



# The Two-Faced Coin of Pride and Honour in Shakespeare's Coriolanus

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All roads lead to Rome. No truer is this statement than in Shakespeare's Roman plays: Julius Caesar (1601), Antony and Cleopatra (1608) and Coriolanus (1609). In all these plays, Rome is linked to a repeated word "honour". It is for Rome that Brutus betrayed his friend and by Rome that Antony suffered shame and it is again Rome which becomes the target of Coriolanus' revenge. Picking a leader (Caesar), a friend (Brutus), a lover (Antony) and a son (Coriolanus), the essential human relationship representing any state, Shakespeare was successful in presenting Rome from different angles. Besides being Romans, these heroes, all the more so, are seeking honour, something most often noticed in all of his dramas, but here with one difference. Honour would be deliberately investigated in Shakespeare's Roman plays, especially the perfect model Coriolanus, to make a point. Here, it is, in value, unlike both Othello and Hamlet's honour which stimulates their passion for revenge, not a means; it is an end by itself. It is considerably only a means in the sense that being accompanied with pride fuses effective strategy with virtue and eventually leads, willingly, to their destruction. So honour and pride are two faces of the same coin. Intentionally, it is a coin both verbally and virtually, because in a way it is, just like financial coins, the reflection of the identity, uniqueness and the culture of the nation, and in this case, to explain the virtual meaning, it is a combination exclusively reflecting the Roman ideology. Nothing seems to offer a satisfying reason behind this end more than two opposing traits: honour and pride which in many ways, exclusively, combined in a Roman system to be a two-faced coin.

**Key words:** *Shakespeare, pride, honour, Coriolanus, Rome, postmodernism.*



## **The Two-Faced Coin of Pride and Honour in Shakespeare's Coriolanus**

In his Roman plays generally and in Coriolanus specifically, Shakespeare more clearly maintains a comprehensive balance between man and his society. Clearly modelled after Roman historic plays, these tragedies swing between personal and political interpretations.

That Shakespearian double-sidedness, Hibbard comments, his ability to present both sides of a question sympathetically is where his political strength lies (1967: 57). With unique and clever complexity, these dramatize the relationship between the person and the state, and as G. Williams explains, each “draws attention to the figures limitations” (1987: 6). He goes on to argue that the setting in ancient Italy, might bid “some cover to a dramatist intent on dealing with hard political issues” (Ibid., 8).

Depending on that, these plays contain a number of elements paralleling Rome with England. For instance, the overused body politic metaphor can be easily recognized in almost all of Shakespeare's plays. In fact, there is an implicit acceptance inside the Renaissance mind to (The Elizabethan world picture: order vs. disorder). For them, for this point to be illustrated:

The universe was a vast series of mirrors. What went in one sphere was paralleled in the others ... in the analogical sense that the introduction of disorder at any point was a surrender an admission of the power of the destructive principle which constituted a general threat. (qtd in Murray, 1978: 161)

Learntes warns his sister from getting involved with Prince Hamlet justifying:

...his will is not his own,  
..., for on his choice depends

The safety and health of this whole state.  
And therefore his choice be circumscribed  
Unto the voice and yielding of that body  
Whereof he is the head ( I,Sc.III.17).

Historically speaking, succeeding Elizabeth, James I referred to himself, in his political declaration as the head of “the body politic”. Indeed, this very politic analogy, is deliberately used, as Alex Garganigo argues, as “his almost exclusive property: more than ever before, it became a tool with which to exact and maintain obedience” (2010: 1). Generally, in all his plays, Shakespeare urges his audience to think, without a contrived solution reducing his dramatic glamour. Yet, all these “heads”, interestingly enough, ended with, however honourable, a tragic death, and more interestingly it is, especially for Romans, a self-caused



destruction best justified by the combination honour and a special kind of pride which in its essence can reach the level of “harmatia” as Aristotle calls it.

Virtue, in the wider sense, can best illustrate and exemplify these two notions, on the ground that “Shakespeare's Roman plays show Rome as an intensely patriarchal world governed by the notion of virtues, a strict, military code of personal honour and duty to the state” (Fouassier, 2012:1).

The Oxford Dictionary, correspondingly, defines virtue as “behaviour or attitudes that show high moral standards”. Actually, these high moral standards are inherent in the conception of Roman virtue (rooted from the word vir or “man”, signifying “manly excellence” as Langis explains. Furthermore, he illustrates that this perspective, again exclusively in Roma, is “the imperative to be both common and uncommon, to rise above the herd and to be co-operative within it” (2010: 3).

Relatively, representing the ever opposing values of love and war, Antony and Cleopatra and with the same complexity, Coriolanus, these Romans, in the hint of masculinity and courage, seem to propose an equal virtue and in parallel equal virility. War in both of them shown as the “cruder ideal”. In a wide sense, this value represents “nobility, practical efficiency, all-inclusive power and ambition” (Knight, 1931: 154).

Additionally, Coriolanus is constantly exposed as a new “Hercules”. His wars are terrible in their ringing, iron blows, in the breaking through city walls. Perhaps he lacks Antony's romance and passion and is not so portentous and “honour-burdened” as Brutus, due to his “pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war” as Knight exclaims that he is very much “a thing of blood, violence and specifically metal” (157).

Coriolanus' ambition, like Othello's, is “the soldier's virtue” as well, but in some respects it leads to and distinctively twined with pride something which tremendously can limit if not alter the very success it would thrive. That is much to say that his warrior ambition, the primal embodiment of virtue and valour, becomes “self-contradictory, self-poisoned one”. (Knight, 1931:154). He scornfully addresses his soldiers, although they are “filling the air with swords advanced darts” and described as “helms of the state”, as “curs”, “rats” and “shames of Rome”.

An expected contempt and condemnation can felt towards him, but on the contrary, the play, to our surprise, and more precisely, all Shakespeare's Roman plays present this proud hero as a “kind of superhuman”. And to sustain this idea, moreover, all these plays, without exceptions, open with the Romans celebrating their hero's' victory. We are made vividly aware of their ambition admittedly the celebrated and most respected “soldier's virtue”.



But, as it is the matter in other tragedies, it is only at the end, that this ambition, significantly leads the same noble warriors to banishment as traitors save Brutus, whose death, contradicting that of Julius Caesar, cannot be applied to his pride, and his nation's honour seems to be his noble quest:

All the conspirators, save only he, Did that they did in envy of great Caesar.  
He only, in a general honest thought and common good to all, made one of them (III, sc.II, 831).

Naturally, seeking honour is the inclination, for he insisted "For mine honour, and have respect to my honour" is the motive.

Interestingly enough, the other Romans are destroyed as a natural consequence of pride which by all means weakened and then altered the nature of that honour, once been the impulse of respect and achievement, and its original fancy.

Particularly in *Coriolanus*, there is an acceptance of the Roman hero dignity something which can best illustrate the nature of that Roman combination of honour/ pride. The basic structure of this play is three movements, preceded by a kind of overture which occupies the first three scenes and presents all the main characters along with the major issues. It takes place entirely in Rome and opens with *Coriolanus* return to his city with triumph.

Of prime importance, however, is the fact that this notion can be in accord with "the play's view of the inborn inequality of men" (G. Williams, 1987: 68). The concepts of the Patrician nobility have been indulged in his character so soon, and they admittedly treat him as the "epitome of Patrician Roman honour" (Andrew Gurr, 1980: 57).

And when his state celebrated his achievements in warfare, probably it is because that behind achievement, there is always an implicit quest of "virtues" or valiancy as Plutarch points in *Life of Coriolanus*, which "was honoured in Rome above all other virtues" (quoted in Hibbard p.9).

In reality, in Shakespeare's Roman plays, the setting predominately turns to be a theme by itself, a significant subject matter, since Rome is "governed by the notion of virtues, a strict military code of personal honour and duty to the state" (Fouassier, 2010: 1). Relatively, in Roman trilogy: *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*, the hero, his action, decision, suffering, achievement or reaction has comparatively reliance to Rome. Hence, depending on the notion that the city is a "Patriarchal world", a reflection of honour, all of

them, more than notably anywhere else, are measurably longing to it and identifying themselves to it, and in effect can be an image and the tool of their destruction as well.

For instance, the soldiery valour of Antony is immensely praised and by all means associated with Rome, and sacrificing this to his beloved “east”, he falls in an action of shame, in its nature different from that of Hamlet, Othello or even King Lear, for it is a shame where “Experience, manhood, honour, never before/ Did violate so itself” ( III, sc. VIII, p. 1245).

Antony's dissolution of Roman virility has lead him to dishonour:

Ant. Oh, whither hast thou led me, Egypt? See  
How I convey my shame out of thin eyes  
By looking back what I have left behind  
Stroyed in dishonour. (III sc. xII: 1247)

Surely, except violating the Roman concept of honour, the Romans can forgive their heroes anything else. The fact that Coriolanus is “vengeance proud, and loves not the common people” (II,sc.II:1284) is not invisible. Nonetheless, they are aware that he is rather serving Rome “to please his mother and to be partly proud” (I,Sc.I). Besides he is careless whether they love or hate him perhaps due to the fact, correspondingly, that “he hath so planted his honours in their eyes and his actions in their hearts that to their tongues to be silent and not confess so much were a kind of ungrateful injury” (1284).

Unsurprisingly, Coriolanus, derived from his single-handedly conquered city Corlio, only this title can worth his intention. In a way, it instills its triumphant ardour and is entirely successful in insinuating, even so, the meaning of colonization. As a matter of fact, it is something lacking honour in its essence and at the same time can suggest the very contracted meaning although it is bestowed on this courageous Roman as a “mark” of honour.

His “iron” mother, unlike other leading tragic females save Mrs. Macbeth, is not an ordinary woman. She always loves to picture Coriolanus, contradicting his delicate wife which for her does not seem to fit in with his glory-quest, gowned in blood also as a mark of honour.

**Vir.** His bloody brow! Oh, Jupiter, no blood!

**Vol.** Away, you fool! It more becomes a man  
Than gilt his trophy. The breasts of Hecuba,  
When she did suckle Hector, looked not lovelier  
Than Hector's forehead when it spit forth blood... (I.sc. IIIp: 1274)

“His violence”, as Knight explains, “his embattled pride, his ruthless scorn of inferiors, all feed her proud love” (172).

More than that, for the defeated Antony, blood can be the only means of saving and enlive honour:

Tomorrow, soldier

By sea and land I'll fight. Or I will live  
Or bathe my dying honour in the blood  
Shall make it live again... (Iv.sc. Ip: 1250S).

Along the same line of reasoning, his values are, as aforementioned, are Roman values. This is as much to say that being matched with superiority is something recurrent twined with the Roman nobility. Here, as most critics have noted, the concept of honour is “cultural”, and by no means “natural”. Then, why in any way can Coriolanus be blamed for his “pride, irascibility and unsociability?” (Langis, 2010:2).

For Aristotle, virtue presents itself not purely by moral will, but to varying degrees in being with or in resistance to nature:

*Non of moral virtues arises in us by nature; For nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature. For instance the stone which by nature moves downwards cannot be habituated to move upwards, even if one tries to train it by throwing it up ten thousand times... Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit. ( qtd in Langis: 5)*

For Coriolanus, he is definitely virtuous, yet his flaws has been noted in looking for honour as an end in itself, something so obviously seen in his repeated refusal of praise and rewards. Perhaps for his pride to deny dependence on his inferiors he despises for their cowardice who recognized that " he pays himself by being proud". Likewise, Julius Caesar, by all means the perfect Roman Ideal, was " three times offered the crown and three times refused it". Both of them faithfully serve their state, yet genuinely according to their own "code".

*I had rather be their servant in my way  
Than sway with them in theirs.*

In contrary to Caesar, Andrew Gurr insists on the fact that Coriolanus “is young and has not learned how to disguise his arrogant “honour” with words and acting. Older patricians are thoroughly accustomed to concealing their outlook in the longer term interests of their class” (1980:57).

Even his wounds, the vivid proof of the hero's valour, he refused to show them to, as he viewed the, the mob neglecting the necessities of republican polity. He finds it utterly insufferable to listen to his mother's urge to show these signs of honour, regarding it as a kind of humiliation, and he replied:

*Would you have me false to my nature? Rather say I play*

*The man I am* (III, sc.II,P:1416).

In this sense, for Plebeians, Coriolanus and his failing to feed the body of Rome, is now really a dangerous “microbe” (Knight : 177), and an alien to his community by nature. For one, Coriolanus virtue when denied subordination to politics is reversed to something destructive for both its carrier and his city. In view of that, “this paradox of perfection”, as Langis explains “becomes an improper pride within civic intercourse”. (P:5)and his people themselves justify

*Whether 't was pride,  
Which out of daily fortune ever taints  
The happy man; whether defect of judgment,  
To fail in the disposing of those chances  
Which he was lord of; or whether nature,  
Not to be other than one thing, not moving  
From the casque to the cushion, but commanding peace  
Even with the same austerity and garb  
As he controll'd the war; but one of these-  
... made him fear'd  
So hated, and so banish'd... (Iv).*

Actually, in the light of their dignity, with regard to honour, both Caesar and Coriolanus, often invoking feelings of fears and remorse of their community, are conceived as being or at least expected to be tyrant. Those are seeking “beauteous freedom”, realized that Caesar

*would not be a wolf  
But that he sees the Romans are but sheep.  
He were no lion were not Roman hinds. (I, Sc. III :821).*

Nonetheless, for most critics, Coriolanus is a victim in the same way that Macbeth and Othello are victims of their cultures standards. But with pride, he has a fatal flaw, unsurprisingly reflecting egoism and in away accompanying the warrior valour, that is rage. Although “His nature is too noble for the world”, his friend Mentos explains, but ...being angry, does forget that ever

He heard the name of death (III, sc. I: 1293).

Every time his self-esteem is depressed, it springs back with the same “choler-distorted face”. In this perspective, Coriolanus loses his humanity and this weakness, however, deprives his pride and anger of all dignity; and thanks to this weakness that his enemy are able to teach the plebs how to induce his “paroxysms” of rage.

After banishment, his anger takes the form of a determination to set fire to the ungrateful Rome and to destroy it utterly. Arguably, Shakespeare has presented many, if one can say, intentional signs, sometimes with altered or even invented events and description, which supported his focus on the Roman ideology of pride/honour. First, the historical Martius has no intention of burning the city. His intention was to ally himself with the nobility of Aufidius in order to recover for himself the Roman Republic. In addition, the image of the “blazing city” is something imported into the original story by Shakespeare. Relatively, he masterfully enhanced this image with that of the “dragon” (1305) when “This Martius is grown from man to dragon He has wings, he's more than a creeping thing”. Comparatively, King Lear is excellently an instance in point. A pride-insulted man, he described himself as a dragon, something which shows, in essence, the extent of his character, as it should seem. In a way, the hugeness of the dragon coincides with the extent of his pride and wrath and insightfully presents his ability of avenging his injured pride with fire as well.

More to the point, it is not by chance that Coriolanus decides to avenge his pride by fire. Actually, it reflects his awareness of the cleansing power fire (purification) greatly suitable for the Plebians, the “inferior veins” in the belly myth, for being: “one of the lowest, basest, poorest, of this most wise rebellion” (1272). Along the same line, however, the inferiority of the Plebeians finds its echo in prince Hamlet's description of the mob as “groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise” ( III. Sc. II p: 908).

For Coriolanus burning Rome is a kind of “annihilating Rome”, Langis explains, because he “would destroy what in better times would serve as the mirror of public opinion, which he would not so much lean on, but use to acknowledge his rightful worth” (2010: 12). Moreover, his family, kins and friends are by no means excluded. So, through this process of purification, he, to varying degrees, includes himself, or at least part of himself: his own blood, mother and son. This actually reveals how the effective side of his honour and so visible, so blatant virtue-dominated character shows itself.

So, the essential question, faulty as he is, is Coriolanus' end reached the necessary tragic effect. Apparently, his defects overcome the good; and in the wide sense of the word, he is not altogether doomed. Even his admirable honour, being accompanied by pride, loses its essential nature and true meaning acquiring a reverse effect reaching the level of a flaw.

Indeed, Shakespeare's development of the woman character is crucial. The women go to him, free willed, to preserve the city. Unexpected passion, emotion, long hidden by the compulsions of Roman virtues, appeared at the end. Coriolanus' love, finally stimulated by the forms of feminine beauty, this time not of frailty, shame or betrayal so recurrent in other tragedies, proved more strong than pride for which it bowed:



O Mother, mother  
What have you done?

....

You have won a happy victory to Rome,  
But, for your son, believe it, oh, believe it,  
Most dangerously you have with him prevailed,  
If not most mortal to him (v. sc.III, p: 1310).

His exchange with his mother, symbolizing the mother state of Rome, and his delicate wife shows as Knight remarks that “love has now lent his pride its easy grace and splendour, something of its own infinity” (198).

It is at this point, only at this point, that his sacrifice and his facing of a sure death to achieve honour that he reached the royal integrity of tragedy. His final victorious enlighten cry rings to free his heart from the bondage of self-hood and he only then attains respect and the infinity of soul.

### **Conclusion**

Three specific ideas in the discussion of honour and pride as means of self-destruction are crucial and relevant to understand Coriolanus and generally Roman plays as a personal and civic tragedy. First, honour here is something cultural and one dare saying not natural. It follows that, unlike other tragic heroes, their flaw seems to be inherent, if one can say, or more precisely something acquired from their culture in their characters.

Second, Shakespeare in his Roman plays has concentrated on this conception by altering historical events or sometimes adding certain suggestive details and symbols. Finally, the aforementioned combination leads eventually to the hero rigidly incarnating these qualities and yet again pride and honour are ever apt to be observed and reversed of the same coin and here exclusively the unique Roman coin.



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