inherited my very wishes, / And the buildings of my fancy” there still remains “one thing wanting, which I doubt not but / Our Rome will cast upon thee” (2.1.197-199).


38 My reading of this scene reflects the influence of Blits, *Spirit, Soul, and City*, and Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* upon my argument.

39 Blits observes that in this passage, “to die” means “to die fighting, with self-respect. It means placing something higher than – and even in opposition to one’s life.” See *Spirit, Soul, and City*, 11-12.

40 The patricians and the plebs alike, in contrast to the tribunes, frequently evoke the language of love and friendship (2.2.51-53; 2.3.91-92).


43 In earlier versions of the story of Coriolanus, Volumnia was known as “Veturia.” Alexandre de Pontaymeri suggests that in persuading Coriolanus not to destroy Rome, Veturia used “manie great maximes of and for the state… as all the Xenophons, Tacitusses, Machiavels, yea, whatsoever Councellors to the Princes of Europe may justly learn example… and admit them amongst the very cheefest dessignes.” See A Vvomans Vvoorth, Defended Against All the Men in the World: Proouing Them to be More Perfect, Excellent and Absolute in all Vertuous Actions, Then Any Man of what Qualitie Soeuer... trans. Anthony Gibson (London: Iohn Wolfe, 1599), 6.

44 Frederick Boas observes that “it is somewhat startling to find [Volumnia] so apt a mistress of diplomatic methods… her doctrine of legitimate dissimulation is better suited to the Italy of Machiavelli than to… Rome in the 5th century B.C.” See Shakespeare and His Predecessors (London: John Murray, 1896), 491. Harold Goddard argues that in her attempt to persuade her son to dissemble for the sake of his election as consul, “Volumnia reveals her true colors. This supposed paragon of Roman honor turns Machiavellian politician and, like a totalitarian in our day, begs her son to dissemble until the office is his.” See The Meaning of Shakespeare (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1950) 603.


46 James G. Bulman, The Heroic Idiom of Shakespearean Tragedy (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1985), 19;


52 Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 382. Hume’s qualified defense of the “shining virtues” should be read not only in terms of his desire to exploit their appeal in a polemical context, but also in terms of his positive aversion to humility. Nonetheless, as Annette Baier points out, “Hume has almost as many doubts about the character of the hero as about the character of the humble saint.” See *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume’s Treatise* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991), 210.


54 Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, 410.


60 Walzer, “Liberalism and the Art of Separation,” 324.

which, much like Kristol’s article, argues for the benefits of honor to liberal societies.

62 Vickers, *Coriolanus*, 19; Michael McCanles, “The Dialectic of Transcendence in Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*,” *PMLA* 82 (1967), 44. Barbara Parker neatly summarizes Coriolanus’s reversals in III:ii. “Torn between pleasing his mother and performing an intolerable task, he reverses himself no less than three times: ‘I cannot do it’ (3.2.40), ‘I will do’t’ (3.2.103), ‘I will not do’t’ (3.2.122), ‘Look, I am going’ (3.2.126)” (69).

63 Blits, *Spirit, Soul, City*, 3-4.


65 In the midst of a crisis, Rome is saved from being destroyed by one spirited, honor-loving individual through the “happy victory” (5.3.186) of one over another.

66 In the context of what Judith Shklar has called “the liberalism of fear,” humanity (which, unlike honor, necessarily rejects cruelty) would seem to be as important a quality of character as honor.