

*Prize Essay Read by Richard G. Ellsworth at the Commencement Exercises, May 27, 1926.*

## SHAKESPEARE'S CORIOLANUS

Shakespeare's plays are sometimes arbitrarily classified as tragedy, comedy, and history. "Coriolanus," which is taken from Plutarch, may be called an historic tragedy of classical times. In this play there is evinced that close adherence to his source which is so characteristic of Shakespeare's treatment of Plutarch. Shakespeare takes very few liberties with Plutarch, for our greatest national poet, whose subject is always humanity, and who, as is almost universally admitted, has said more about human nature and said it better than any other profane writer, found in Plutarch that ideal combination of well described situations and excellent character delineation so essential to dramatic production. Plutarch was not a writer of annals but of lives; he portrayed his subjects as he knew them, straightforwardly and simply, obscuring nothing, magnifying nothing. None realized his power in this better than did Shakespeare, who knew when to let well enough alone, and so we find from a comparison of the two that he was content to accept Plutarch as he found him. A deep analysis of the play and of the original is not necessary to see how closely the poet adhered to the early Grecian master; in fact the play is but the dramatic version of the original, supplemented of course to meet the exigencies of drama, and in parts a phrase for phrase reproduction of Lord North's translation rendered in blank verse. To quote a few examples: when the Volscians had been driven within the gates of Corioli, Caius Marcius (for he had not yet received his honorary title of Coriolanus) is reported by Plutarch as saying: "That fortune had opened the gate to the victors rather than to the vanquished, while the poet renders it:

Marcius: "Tis for the followers fortune widens them, not for the fliers."

So on throughout the play, we find Plutarch continually repeated. A very striking example is the plea of Volumnia to her son, who, having been banished from Rome by the Plebeians, has attached himself to the Volscians, and with the fires of his pride fanned to blazing heat by his downfall at the hands of those whom he had

always looked upon with contempt, is about to avenge his wrongs by ravishing with fire and sword the roofs and people of his native city. Yet Shakespeare is not slavish in his homage. He does not hesitate to supplement Plutarch in this and in many other instances. He adds for dramatic effect, he also omits situations that do not bear directly on the drama, and transfers scenes to a different time or place from that given by Plutarch.

To understand and fully appreciate the play it must be read, but the following will suffice to explain the situation, the events that lead up to it, and the results ensuing from it:

The infamous Tarquinius Superbus had been banished from Rome and the kingdom had become a republic, but the lot of the plebeians was little better than before. The senate, taking the part of the higher orders, had oppressed the people so much that they were on the verge of rebellion. Rome was then at war with the Volscians, and without the common people, who served in the ranks of the army, she was helpless. Menenius Agrippa, an aged senator more moderate than his colleagues, was sent to pacify the mutinous citizens. He exemplified the relative positions of patricians and plebeians by relating the famous legend of "the belly and the members" to the people, and so succeeded in inducing them to refrain from their intended revolt. Shortly afterwards, they were successful in gaining a voice in the government by the appointment of five tribunes to represent them.

Now Caius Marcius, who, while yet a youth, had won the coveted oaken garland for his conspicuous bravery in the expulsion of the Tarquins, and who had added honor to honor by his prowess and courage in seventeen successive years of warfare, was one of the most violent opponents of the plebeians in their struggle for equality. Brought up by his widowed mother, Volumnia, his natural warlike bent was fostered and encouraged by her, whose greatest joy was to see her son returning from glorious war crowned with the insignia of victory. This maternal indulgence and encouragement of his warlike spirit, although it had made him the terror of his enemies, the model of the young nobility, and the supporting arm of the infant republic, yet, because it did not restrain his talents to their proper channels, had nurtured in him a



false, unbending pride, and an unconcealed contempt, even hatred of the lower classes.

On his return from his latest triumph, the capture of Corioli, the capital city of the Volscians, which had won for him the honorary title of Coriolanus, he was prevailed upon by the senate to offer himself as a candidate for consul. In accordance with custom he was to stand in the forum, garbed in a loose robe, and there embrace the people, exhibit his scars as marks of his love and sacrifice for his city, and beg the people for their voices. This proceeding was so distasteful to the haughty Coriolanus, that, instead of mollifying the smouldering anger of the plebeians, who could not forget that he had opposed them, he further incensed them by his proud bearing and scornful words. The final spark was touched when the crafty tribunes, Sicinus and Brutus, who, to further their own ulterior purposes, had set themselves up as champions of liberty and equality, summoned him to answer for his actions before the assembled populace. This he refused to do, but was finally persuaded by his mother and friends to ask the people's pardon. The difficulty of such an action to Coriolanus is vividly pictured by Shakespeare in Coriolanus' reply to the importunities of his friends:

Cor.: "Well! I must do't,  
 Away, my disposition, and possess me  
 Some harlot spirit! My throat of war be turn'd  
 Which quired with my drum, into a pipe  
 Small as a eunuch, or the virgin voice  
 That babies lulls to sleep! The smiles of knaves  
 Tent in my cheeks; and school-boys' tears take up  
 The glasses of my sight! A beggar's tongue  
 Make motion through my lips, and my armed knees,  
 Who bowed but in my stirrup, bend like his  
 That hath received an alms: I will not do't:  
 Lest I surcease to honor mine own truth,  
 And, by my body's action, teach my mind  
 A most inherent baseness."

Here again he demurs, but on further solicitation by his mother he gives in with the following ironical words:

Cor: "Pray, be content:  
 Mother, I am going to the market place;  
 Chide me no nore. I'll mountebank their loves,  
 Cog their hearts from them, and come back belov'd

Of all the trades in Rome. Look, I am going:  
Commend me to my wife. I'll return consul;  
Or never trust to what my tongue can do  
I' the way of flattery, further."

Coriolanus, accompanied by his friends, proceeded to the forum where the rabble awaited him, their anger aroused to the breaking point by the insidious conspirings of the tribunes. On being accused of treachery to his city, all the pent up wrath of Coriolanus broke from its restraint, and he sealed his doom by the following scathing denunciation of the tribunes and people:

Cor: "The fires i' the lowest hell fold in the people!  
Call me their traitor,—Thou injurious tribune!  
Within thine eyes sat twenty thousand deaths,  
In thy hands clutched as many millions, in  
Thy lying tongue both numbers, I would say,  
Thou liest, unto thee, with a voice as free  
As I do pray the Gods."

On the given signal from Sicinus the now thoroughly aroused mob, who had come prepared to sacrifice their victim, cried out in one voice:

"To the rock with him, to the rock with him."

The shouting increased. Coriolanus' honor has been questioned. The scars he has received in seventeen years of devoted service, his unparalleled bravery and military genius, his generous refusal to accept his due share of the spoils of Corioli, his high rank, the awe which he was wont to inspire in the craven hearts of the people,—all fade away as like a mist, and he now stands doomed by those who see before them, not Rome's greatest warrior, but a haughty, cruel tyrant, whose pride shall prove his downfall.

However we may deplore this weakness in Coriolanus, we must admire the courage with which he receives the sentence of death as throwing all caution to the winds, he defies the mob to do their worst;

Cor.: "I'll know no further:  
Let them pronounce the steep Tarpeian death,  
Vagabond exile, flaying; pent to linger  
But with a grain a day: I would not buy



Their mercy at the price of one fair word;  
Nor check my courage for what they can give,  
To have't with saying, Good morrow."

The unscrupulous, but wily tribunes, fearing perhaps that the extreme penalty might arouse the sympathy of the people at the last moment, and redound to their own destruction, commute the sentence to banishment; and so Coriolanus, his pride still unabated, and his heart burning for revenge, betakes himself to the Volscian capital, throws himself at the mercy of his great enemy Tullus Aufidius, and is given command of an army against Rome. Finally, after having overrun the states of Rome's allies, and devastating their cities, he encamps his army before the gates of the city which he had last entered as a returning conqueror, and which had shown its gratitude by banishing him from within its walls. The people were in a panic. The man upon whom they had been wont to depend to preserve them from their enemies had turned his arm against them; the cowardly tribunes, realizing their own impending doom, prevailed upon the friends of their banished leader to plead with him that he might spare the city which exiled him; but he remained firm in his purpose, until his mother and wife, with his young son, Marcius, coming to him in their mourning garments, pleaded with him so earnestly that, being compelled to choose between love and revenge, his heart softened, and he withdrew his army, knowing that he was signing his own death warrant.

In this dramatic climax Shakespeare rises to the very heights of pathos. Volumnia's appeal must be read to be appreciated, but it is too long for insertion here. The dramatic effect is heightened by the dilemma which she proposes to him:..

Vol.: "Alas! how can we for our country pray,  
Whereto we are bound; together with thy victory,  
Whereto we are bound? Alack; or we must lose  
The country, our dear nurse; or else thy person,  
Our comfort in the country."

She shows him that whether he win or lose in his rash attempt to avenge his wrongs, both he and she will suffer by it. If he fails, she will be forced to look upon her son led manacled through the streets; if he wins, he

will bear the palm for having ruined his country, and for having shed his wife's and children's blood. Volumnia herself avows that he shall not enter the city except he trample over the dead body of his mother. She then contrasts the honor that will be his if he will, by giving up his project, bring about a lasting peace between the Romans and Volscians, with the infamy that will ever be attached to his name if he obstinately continues in his shameful course. Coriolanus is visibly moved, but it is not until she falls to her knees that his pride weakens; the floodgates of his heart are opened as, holding his mother's hands he cries:

Cor.: "Oh mother, mother  
What have you done? Behold the heavens do ope,  
The gods look down, and this unnatural scene  
They laugh at; O my mother, mother !O!  
You have won a happy victory to Rome:  
But for your son,—believe it, O, believe it,  
Most dangerously you have with him prevailed,  
If not most mortal to him. . . ."

He calls off his legions and returns to Corioli. Now, Tullus Aufidius, whose jealousy has been aroused by Coriolanus' popularity with the soldiers, sees in this an excuse for bringing him into disrepute with the Volscian senators, and thus re-establishing himself as leader of the army. A conspiracy is formed, and Coriolanus is brought before the Volscian senate to answer for his conduct. The jealous Aufidius, knowing the weakness of Coriolanus, accuses him of treachery. Once more his wounded pride breaks forth in a scathing abuse of his adversary, and in the confusion that follows he is stabbed by the latter, a victim at last of the mother of all vice—Pride.

Such in short, is the story of Coriolanus, immortalized by Plutarch, a story dramatic in its essence, and dramatized by the master hand of the greatest playwright of all time. For one who makes no pretence of being a literary critic, to attempt to criticise is as presumptuous as it is impossible. We can but read and wonder. The marvellous knowledge of human nature displayed by Shakespeare leaves us confounded at our own ignorance. In "Coriolanus" he attains to the sublimest heights of pathos, especially in the speech of Volumnia when she begs her son not to commit violence against the city.



As we have said, Shakespeare follows Plutarch closely, but he heightens the dramatic effect beyond measure by the versatile touch of his own unparalleled genius. The scene before the gates of Rome is beautifully described by Plutarch, but the subtle touch of Shakespeare's hand adds an indefinable something to the picture which leaves us breathless at its close. Plutarch ends Volumnia's plea by speaking in the third person: "When she had said this, she threw herself at his feet, together with his wife and children." There he has Coriolanus submit, thus mercifully ending the scene by drawing a veil over the picture of a mother kneeling to her son. But Shakespeare, who stops at nothing, not only forces the mother to the dust, but shows her there laying bare her heart in a last despairing cry, which is remembered long after the play is ended:

Volumnia: "He turns away:  
Down ladies; let us shame him with our knees.  
To his surname Coriolanus 'longs more pride,  
Than pity to our prayers. Down; an end:  
This is the last,—so we will home to Rome  
And die among our neighbours.—Nay, behold us:  
This boy that cannot tell what he would have  
But kneels, and holds up hands, for fellowship  
Does reason our petition with more strength  
Than thou hast to deny 't.—Come, let us go:  
This fellow had a Volscian to his mother:  
His wife is in Corioli, and his child  
Like him by chance:—Yet give us our despatch.  
I am hushed until our city be afire,  
And then I'll speak a little."

If there is one respect in which Shakespeare excelled all other writers, it is in his almost perfect knowledge of women. We find this revealed in all his plays, not ostentatiously but by delicate touches, delightfully feminine, and expressed sometimes in very few words; we get it in the scene where Valeria comes to visit the wife and mother of Coriolanus:

Val:—"How does your little son?"

Virg: "I thank your ladyship, well, good madam."

Vol: "He had rather see the swords and hear a drum than look upon his school-master."

Val: "O' my word, the father's son: I'll swear, 'tis a very pretty boy, o' my troth. I looked upon him o' Wednesday half an hour together he has such a confirmed countenance——"

The character of Coriolanus is quite real and the circumstances that nourished his pride, until it predominated over his better self, are quite probable causes of such a result. Although this pride was partly the cause of internal dissensions at Rome, the cause of Coriolanus' banishment, and finally of his death, yet Shakespeare does not condemn him. He places the situation with its consequences before us; he reveals the innermost workings of Coriolanus' mind, and the titanic struggle going on between his pride and his better nature, but he passes no judgment, he neither condemns nor vindicates. He arouses our sympathy for Coriolanus, but does not permit us to forget the penalty which Coriolanus had to suffer for his fault.

As a character Coriolanus ranks far below Othello or Lear. Othello, one of the noblest of Shakespeare's characters, is the innocent victim of his greatest villain, while Coriolanus suffered through his own fault, and at the hands of those who were far inferior to himself intellectually. Lear, too, is made to suffer for his pride, but it is the excusable pride of an old man whose age has impaired his reason; moreover, his years and the extent of his sufferings demand a strong sympathy from the reader. Sicinus and Brutus are amateurs as compared with Iago or the king in "Hamlet," but in their own sphere of action they play their parts perfectly. Volumnia, very much unlike Desdemona, Ophelia, or Cordelia, has an element of masculine strength which spoils her somewhat as a great female character. Unlike them too, she is kept in the background until the final crisis arrives, but there she fills her place as none of the others could have done, except perhaps, Cordelia. There she justifies her claim to be placed in the gallery with Shakespeare's greatest women.

To further substantiate our claims for "Coriolanus," let us approach our subject from another angle. Critics contend that there is a decided falling off in Shakespeare's later plays. This might well be expected, and may be explained by saying that the master was losing his hold as the most writers do when the prime of life has passed, or that his interest in the stage was lessened with his retire-



ment from active participation in his profession. If the shortcomings of "Coriolanus" need any apology, it may be attributed to one or both of these causes without casting any reflection on the genius or industry of its author. No man can rise to such great heights and retain his grip indefinitely; his vein must sooner or later be exhausted. Moreover, the plays written after the great tragedies are new experiments to test the fickle public taste. The burst of patriotism inspired by the defeat of the Armada had brought with it a taste for the glamour of war, with its pomp and glory, its bloodshed and sordidness. Such a play as "Coriolanus" was well calculated to cater to popular wants, while at the same time the material was half formed and ready to hand. Shakespeare wrote for the theatre goers of his time. If he was sometimes forced to subdue himself to public opinions and tastes, the fault was not his own. He was compelled to bend his will to the public demands. However, there is no necessity for establishing an ability for "Coriolanus;" it is a good play, with some fine dramatic scenes, and many excellent passages. Moreover, it contains a moral without making the didactic side too apparent. This is but another tribute to Shakespeare's genius, and to his knowledge of human nature. He does not attempt to preach. He simply lays the situation before the reader and allows him to draw his own conclusions. Here is where Jonson fails. His plays are openly didactic. He did not understand, as Shakespeare did, that adverse trait of human nature which resents any attempt to coerce or to dictate a rule of conduct.

Again, if we remember that Shakespeare's theme was always humanity, with its excellencies and its attendant weaknesses, we are compelled to admit that "Coriolanus" (which is one of the later plays, and not classed among the best of these,) is as true a picture of human conduct and human action as "Othello" or "King Lear." The nice subtilties, the fine distinctions, the wealth of metaphor, and the marvellous range of thought of his great tragedies are somewhat weakened, but his knowledge of human nature remains. He does not go to the awful extremes found in "Lear" or "Othello," for experience has mellowed his outlook. He has passed through the fires of every human passion, he has sounded the depths of human feelings, he has ventured to the very extremes of hate