

Were It Not To Be Anachronism: Coriolanus As Seen by Aristotle

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Abstract

This study offers a critical re-evaluation of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* through the philosophical frameworks of Aristotle with particular reference to his typology of governments. To do this the tragedy has been scrutinized in terms of three different benchmarks utilizing Aristotle's great works *Politics*, *Poetics*, and *Nicomachean Ethics*. While the study initiates with the juxtaposition of governmental systems of Aristotle and the political aspects of the tragedy, it further investigates how the tragedy aligns with or diverges from Aristotelian ideals of ethical character, political virtue, and tragic structure. The political structure of Rome, as portrayed in the play, reflects a fragile and transitioning polity, aligning neither with Aristotle's ideal constitutional model nor with his stable deviations. *Coriolanus*'s rejection of deliberative politics and the common people imparts him an anti-polis figure. Thus, *Coriolanus* emerges not only as a structurally Aristotelian tragedy but also as a dramatic interrogation of personal excellence in unstable political regimes.

Keywords: Aristotle, Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, tragedy

1. Introduction

Coriolanus, albeit being Shakespeare's last tragedy, has hardly been granted if little interest among both literary and theatrical cycles when compared to his previous tragedies embracing vivid imagery and glamorous scenic elements. One reason for this surprising occasion could roughly be given as the self-specific political theme of the play, which makes it hard to extend its thematic ground to a figuratively inclusive and affluent content (West & Silberstein, 2005).

Indeed, it would not be so awkward to contend that Shakespeare imparted his political insight to its utmost tone of reflection throughout this tragedy in line with the general twist of his style that is prevalently accepted to be resting on James VI's ascension to the throne (Tudeau-Clayton, 2022). This conspicuous change in his tone of political projection molded in his play revealing the transformation from a bilateral monarchical clash embellished with intrigues to that of a sovereign ruling of James VI unifying England and Scotland under one kingdom (Hadfield, 2016). Yet, most probably it is the same political content what seemingly drags *Coriolanus* to suffer the bitter uniformity of a savorless simple plot at first sight, when in reality it possesses much the same fabric of Antony and Cleopatra in view of intrinsic values such as complexity and charm (Hillman, 2013). In this sense, while the protagonist of the play, *Coriolanus*, is depicted as a valiant master soldier of aristocratic origin with a disdainful characteristic restraining him from the commonality of body politics, his remarks full of political parlance similar to the rest of the other aristocratic characters such as Menenius, Brutus and senators paradoxically accentuate the political tone of the play in a subtle picturesque fashion (Holloway, 2007). It is of course, quite possible to assess the political aspects of the play in various contexts since the concept of politics is a versatile term depending on the subject matter to be scrutinized (Grant, 2002). Sometimes the selected political motive such as ingratitude or hypocrisy, could be well knitted within the texture of a play under the pretext of natural traits designated to characters as their disposition, manner or temper, while surreptitiously indicating the theological background of the entire play (Leithart, 2006). Hence, as an ad hoc solution it becomes literally a necessary act, at this moment, to mark out the generic borders of the term politics with due regard to Shakespeare's plays exclusively (Alexander, 2024). Fortunately, this does not constitute a hard task to implement on the grounds that Shakespeare's plays stick out to be a good fit for the generic portrayal of politics as the systemic issues related to governmental organs and the rivalry for power to possess sovereignty by those who contend for it (Frazer, 2016). *Coriolanus*, by the same token, enacts as a good case in point at this juncture with its thematic structure consisting of a reciprocal political power relation that resonates between the monarch and the layman (Sanders, 2006). Notwithstanding its bilateral power strife instead of a multi-directional one which is a ubiquitous attribute in Shakespeare's previous tragedies, the play is an apt exemplification of an attempt that seeks to associate body politics with political perspective (Dobski & Gish, 2013). Shakespeare, meanwhile, both through the general content of the play and the very speech acts allocated to his characters unveils a parade that serves as a superb epitome of what Aristotle witnessed during his lifetime with one exception; the actual setting was Ancient Greece instead of Rome (Dietz, 2012). Living under the same sky with Philip II who defeated Greek city states and tutoring philosophy to his son, Alexander the Great, at his will, virtually Aristotle was the major figure who ignited the flame of a universal state in Alexander's heart (Liebert, 2011). Thus, the obvious similarities between the thematic structure of *Coriolanus* and his age brings to mind a fascinating but tricky question 'How would Aristotle have appreciated the play, had he had the opportunity to read *Coriolanus* by any chance?' since he was the author of *Politics*, one of the most groundbreaking works in Western Tradition with its well demarcated

theoretical framework on governmental systems. More precisely, until the eighteenth century when Montesquieu came up with his famous work *On the Spirit of Laws*, and separation of powers principle, *Politics* was the most detailed typological handbook that could be referred to as far as governmental systems are concerned (Alexander, 2000). In this precious work Aristotle posits six theoretical governmental systems that come up with a basic dichotomy of common interest vs. the ruler's interest in groups of two. More specifically, he labels monarchy, aristocracy, and polity as a group of three specific governmental systems that function for the benefits of the common interest while designating the remaining three as tyranny, oligarchy and democracy that function for the benefits of the rulers as a kind of perverted ruling systems (Aristotle, 1885). Aside from this fundamental information regarding the general taxonomy of governmental systems, Aristotle, also asserts the necessity of a constitution when pronouncing any type of governmental system prior to categorizing them in terms of their discrete examples with an exact number of five monarchy, four democracy, four oligarchy, and three tyranny types (Cantor, 2017). Beyond this taxonomy, Aristotle also categorizes these constitutions in a nutshell with a dichotomy of good and bad depending on their aim which could either be beneficial for the interests of commonality or a special group or an individual who is in charge of ruling (Miller, 2022). Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, in this respect, hosts a plethora of details each one of which would readily be a good pick for investigation as to Aristotle's theoretical assessment of governmental systems, and the very fabric of a society that is compulsory for constituting the ideal state (Kuzner, 2007).

Accordingly, throughout this paper the aim of the author will humbly be to analyze these fascinating political details that constitute *Coriolanus* through a specific lens, which is due to find a proper resolution to the aforementioned question "How would Aristotle have appreciated the play, had he had the opportunity to read *Coriolanus* by any chance?"

2. *Coriolanus* as Seen by Aristotle

Coriolanus throughout its general course depicts a sui-generis republic, dominated by a strong military figure, Caius Martius, who, on the one hand, excels the exact requirements of an adroit leader in the battlefield, while lacking the fundamentals of a capable statesman with his non-negotiating personality (Shrank, 2003). In this context, assessing *Coriolanus* through Aristotle's eyes clearly turns out to be an arduous task to be accomplished since republic as a concept of a governmental system lacks in Aristotle's taxonomy (Aristotle, 1885). Still, the ruling system portrayed in the play draws not so distant to his general stance towards the problem of ruling as Aristotle was in favor of a balanced distribution of power among different social layers of the society (Buckle, 2002). Granted that Shakespeare is believed to have composed *Coriolanus* with an intention to illustrate the period just in the wake of Octavius Caesar's drastic actions during the time when Rome completed its transformation from a city-state towards a young republic, Aristotle's views on power distribution appear to be a well suit for this pursuit of Shakespeare in practical terms (D'Amico, 1992). In other words, the oscillating rhythm of power relations in between the two ends of Roman society, patricians vs. plebians, as depicted in *Coriolanus*, in addition to the emergence of Tribunes as newly invented offices depending on this fluctuation could be interpreted as the incorporation of different layers of society into the ruling system (Langis, 2010). This incorporation, nonetheless, cannot be labelled as a desired systematic one when assessed in line with Aristotle's perspective cornering ruling systems; rather, it is more likely to be seen as a concession to preclude an imminent revolution that is usually ignited by the unprivileged against the injustice of ruling upper class as seen even in *Politics* let alone Aristocracies in Aristotle's account (Aristotle, 1885). To this end, the revolt of the hungry plebians in the preliminary scene of the play would be an illustration so proper for an embodiment of Aristotle's theoretical inferences concerning revolutions inasmuch as the humiliated citizens of Rome do claim their voice to be heard instead of being looked down on by noble patricians (Wudel, 2002). The recent situation, on the other hand, could also be well interpreted as a picture that enacts as the ultimate result of injustice and delinquency perpetrated by *Coriolanus*, or at least, in the eyes of the citizens of Rome since they label him as a "traitor" who "contrived to take from Rome all seasoned office" to gain "a power tyrannical" (Shakespeare, 1973, 3.3.83–85 is, a great souled man to despise others as a justified deserving person (Aristotle, 1956). Yet, taking fatal risks o). more respect he earns and therefore deserves amidst the society, and by the same token, the less a person demands As such, the quality of Shakespeare's young republic stands the case on its head and does not seem to concur with the characteristics of Aristotle's ideal state on the grounds that a good government as Aristotle appreciates, must be based on justice while functioning for the benefits of common interest (Aristotle, 1885). All these put aside, *Coriolanus*, after all, with this firm stance of his against both the demands and the irritating reproaches of the Tribunes would also be perceived as a man of sheer will who faces all sort of fatal risks for the sake of virtue; thereby making the issue a kind of more intricate evaluation as far as Aristotle is concerned (Howland, 2002). His audacity and actions could be associated with the famous Greek term *megalopsychia* which Aristotle explains as possessing a great soul that finds itself worthy of great things while arguing the more a person claims from the world and others, the than he deserves, inevitably the smaller soul he would possess, which in this respect, entitles magnanimous, that f actions during perilous times being one characteristic of *Coriolanus*, indeed he still only resembles to possess the true nature of a great souled man of Aristotle's since he falsely believes to deserve the ruling power just for being a sine qua none of the battlefields (Alvis, 1978). This perspective of his therefore, envisions a less tempting image of a capricious personality full of resentments, deserving more of a depiction no other than being full of self-conceit in view of Aristotle (Aristotle, 1956). Furthermore, serenity, above all, is the most primary characteristic of Aristotle's magnanimous man that leaves no room for any fluctuation of temper whereas *Coriolanus*, by all means, falls short of possessing this qualification with his boast in victory and rage in defeat (Oliver, 1959). With his lack of such standards what makes *Coriolanus* a heroic figure in the first place, suddenly transforms into nothing but a glamorous vanity as he cannot achieve to mold his pride into the same pot with mildness and dignity in a way that Aristotle insists (Aristotle, 2011). It is, without hesitation, function of being a community what constitutes a state while targeting to achieve the highest good simultaneously; and in the

second place, citizens that assume the role of participators to public life; citizens those are virtuous of politics, stable for justice and just for all the rest (Aristotle, 2011). Judging from this perspective, Coriolanus clearly deprives himself of the qualities pertaining to a simple but virtuous citizen that adds to the harmony and unity of a state with his contempt for rhetoric and disinclination for integrating into political community as an individual who holds civic virtue (Shakespeare, 1973, 3.3.83–85). Instead, through an Aristotelian lens, he can be a stellar epitome of a protagonist soaking in hamartia and therefore whose actions abound with hubris leading himself to a finale in which he himself sculpts his own tragic fall (Aristotle, 1984). During his journey towards his tragic fall, Coriolanus also tastes peripeteia, the most powerful part of a tragedy in terms of Aristotle, specifically when he is banished from Rome as well as anagnorisis, another important element of Aristotelian tragedy, the moment he started negotiation with his mother, Volumnia (Aristotle, 1984). *Peripeteia*, in great philosopher's *Poetica*, is defined as "a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity" (Aristotle, 1984, 1452a22–24); and *anagnorisis* as "A recognition, as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing either friendship or enmity in those who are marked for good or bad fortune" (Aristotle, 1984, 1452a29–33). These two put aside in succession, Shakespeare's refined mastery of plot construction undoubtedly appears to be knitted in strong conformity with Aristotle's distinct evaluation of superior tragedy (Aristotle, 1984). Both events, in a brilliant fashion are devised to reveal two turning points for the protagonist dragging him into a pit of suffer and tragic fall on account of a flaw in his character while serving as indispensable elements of Aristotelian tragedy (Shakespeare, 1973). This superior tragedy, on the other hand, enables its audience to reach catharsis on two premises: one as the profound pity felt for a man in the face of two conflicting duties and the next as the fear that supremacy without virtue results in self termination (Kruse, 1979). Hence, structurally speaking, Coriolanus enacts as a flawless embodiment of Aristotle's superior tragedy embracing a substantial noble figure that suffers from hamartia and therefore moves from fortune to misfortune in compliance with Aristotle's interpretations "the change of fortune should be not from bad to good, but, reversely, from good to bad, arising from a flaw in character and not from vice or depravity" (Aristotle, 1984, 1453a10). A figure of tragic excellence "**aretē**" but untempered by "**phronesis**", or practical wisdom whereby Shakespeare epitomizes a character who is singularly magnificent in martial valor yet fundamentally deficient in political sensibility (Aristotle, 1956, pp. 218–219). This is the exact issue especially where Aristotle defines virtue as a median of excess and deficiency in the navigation of wisdom and possessing the ability to accommodate to each context whereas Coriolanus, on the contrary, is a character of rigid extremity who is incapable of negotiation because of his heroic code against the demands of civil requirements (Aristotle, 1956). As Aristotle furthers, against all odds, there is only one way for success whereas there are many options to fail, and in this case, it is tragic immobility as a fatal adherence to self-consistency, which prepares Coriolanus' fail instead of tailored to be villain (Aristotle, 2011). Also, he is cautious about another risk for society that precisely resembles the situation where Coriolanus sees himself above its norms stating one who cannot manage to live in society or who finds himself sufficient so far as to feel having no interest in living among it can nothing but a "beast or god" (Aristotle, 1885, p. 5). In strict contrast to this situation, the concept of justice in terms of Aristotle amounts to *distributive justice*, where both power and honor belong to citizens equally resting on the merit and legacy of the state (Aristotle, 1885, p. 37). Ultimately, while Coriolanus embodies a form of tragic nobility, his incapacity to balance martial virtue with the civic prudence required for political harmony disqualifies him from Aristotle's conception of the truly great-souled man, exposing the inevitable downfall of a character governed by heroic extremity rather than reasoned moderation (Aristotle, 1956).

3. Conclusion

While re-interpreting *Coriolanus* through Aristotle's philosophical Works *Politics*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, and *Poetics* this study has reached the conclusion that the political framework of the tragedy reflects neither a fully formed constitutional polity nor a coherent Aristotelian deviation, but rather a volatile hybrid state on the brink of revolution. Within this fractured structure, Coriolanus stands as a figure of military excellence yet civic failure; possessing **aretē** on the battlefield but lacking **phronēsis** in the forum, which is not the equivalent of what Aristotle deems essential for genuine greatness in a political community. His lack of ability to manipulate rhetorical persuasion and his disdain for the civic structures of Roman republic deprives him of holding the status of a true *a great souled man* of Aristotle. Indeed, what is left for him is nothing but a figure distorted by hubris and political myopia.

Last but not least, while in terms of dramatical aspects, the tragedy embodies the Aristotelian hallmarks of superior tragedy, including **hamartia**, **peripeteia**, **anagnorisis**, and **catharsis**, but thematically speaking, it hosts a criticism of never compromising heroic code of honor within transitional regimes. In this context, **Coriolanus** may be read as Shakespeare's exploration of political instability and ethical rigidity, where personal greatness is signified as tragic by its resistance to civic integration.

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