

I. SOME GENERAL AND INCIDENTAL REMARKS

In his book on *Coriolanus* published by Edward Arnold in the "Studies in English Literature" series Brian Vickers said that this tragedy, probably the last ever written by Shakespeare, is his most difficult play. A most unusual, though challenging and stimulating statement. Yet it might be contended that it is Shakespeare's easiest play, and one might carry this paradoxical strain to the extreme degree of absurdity by stating that it is the most difficult play to talk about because of its exceptional easiness. Now these assertions should be substantiated. Such contradictory opinions must be grounded in some way, and there is some interest in studying the reasons why some people find the play so very easy, and perhaps even too easy, and other people find it extremely arduous. Seen from a dramatic point of view, *Coriolanus* is remarkable for its streamline simplicity, its remarkable singleness of purpose. But there lies the paradoxical difficulty to which students of literature are confronted: since they are supposed to expatiate upon texts, how will they manage to express interesting ideas about a play which seems to contain its own commentaries? Is it not tediously unrewarding to explain the inner working of a drama whose structure and motivational data appear exceptionally perspicuous? Indeed on a strictly factual level, the play, based on historical narratives, is logical in its development, tight-knit and waterproof in its structure, strictly human in its scope, social and political in its subject-matter.

It is true that *Coriolanus* does not lack immediate intelligibility, at least as regards the sequence of events and the characters' motivations, which does not mean that it lacks profundity. It can be regarded as the most classical of Shakespeare's plays, not only on account of its ancient and Roman subject-matter, but also of its

dramatic qualities, particularly a certain respect for cogency and verisimilitude, what Boileau, Pope, and others called obedience to Nature. On the whole, yet with an important reservation as regards the formidable stature of the hero, *Coriolanus* corresponds to these criteria. The story is more than true-to-life, it is true to history, though Shakespeare altered Titus Livius' and Plutarch's narratives on some points and as usual, he cultivated his tendency to fantastic mythicizing, by making the protagonist more of a titanic superman than he actually was or could be, conveying the impression at the end of the play that his more than Homeric hero is capable of smashing down the Roman fortifications by the sheer force of his own muscles or the invincible supremacy of his warfare. Incidentally the word *protagonist* is used here in its genuine and etymological acceptance, coming from the Greek term which means the first fighter or the main leader, so that there is only one protagonist in a play. The historical reality is of course different. Coriolanus did threaten Rome indeed, not because he was a giant, not even because of his strategic superiority as a general at the head of Volscian troops, but because he had rallied an army of Roman rebels among his clientele. Similarly the single-handed conquest of Corioles was produced by Shakespeare's fabulous and epic imagination. So the argumentation presented here must be qualified: Shakespeare did not renounce being Shakespeare when he wrote *Coriolanus*. Only by Shakespearian standards does this play appear less Gothic, more classic than the rest of his work. And, as has been indicated, the material of the play is always situated on a human plane, not only as regards the facts proper, but also the text itself, which remains secular in its significances and resonances. There is no divine or supernatural intervention. The gods are often mentioned, but in such a matter-of-fact and familiar way that they seem to belong to the local experience, as moral authorities feared and venerated by men. Yet they remain distant. Real authority is embodied in human beings. In the decisive scene that takes place in the Volscian camp, Volumnia kneels down before her son, because he has become a tremendous being. Then Coriolanus, ashamed of what he deems sacrilegiously unnatural, inverts the relationship and kneels down in front of the august

embodiment of motherhood that Volumnia is to him. In each case the posture of religious veneration is offered to a human being, not to a god. Similarly Coriolanus offered himself as an expiatory victim to Aufidius. In their idealistic moods, men divinize each other in this play, which has a unique and thrilling grandeur of its own. Yet perhaps the grandeur of the play comes from its questioning of human grandeur: in trying to imitate gods, men only succeed in imitating the Moloch-like figures worshipped by primitive mankind, in which the relentless dealing of death constitutes the distinctive attribute and privilege of divinity. But Coriolanus melting down to an almost feminine or childish (cf. the famous "boy of tears", 5.6.103) figure of pity suddenly creates a complete shift of values, a new humanism. And also a new play. So far the play seemed strictly psychological and political, with a main character who is perhaps the only *character* in the academic sense of the word ever created by Shakespeare –, the only one of his heroes who has a clear-cut consistent temperament, the only one endowed with a biography: the audience is informed of details about his past (an only child brought up by his mother, etc.), providential to those readers who favour the psychological approach to literature, and feel frustrated by not having the same kind of information concerning Hamlet, Othello, or Macbeth.

To most people *Coriolanus* is essentially a political play, a definition correct to a certain extent, though not sufficient. But this view leads to strange statements. For instance when Brian Vickers said that *Coriolanus* is a difficult play, what he meant actually was that Shakespeare's political lesson was difficult to grasp. Now, Vickers was certainly right in stating that Shakespeare's political message is not easily perceptible. But is there really a political message to be construed from the play? Shakespeare shows a clash of biased and passionate factions or individuals affronting each other, but he himself, as an artist, probably stood aloof. Anyway this does not necessarily make the play difficult. Theatre-goers do not always worry about political messages; what they expect from a play is dramatic activity and consistency, qualities that *Coriolanus* is not deficient in. The real difficulties of the play may lie elsewhere, in the problem of ethical values, for instance, and in another aspect

which has not been mentioned yet, but cannot fail to strike the reader, the arduousness of the text itself, dense, cramped, sometimes obscure and enigmatic. It is comparatively easy to take a general view of the play, not so easy to grasp all the details, owing to the complexity of the style. There is a curious contrast between the primitive simplicity of the passions and impulses evinced by the ancient Romans conjured up by Shakespeare and the sophisticated refinement of their language. Indeed the play can be regarded as very Roman in this respect, and though written in English the syntax seems sometimes very Latin, if only by its elusive intricacy. This indeed makes the play difficult, so that the first task that the reader has to undertake is to study it very carefully, sentence after sentence and sometimes word after word, with the help of the footnotes and sometimes of a specialized glossary. A demanding, yet rewarding task, because there lies the substantial profundity of the text.

II. *CORIOLANUS* AS A ROMAN PLAY

History and legend

Like every other writer and poet of the Renaissance, Shakespeare was familiar with Roman History, and certainly fascinated by it; it is difficult to know if he was conscious that the kind of historical knowledge handed down from Antiquity as Roman History was in many cases (including the Coriolanus episode) more legendary than strictly historical. Anyway the mixture of fabulous legend and genuine history also occurs in his English histories, even when they deal with the recent past; sometimes the inclusion of legendary material was carried out by Shakespeare himself, sometimes it was already present in the sources. In every case a history play is not written merely for the sake of retrospective resurrection: it always contains an exemplary situation, an eternal archetype, from which lessons for the present time can be derived. Five of his works take place in ancient Rome (four plays and one poem). To these five a sixth can be added, *Cymbeline*, a romance written shortly after *Coriolanus*, though it is not usually studied as a Roman play. Yet a few details in it can be found relevant to the study of *Coriolanus*. The action takes place in ancient Britain during the imperial period of Roman History. Shakespeare took the subject from Holinshed's Chronicle, in which it is presented as belonging to History, though there is every reason to believe that it is entirely mythical. Britain is dominated by Rome as a tributary. A part of the multiple plot of *Cymbeline* is occupied by a British rebellion against Roman imperialism. Yet, in spite of the obviously patriotic overtones, the outcome is paradoxical and baffling to a modern audience: though the Britons win a decisive battle over the Roman legions, they do not take advantage of their victory, and, after releasing and restoring their prisoners to their former rights, they reconcile

themselves with their conquerors. They take legitimate pride in their military valour, but they humbly recognize the superiority of Rome as a civilising power. So they gladly renew the treaties ensuring their own dependence. Rome is thus presented under several facets: a nation of prey, a militaristic establishment, but also the cradle of civilisation. Modern sensibility may be shocked by this strange conclusion. War is usually regarded in the present time as utterly barbarous. The idea that aggression and conquest can serve as vehicles for civilisation can be but rejected as a grim and hypocritical joke. Nor is it still held that military courage is the "chiefest virtue", as Cominius says in *Coriolanus* (2.2.82). Yet one should not conclude that Shakespeare's set of values is opposite to ours, and besides we ourselves do not live in a world in which all people share the same opinions on any topic. Anyway, no one can assert with certainty what Shakespeare's personal views were, since, at least in his plays, he never expressed himself directly. The audience faces a debating multitude, among whom the author has no mouthpiece. On the subject of war and imperialism his doctrine must have been subtle, making allowance for the part of truth and error contained in people's ideas and for the relativity of common tenets. Another element in *Cymbeline* may appear relevant to the study of *Coriolanus*, the fact that the Rome described by Shakespeare in his romance is marked by decadence, for the chief villain of the plot, named Iachimo (a variation on *Othello's* Iago) is both an ancient Roman and a modern Italian, owing to a bold anachronism typical of Shakespeare's fantastic way of dealing with time and space. This Iachimo has lost the old manly virtues for which the Romans were reputed and has become a Machiavellian schemer, a politician. There is at least one notion, or one type of man which is always mentioned with disparagement in Shakespeare, the politician.

Originally Rome was a hereditary monarchy. But a revolution took place in the fifth century before Christ, when, according to legend if not to History, the Tarquins, the then reigning dynasty, were expelled from the country by an aristocratic rebellion, because the King's nephew had raped a noble lady, named Lucretia, who committed suicide as she could not survive her shame (people

would say her trauma nowadays). The nobles took over the power and abolished monarchy for ever. The story is partly related by Shakespeare in his long narrative poem *The Rape of Lucrece*, published in 1594. This poem can be regarded as a sort of laboratory in which many literary themes were concocted and tested before undergoing their theatrical elaboration, the rape-theme, for instance, which always represents in Shakespeare the most outrageous manifestation of primeval barbarity in human behaviour, and which is present in *Coriolanus*, though not quite conspicuously. Though Shakespeare's preoccupations in *Lucrece* were mainly moral and psychological, the historical and political aspects of the story are not absent. In themselves the preoccupations are not distinct. The indignation which caused the revolutionary upheaval was grounded on moral conscience and sensibility, and had political consequences of great weight. The events brought about by what might have amounted to a private affair resulted in the throwing down of the monarchy and the setting up of the Republic. To those people who believe that Shakespeare was an out-and-out supporter of absolute monarchy and who might wonder why he chose to write a story about a republican revolution, one might give these two contradictory answers:

1/ Perhaps Shakespeare was not an out-and-out supporter of absolute monarchy after all.

2/ Even if he was, the very idealism of his political views implied a type of monarchy in which by essence and by nature the king sets the pattern of honour and virtue to the whole nation. Honour and virtue exclude the raping of one's subjects' wives. Besides the concept of absolutism in monarchy does not mean that the sovereign has the power of transgressing the fundamental laws of human society. These subjects are not foreign to the controversies present in *Coriolanus*.

In his Roman plays (except *Titus Andronicus*) and poem, Shakespeare was interested in revolutionary periods, witnessing important mutations in political rules. The men and women described in these texts tend to fall into three groups:

1/ Those who press the political mutations forward.

2/ Those who resist them obstinately.

3/ Those who stand aloof and waver in between, out of resignation, or opportunism, or tactical calculation, or prudence (the wait and see policy). To these three groups a fourth can be added, the mob, capable of running to extremes from one side to another, or remaining benumbed in a state of passivity.

The Tragedy of Coriolanus comes next after *Lucrece*, according to the chronological sequence of History. In Shakespeare's own career, it probably came last, though there remains some uncertainty as to the date and the order of composition. It is difficult to know whether *Antony and Cleopatra* or *Coriolanus* was Shakespeare's last tragedy (and simultaneously last Roman play) but this problem is immaterial here, and it is logical to mention *Coriolanus* immediately after *Lucrece* for the sake of historical clarity. The events narrated in the poem took place about 509 B.C. and what is dramatized in the play refers to the early days of the Republic. The tribunate was created in 494 B.C. and the battle of Corioles (or Corioli) was fought in 493 B.C. Caius Martius (or Marcius) had in his early days taken part in the battles fought against the Tarquins, who, by the way, allied themselves with the Etruscans after they were banished from Rome, which shows that there is a great amount of thematic recurrence in History, since the Etruscans were the Romans' hereditary enemies. It seems surprising to associate Caius Martius with a revolutionary rising, as he seems to embody the spirit of conservative loyalty and reaction to change and progress. One might find an answer to this question by pointing out that Coriolanus is not so staunch and unwavering as he pretends to be, since we see him betray his country out of personal spite, after posing as the very embodiment of self-denying patriotism. One might also argue that it would be useless and irrelevant to ponder upon the hero's attitude and response to political dilemmas twenty years before the action of the play, and upon a hypothetical inconsistency of behaviour which was not exploited or even pointed out by Shakespeare. There is matter enough for reflection in Coriolanus' disloyalty to himself and to his former patriotism within the action of the play. Yet it may prove interesting to return twenty years back, not in order to search into Coriolanus'