

**“When Two Authorities Are Up”:  
The Mixed Constitution in Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus***

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## Abstract

*Coriolanus* is one of William Shakespeare's lesser-known plays but a treasure trove for political theorists. This paper explores its political themes with special attention paid to Shakespeare's portrayal of the Roman Republic's mixed constitution. While others have argued that Shakespeare endorses the mixed constitution in *Titus Andronicus*—one of his earliest plays—I argue that he does the same in *Coriolanus*, thereby offering a new reading of this four-hundred-year-old text. Specifically, the play shows us that oligarchy and democracy are undesirable forms of government, and that the political arrangement that is most conducive to cooperation and internal stability is one in which the patricians (the nobility) and the plebeians (the commoners) govern together. Other topics discussed include Coriolanus' views on the mixed constitution and democracy, his inability to be anything but a beast, and the plebeians' distinctly republican conception of liberty, which differs from Isaiah Berlin's concept of negative liberty. Overall, I conclude that *Coriolanus* is not a conservative play—as is commonly believed—but one that demonstrates that the masses have a legitimate role to play in the *polis* and ought to be afforded a political voice.

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## Introduction

Mixed constitutions feature prominently in the history of political thought and take several forms. For example, the unnamed Athenian in Plato's *Laws* argues that monarchy and democracy should be combined—criticizing Persia for being too monarchical and Athens for being too democratic—and in the *Politics*, Aristotle's polity blends together oligarchy and democracy, two “perverted” constitutions.<sup>1</sup> But the classic mixed constitution consists of three parts, and dates back to Polybius, a 2<sup>nd</sup>-century BCE Greek historian. That is, in Book VI of the *Histories*, he declares that “there can be no doubt that . . . the best system of government . . . combines [monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy],” pointing to the longevity of Sparta and success and stability of the Roman Republic.<sup>2</sup> In fact, he attributes the rise of Rome, in large part, to the checks and balances inherent in its mixed political system, which “[ensured] moderation and proportion,” as Bellamy writes.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Cicero praises the mixed constitution (i.e., the Roman version) for having a “widespread element of equality”—for bringing all citizens into the political process—and for guarding against the natural degeneration that plagues pure forms of government.<sup>4</sup>

Long after the demise of the Roman Republic in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE and its transition into an authoritarian empire, its constitution remained popular with political theorists, particularly with those who sought to limit the powers of monarchs but did not believe that the masses were capable of complete self-rule. Among the most famous of these thinkers is

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Laws*, trans. Tom Griffith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), bk. III, 693d-e; Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Ernest Barker (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), bk. IV, ch. 8, 1293b33-4.

<sup>2</sup> Polybius, *The Histories*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), bk. VI, par. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Bellamy, “The Political Form of the Constitution: The Separation of Powers, Rights and Representative Democracy,” *Political Studies* 44, no. 3 (1996): 440, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.1996.tb00593.x>.

<sup>4</sup> Cicero, *The Republic*, in *The Republic and The Laws*, trans. Niall Rudd (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), bk. 1, par. 69.

Machiavelli, who writes in the *Discourses on Livy* that Rome’s constitution “made for a perfect republic” and that the conflict between the Senate and the people led to the passing of laws that “[fostered] liberty.”<sup>5</sup> Less known are those in England in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries who were opponents of absolutism and believed that Parliament should be on equal footing with the king or queen, such as Sir Thomas Smith, whose treatise *De Republica Anglorum* (1583) was widely read.<sup>6</sup> According to Hadfield, “Most theories of government articulated in Tudor and Stuart England were derived from a mixture of Greek and Roman writings”—Polybius was especially popular—and thus, “a key notion was that the ideal government should take the form of a ‘mixed’ constitution.”<sup>7</sup>

It was in this context that Shakespeare wrote *Coriolanus*, a tragedy that is set in the very early Roman Republic and examines the inner workings of the city’s political system as it is taking shape. What I want to consider, specifically, is whether Shakespeare portrays this system in a positive light. To that end, I will answer the following question: does *Coriolanus* endorse the mixed constitution as a desirable form of government, or does it show—to quote Thomas Hobbes—that “to divide the power of the commonwealth . . . [is] to dissolve it”?<sup>8</sup> Because Shakespeare was a relatively wealthy individual who came from a well-off family—the prime target of peasant discontent—it is often assumed that he must have been a conservative who favored the status quo.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, *Coriolanus* is “more often than not . . . read as a conservative work” that illustrates the troubles that beset a state when social hierarchies break down, but in my view, a closer analysis of the text reveals that the splitting of political power between the two

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<sup>5</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, Selections from *The Discourses*, in *Selected Political Writings*, trans. David Wootton (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1994), bk. I, chs. 2, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 20.

<sup>7</sup> ---, *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics* (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2003), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1994), part II, ch. 29, par. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Donald Neil Friesner, “William Shakespeare, Conservative,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (1969): 165-78, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2869003>.

orders in Rome—the patricians and plebeians—has a number of advantages.<sup>10</sup> In short, *Coriolanus* is a pro-mixed constitution text, akin to the works of Polybius and Cicero.

### **Organization**

This paper will be organized as follows: Chapter 1 provides an overview of the play—when it was written, what it is about, and how it has been interpreted—as this is necessary to fully understand my argument. In Chapter 2, I analyze Coriolanus’ political convictions—this includes his opposition to Rome’s mixed constitution and his belief that the plebeians are a bunch of “dissentious rogues” who are undeserving of representation—and more generally, his flaws as a political figure (1.1.162). Chapter 3 is about the mixed constitution in particular and contains an analysis of Shakespeare’s depiction of the Roman Republic and the political players who comprise it. Chapter 4 focuses on the plebeians’ conception of liberty and how it is necessarily connected to their participation in politics. Lastly, in Chapter 5, I compare *Coriolanus* with *Titus Andronicus*, another Roman play that has been read as endorsing the mixed constitution as a desirable form of government.

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<sup>10</sup> Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics*, 178.

## Chapter 1: “A Play About the *Polis*”

*Coriolanus* is a political play that traces the rise and fall of a general-turned-politician named Caius Martius Coriolanus. It explores his complicated relationship with his mother, Volumnia, and his betrayal of Rome, but most significantly, it is a play “specifically about the *polis*.”<sup>11</sup> That is, the city of Rome is not only the setting of the play but its main topic of interest, and the struggle at the heart of the play is not between mother and son—though this is important and well worth examining—but between two opposing conceptions of what Rome should be and whose interests it should represent. *Coriolanus* is, in the words of William Hazlitt, “a store-house of political commonplaces,” and my objective is to analyze these in the following chapters.<sup>12</sup> I will begin, however, with an introduction to the play, for those who are unfamiliar with it or simply need a refresher.

### History

The legend of Coriolanus has been recounted and retold—with slight variations—by multiple ancient historians. These include Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE to Cassius Dio, who lived hundreds of years later. Plutarch’s 2<sup>nd</sup>-century CE version, the *Life of Coriolanus*, is the most comprehensive account of Coriolanus’ experiences in war and politics, and Sir Thomas North’s English translation—completed in 1579—served as the inspiration and basis for *Coriolanus*, one of Shakespeare’s later works and likely the last tragedy that he wrote (1607/8).<sup>13</sup> Unlike *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus* takes place during a relatively unknown period in Roman history, at least in the popular imagination:

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<sup>11</sup> Anne Barton, “Livy, Machiavelli, and Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*,” in *Shakespeare and Politics*, ed. Catherine M. S. Alexander (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 87.

<sup>12</sup> David George, ed., *Coriolanus: Shakespeare: The Critical Tradition* (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), 98.

<sup>13</sup> James Crewe, introduction to *The Pelican Shakespeare: Coriolanus*, by William Shakespeare (New York: Penguin Books, 2018), xxix-xxx.



the 490s BCE. This puts us less than twenty years after the expulsion of Tarquin the Proud, the last king of Rome, and the subsequent transformation of the Roman state from a monarchy to a republic. We are far removed from the destructive civil conflicts of the late Republic or the decadence of Imperial Rome under someone like Commodus; life is simple and austere, and revolves around small-scale wars. There was no indication at this time that Rome was destined for greatness or that it would become the superpower of the Mediterranean world in a few hundred years. It was merely a small city-state on the Italian Peninsula, next to the Tiber River, in near-constant conflict with its neighbors.

But *Coriolanus* is more than a semi-historical play about Rome; as Greenblatt writes, it “obliquely addressed immediate and pressing concerns” in early modern England under James I—Elizabeth’s successor and the first Stuart king—including food shortages and the exploitation of the peasantry by landlords.<sup>14</sup> Pettet was the first to identify a connection between the opening scene of the play and the Midland Revolt, a series of peasant-led riots that broke out in the countryside—including in Shakespeare’s home county of Warwickshire—in the spring of 1607.<sup>15</sup> He concludes that *Coriolanus* was the result of “a man of substance [reacting] to a recent mob rising in his country.”<sup>16</sup> Another commentator, Barbara L. Parker, posits that *Coriolanus* is meant to represent James I, as they were both “self-righteous and politically inflexible” and prone to insulting commoners at the drop of a hat.<sup>17</sup> If it seems that Shakespeare is critical of *Coriolanus*—which I think he clearly is—it would not be a stretch to say, then, that he was making a larger point: that he was criticizing James’ political philosophy and advocating a

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<sup>14</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 156.

<sup>15</sup> E. C. Pettet, “*Coriolanus* and the Midlands Insurrection of 1607,” *Shakespeare Survey* 3 (1950): 34-42, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521064163.005>.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>17</sup> Barbara L. Parker, *Plato’s Republic and Shakespeare’s Rome: A Political Study of the Roman Works* (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 2004), 70.

different way of organizing the state. I will return to this idea in the next chapter.

Historically, *Coriolanus* has been among the least popular of Shakespeare's plays. A 2016 YouGov survey found that only 5% of British people had seen or read it, compared to the 51% and 47% familiar with *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth*, respectively.<sup>18</sup> Crewe offers one explanation for this: "None of the major characters in *Coriolanus* nor the harsh Roman world it represents is particularly appealing."<sup>19</sup> My own theory is that it is lacking in memorable lines—*Coriolanus* only has one soliloquy, compared to *Macbeth*'s seven—and also somewhat anticlimactic. *Coriolanus*' downfall plays out so quickly that the reader or viewer is left with little time to process what has happened, and then the play abruptly ends. Moreover, for those interested in Shakespeare's more political plays, it is often overlooked in favor of *Julius Caesar*, a play that is not only more accessible—most people are familiar with the story of Caesar's assassination on the Ides of March—but some might say more exciting.

Indeed, *Coriolanus* is rarely ranked among Shakespeare's great works. Many who have read it are likely to agree with Maxwell that "it is, for Shakespeare, rather a dull [play]."<sup>20</sup> Yet we cannot ignore those who have found it to be captivating and have applauded it for various reasons, which range from *Coriolanus* being a fascinating and deeply complex individual to it perfectly capturing the essence of Republican Rome. Most notably, T. S. Eliot argues in his essay "Hamlet and His Problems" that it is Shakespeare's "most assured artistic success," along with *Antony and Cleopatra*.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, to John Masefield, it is "one of the greatest of Shakespeare's creations" because Plutarch's biography of *Coriolanus* was so interesting and

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<sup>18</sup> To see the full results of this survey, visit <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/lifestyle/articlesreports/2016/04/22/shakespeare-400>.

<sup>19</sup> Crewe, introduction, xxix.

<sup>20</sup> J. C. Maxwell, "Animal Imagery in *Coriolanus*," *The Modern Language Review* 42, no. 4 (1947): 417-21, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3716795>.

<sup>21</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921), 91.

well-done to begin with.<sup>22</sup> As this English poet eloquently put it, “There can be no great art without great fable.”<sup>23</sup> It has also long been “a favorite of Marxists” and others on the far left because of its depiction of what appears to be class conflict, with the patricians representing the haughty bourgeoisie and the plebeians representing the oppressed proletariat, who throw off their chains and unite in a common political cause.<sup>24</sup>

As with most of Shakespeare’s plays—even the most obscure—*Coriolanus* has a lengthy performance history, and most recently, Ralph Fiennes’ 2011 film adaptation garnered critical acclaim. The earliest performance of *Coriolanus*, however, dates to 1609/10 at the Blackfriars Theatre in London.<sup>25</sup> Notable stage productions since then include John Philip Kemble’s in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, which “emphasized the dignity and nobility of [Coriolanus] and the lowness of the plebeians.”<sup>26</sup> Kemble himself was a monarchist, and in the wake of the French Revolution, he saw *Coriolanus* as a warning against the excesses of popular government and the tumult that results when the people are granted political power. In 1934, a French production of the play modeled on Kemble’s adaptation provoked significant controversy and led to protests because of its perceived “anti-democratic sentiments.”<sup>27</sup> Just two years later in Pasadena, California, locals objected to a “communistic” play being performed in their city, supposedly because the plebeians were portrayed with too much sympathy.<sup>28</sup> In Nazi Germany, *Coriolanus* was initially banned for being subversive but was then “adopted by [the Nazis] as a school text.”<sup>29</sup> They saw Coriolanus as a sort of proto-Hitler and believed that the lesson of the play is

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<sup>22</sup> George, *The Critical Tradition*, 321.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Stanley Stewart, *Shakespeare and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 16.

<sup>25</sup> Crewe, introduction, xxix.

<sup>26</sup> George, *The Critical Tradition*, 90.

<sup>27</sup> James E. Phillips, ed., *20<sup>th</sup> Century Interpretations of Coriolanus* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1970), 4.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Crewe, introduction, xlvi.

that democracy is “corrosive” and that “true order in a state can be guaranteed or restored only by a strong leader, whose morally exalted, heroic personality towers above the masses.”<sup>30</sup>

It is unfortunate that *Coriolanus* has been used as a vehicle for fascism, but it is not surprising that those on the extreme right would see themselves, or a model to be emulated, in a strongman like Coriolanus who is seemingly ultra-masculine and desires nothing more than to go to war. But this does not mean that Shakespeare *meant* to extol Coriolanus at the expense of the commoners of Rome, and in fact, for its time, I will argue that *Coriolanus* was surprisingly progressive. It is not a purely democratic play by any means, but Coriolanus is clearly depicted as a failure of a politician, while the plebeians are clearly capable of participating in politics. But here I am getting ahead of myself, as it is necessary that I first explain how *Coriolanus* actually plays out.

### **Plot Summary**

*Coriolanus* opens with the Roman people in revolt, and we are immediately introduced to a group of hungry plebeians (called citizens) who pledge to kill their “chief enemy”: the aristocratic war hero Caius Martius, later known as Coriolanus (1.1.7-8). They accuse the patricians of intentionally starving them and declare that they will have “corn at [their] own price” (1.1.10-1). We soon learn that other plebeian rebels have convinced the patricians to grant them five representatives to protect their interests, called tribunes, in an event that is now referred to as the first Secession of the Plebs. This is significant in that it “marks the first time in Western history that an aristocracy [was] forced to share power with officers of the people,” thereby putting an end to the patricians’ monopoly on power and creating a system of checks and

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<sup>30</sup> Rodney Symington, *The Nazi Appropriation of Shakespeare: Cultural Politics in the Third Reich* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2005), 160.

balances.<sup>31</sup> To use Aristotle’s terminology, we can say that within the first scene of *Coriolanus*, Rome goes from being an oligarchy—a form of government “directed to the interest of the well-to-do”—to having a mixed constitution that contains both democratic and oligarchical elements.<sup>32</sup>

The play’s titular hero is wholeheartedly opposed to granting the plebeians any sort of representation. He calls them “dissentious rogues” and lambasts them for “[crying] against the noble Senate” (1.1.162-84). He later declares that he despises the tribunes (“the tongues o’ th’ common mouth”), “for they do prank [the plebeians] in authority / Against all noble sufferance” (3.1.22-4). Here, we might compare Coriolanus to Edmund Burke in that they both agree that “nobility is a graceful ornament to the civil order” and that change should be effected very slowly and with the utmost carefulness.<sup>33</sup> Although Coriolanus is frequently accused of being too proud, most Romans—even those he insults—acknowledge his bravery and the “services he has done for his country” (1.1.28-9). We are told by the consul Cominius that he has fought in numerous battles and played a major role in bringing down Tarquin the Proud, having “struck him on his knee” when he was only a teenager (2.2.94). After he takes the Volscian town of Corioles on his own, with no support—a remarkable feat—he earns the cognomen “Coriolanus” and thus becomes Caius Martius Coriolanus. It is after this event that Coriolanus’ mother, Volumnia, urges him to run for the consulship.

Coriolanus is initially resistant to his mother’s request, saying to her that he would rather be Rome’s servant in his own way, meaning by fighting on Rome’s behalf in battle (2.1.198). She eventually prevails with him, however, and he easily wins over the Senate, who are “well

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<sup>31</sup> Jan H. Blits, *Spirit, Soul, and City: Shakespeare’s Coriolanus* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 66.

<sup>32</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, bk. III, ch. 7, 1279b6.

<sup>33</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L. G. Mitchell (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 139.

pleased / To make [him] consul” (2.2.131-2). The next step for Coriolanus is to receive the plebeians’ approval, though he refuses to humble himself before the masses. He even proclaims, “I cannot / Put on the gown, stand naked, and entreat them / For my wounds’ sake to give their suffrage” (2.2.135-8). Coriolanus half-heartedly appears before the plebeians and repeatedly asks for their “voices” (2.3.125-30). They initially agree that Coriolanus should be consul but then change their minds, rescinding their approval upon being persuaded to do so by their tribunes, Brutus and Sicinius. Coriolanus becomes furious—he calls the plebeians “the mutable, rank-scented meiny”—and for this the plebeians nearly kill him, though the patricians (particularly Menenius) are able to calm the situation (3.1.66). Coriolanus formally meets with the plebeians once more to ask for their forgiveness, but they have no interest in making up with him. They declare him “a traitor to the people” and subsequently banish him from Rome (3.3.66). Coriolanus is understandably upset, but he accepts his fate and utters one of his few quotable lines: “There is a world elsewhere” (3.3.136).

Upon leaving Rome, Coriolanus sets out for the Volscian capital, Antium. It is there that he hopes to forge an alliance with his arch enemy and the military leader of the Volsci, Aufidius, in order to exact revenge on Rome, the city that has betrayed him. Before entering Aufidius’ house, Coriolanus recites his only soliloquy—it is worth noting here that he is one of Shakespeare’s least introspective characters—and concludes it by saying, “My birthplace hate I, and my love’s upon / This enemy town” (4.4.23-4). Coriolanus presents himself before Aufidius and declares that he will “fight / Against [his] cankered country with the spleen / Of all the under fiends” (4.5.94-6). Aufidius is surprisingly receptive to Coriolanus’ offer; he calls him a “noble thing” and decides to make him his partner in arms (4.5.120). Coriolanus and Aufidius thus assemble their troops and begin marching towards Rome, a city that Sicinius says is “[sitting]

safe and still without [Coriolanus]” (4.6.38).

The news of Coriolanus’ betrayal soon makes its way to Rome, and the patricians and the tribunes agree to send representatives to Coriolanus to convince him to halt his advance. Cominius is unable to win him over, and Menenius is likewise sent away, with Coriolanus saying to him, “Mine ears against your suits are stronger than / Your gates against my force” (5.2.84-5). Finally, Coriolanus’ family—his mother, his wife, and his young son—appear before him and forcefully plead with him to spare Rome. Volumnia’s two prolonged speeches are especially passionate, and she famously says to her only son that marching on Rome would be akin to “[treading] / . . . on thy mother’s womb / That brought thee to this world” (5.3.123-5). She also appeals to his vanity, warning him that he will be remembered not as a noble man but as one who “destroyed his country” (5.3.147). Coriolanus remains silent throughout this ordeal, but in the end, he cannot resist his mother’s pleas, and decides to “frame convenient peace” with the Volsci (5.3.191).

Volumnia is welcomed back to Rome and celebrated as the city’s savior. A senator announces, “Unshout the noise that banished Martius; / Repeal him with the welcome of his mother” (5.6.4-5). Meanwhile, Coriolanus returns to Antium to officially make peace with the Volsci. But he arrives only to find out that Aufidius has turned against him, and for two reasons in particular: first, he resents Coriolanus for having stolen his thunder—that is, Coriolanus became so popular with Aufidius’ troops that Aufidius laments that “[he] seemed his follower, not partner”—and second, he is enraged that Coriolanus gave into his mother’s demands and abandoned what was the perfect opportunity to take Rome (5.6.38). Accordingly, Aufidius condemns Coriolanus as a traitor, calls him a “boy of tears,” and allows a group of conspirators to murder him (5.6.100). *Coriolanus* ends with Aufidius regretting Coriolanus’ murder—as he

says, “My rage is gone, / And I am struck with sorrow”—and vowing to honor what he calls Coriolanus’ “noble memory” (5.6.145-52).

## Literature Review

Though it has received much attention over the years from Shakespeareans and literary critics, few prominent political theorists have written about *Coriolanus*. This small group includes a pair of Straussians (Allan Bloom and Harry V. Jaffa), Eric Nelson, and just last year, Quentin Skinner, and it is this conversation that I want to add to.<sup>34</sup> In the next few pages, I will discuss the arguments about *Coriolanus* that are most relevant to my own—regardless of discipline—but restricting myself only to the last fifty years or so. My reasoning is that discussions prior to this tended to be overly simplistic, focusing on whether the play was aristocratic *or* democratic in nature. Hermann Ulrici, for example, writes that the “principal object [of *Coriolanus*] is to illustrate the struggle of democracy and aristocracy,” and in his view, Shakespeare favored the latter.<sup>35</sup> Walt Whitman concurs, writing that Shakespeare’s depiction of the “greasy and stupid” plebeians was meant to “[feed] the aristocratic vanity” of the English nobility.<sup>36</sup> Others like Denton Snider believe that “the people are in the right against Coriolanus and so shown by the poet.”<sup>37</sup> James T. Foard similarly argues that “if any bias is discoverable [in the play], it is distinctly of a democratic character.”<sup>38</sup> This interpretation—this democratic take on *Coriolanus*—began to catch on in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, coinciding with the increased popularity in the West of liberalism and revolutionary ideologies like communism and

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<sup>34</sup> Allan Bloom and Harry V. Jaffa, *Shakespeare’s Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Eric Nelson, “Shakespeare and the Best State of a Commonwealth” in *Shakespeare and Early Modern Political Thought*, eds. David Armitage, Conal Condren, and Andrew Fitzmaurice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Quentin Skinner, *From Humanism to Hobbes: Studies in Rhetoric and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>35</sup> George, *The Critical Tradition*, 120-1.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.



anarchism. But what these two views of *Coriolanus* miss is that aristocracy and democracy are not mutually exclusive—they can, in fact, be combined—and Shakespeare does not necessarily have to endorse one over the other.

Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, pro-republican readings of the text have been advanced by Barton, Patterson, and Hadfield, who all agree that Shakespeare portrays the plebeians with sympathy and genuinely understands their grievances against the patricians. Central to this claim is the idea that the plebeians are shown to be articulate and politically adept; as Barton writes, *Coriolanus* “is unique in the canon for the tolerance and respect it accords an urban citizenry.”<sup>39</sup> To Patterson, the plebeians come off not as a mob but as a group of discontented citizens “using their heads” to create political change.<sup>40</sup> Hadfield’s argument is perhaps the most similar to my own, as he interprets the message of the play to be that “English society will function better if there is wider participation in government by a range of estates or classes.”<sup>41</sup> He does not explicitly argue, however, that it is a pro-mixed constitution text—as I will—and what is more, he argues that the patricians are united in the belief that the plebeians should *not* have a say in politics. He writes, “*Coriolanus* shows the patricians refusing to take the republic seriously and so forcing the plebeians and the tribunes to oppose them, creating a contested and divided society.”<sup>42</sup> As I will discuss in Chapter 3, in my view, both the patricians and plebeians accept the mixed constitution as a reality in Rome and work together to defend it against Coriolanus’ relentless attacks.

Other scholars believe that studying the text itself is more important than trying to discern

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<sup>39</sup> Barton, “Livy, Machiavelli, and Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*,” 70.

<sup>40</sup> Annabel Patterson, *Fables of Power: Aesopian Writing and Political History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 124.

<sup>41</sup> Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics*, 181.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

what form of government Shakespeare may have preferred. One view—put forward by Nelson—is that *Coriolanus* depicts the conflict that is inherent in all politics. Specifically, he argues that the Roman plays, taken together, demonstrate Shakespeare’s belief that speaking of the so-called “ideal constitution” makes no sense because “the pursuit of personal ambition, and the preparedness to use all means necessary to preserve the power we have amassed, is a great human constant.”<sup>43</sup> Related to this is Wudel’s claim that *Coriolanus* paints a picture of what politics should not be and represents exactly what James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay “stood against” in *The Federalist Papers*.<sup>44</sup> Accepting these arguments entails believing that the Roman Republic’s political system—as it is portrayed by Shakespeare—is dysfunctional and made up of self-interested groups who duke it out for political supremacy and have no concern for the common good. But I do not think this is the case; yes, the patricians and plebeians do not always get along—this is to be expected, as they inhabit two totally different worlds at the beginning of the play—but this conflict is not inherently bad, and in actuality, there is much more cooperation between them than most commentators tend to think.

It is also important to bring up what others have said about the mixed constitution and how it relates to *Coriolanus*, as this is my main topic of interest. As we will see, the significance of my contribution is that while others have identified *Coriolanus* as “a play on the mixed constitution”—to quote Hörnqvist—no one has taken this argument a step further and said that the play endorses this long-admired form of government.<sup>45</sup> Hörnqvist, in contrast, specifically states that *Coriolanus* does “not . . . [sing] the praises of the mixed regime” because Coriolanus, the Senate, and the plebeians and their representatives “[fail] to perform their proper and

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<sup>43</sup> Nelson, “Shakespeare and the Best State of a Commonwealth,” 269.

<sup>44</sup> Darcy Wudel, “Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* in the Political Science Classroom,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 35, no. 2 (2002): 218, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096502000549>.

<sup>45</sup> Mikael Hörnqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 195.

designated roles within the whole.”<sup>46</sup> Bathory suggests that Shakespeare wrote *Coriolanus* simply to educate audiences about “the advantages and . . . difficulties of mixed government,” not to convince them one way or the other about it.<sup>47</sup> Blits devotes an entire book to analyzing the play scene by scene and discusses Coriolanus’ views on the mixed constitution and his desire to put an end to it, which I will return to in Chapter 2.<sup>48</sup>

Others, meanwhile, have argued that what we see in *Coriolanus* is not a mixed constitution at all, which seems to pose a problem for me, at least on the surface. Barbara L. Parker uses Plato’s classification of constitutions in the *Republic* to claim that Rome goes from being an oligarchy at the start of the play—that is, Rome is split into two cities, “one of the poor and one of the rich,” to quote Plato—to a pure democracy at the end, in which the plebeians rule as a mob.<sup>49</sup> Huffman, on the other hand, says that Rome is basically without a government—that its political situation is nothing more than “a rivalry between absolute monarchy and democracy, between rule and misrule, between order and chaos.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, in making my argument in Chapter 3, I will have to establish and support two related points: first, that what we see in *Coriolanus* is a mixed constitution after all, and second, that the play can be read as endorsing it. But a thorough understanding of the play and the form of government it presents to us requires that we have a firm sense of who Coriolanus is, and so the next chapter will be devoted to trying to understand this notoriously “unclear” individual.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Hörnqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire*, 196.

<sup>47</sup> Dennis Bathory, ““With Himself at War”: Shakespeare’s Roman Hero and the Republican Tradition” in *Shakespeare’s Political Pageant*, eds. Joseph Alulis and Vickie Sullivan (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1996), 254.

<sup>48</sup> Blits, *Spirit, Soul, and City*.

<sup>49</sup> Parker, *Plato’s Republic and Shakespeare’s Rome*, 54; Plato, *Republic*, bk. VIII, 551d.

<sup>50</sup> Clifford Chalmers Huffman, *Coriolanus in Context* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1971), 180-95.

<sup>51</sup> Skinner, *From Humanism to Hobbes*, 117.

## Chapter 2: Coriolanus, the Anti-Prince

Coriolanus is the mixed constitution's chief opponent, though his crusade to destroy it by stripping the plebeians of representation ends in spectacular failure. He is unable to convince his fellow patricians of the illegitimacy of plebeian power, and thus, he becomes a man without a city, at least until he finds refuge in Antium. R. B. Parker connects this to Aristotle's famous quote that the man who is city-less "by reason of his own nature and not of some accident, is either a poor sort of being, or a being higher than man."<sup>52</sup> Coriolanus is clearly not a god—as Parker notes, Brutus chastises him for speaking to the people "as if [he] were a god to punish"—but it is not immediately obvious whether he is "a poor sort of being" (i.e., a beast) or not (3.1.82).<sup>53</sup> I will argue that Coriolanus *does* have many beastly qualities—it is no wonder that Shakespeare consistently describes him as being animal-like—but that this, on its own, is not necessarily a problem. Rather, Coriolanus' problem is that a beast is all he can be; he does not know how to be a political man, and so, as Machiavelli writes, "he cannot hope to survive."<sup>54</sup>

### Coriolanus on the Mixed Constitution

I will begin with a discussion of Coriolanus' deep-seated disdain for the mixed constitution, as this is central to understanding him as a political figure. It is in Act 3, Scene 1—after his election to the consulship has been revoked—that he launches into a prolonged invective against this form of government and calls into question the notion that it is balanced or harmonious at all. He chastises the "unwise" patricians for giving into the plebeians' political demands in the first place, and proclaims,

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<sup>52</sup> R. B. Parker, "Coriolanus and 'th' Interpretation of the Time," in *Mirror up to Shakespeare: Essays in Honour of G. R. Hibbard*, ed. J. C. Gray (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 271; Aristotle, *Politics*, bk. I, ch. 2, 1235a2-3.

<sup>53</sup> Parker, "Coriolanus and 'th' Interpretation of the Time," 271.

<sup>54</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, in *Selected Political Writings*, trans. David Wootton (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1994), ch. 18.

My soul aches  
 To know, when two authorities are up,  
 Neither supreme, how soon confusion  
 May enter 'twixt the gap of both and take  
 The one by th' other (3.1.107-11).

Coriolanus is making two points here: First, the mixed constitution is an unstable form of government because power-sharing arrangements inevitably lead to power struggles and hence, chaos and confusion. This is what Hobbes had in mind when he said, “Powers divided mutually destroy each other.”<sup>55</sup> Second, it is an ineffective form of government in the sense that no one group or individual is in charge, something that is—according to Coriolanus—a prerequisite for efficient problem-solving and decision-making. He elaborates on this by saying,

This double worship,  
 Where one part does disdain with cause, the other  
 Insult without all reason; where gentry, title, wisdom,  
 Cannot conclude but by the yea and no  
 Of general ignorance—it must omit  
 Real necessities, and give way the while  
 To unstable slightness. Purpose so barred, it follows  
 Nothing is done to purpose (3.1.141-8).

This passage gives us the best insight into Coriolanus' worldview. The plebeians are to blame for Rome's mounting problems—the patricians, after all, are justified in “disdaining” them—and plebeian participation in politics necessarily entails mismanagement and “general ignorance.” As he says, the state does not “[have] the power to do the good it would / For th' ill which doth control't” (3.1.159-60). The solution to this problem is simple, however: Coriolanus urges the patricians to “at once pluck out / The multitudinous tongue”—in other words, to put an end to the office of the tribunate and reduce the plebeians to subservience once again (3.1.154-5). With this, Coriolanus reveals who he is: a reactionary whose ultimate goal is to reverse the political gains made by the plebeians in Act 1, Scene 1. In short, he poses an existential threat to the Roman

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<sup>55</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, part II, ch. 29, par. 12.

Republic's mixed constitution.

But we have yet to discuss Coriolanus' main reason for rejecting patrician-plebeian cooperation: the mixed constitution is, in his view, merely a stepping stone to democracy—a conviction that he makes known as early as Act 1, Scene 1, when he declares that the creation of the tribunate “[makes] bold power look pale” and predicts that the plebeians will soon overpower the patricians (1.1.210-8). Later on, he warns his fellow aristocrats,

If you are learned,  
Be not as common fools; if you are not,  
Let [the plebeians] have cushions by you. You are plebeians  
If they be senators; and they are no less  
When, both your voices blended, the great'st taste  
Most palates theirs (3.1.98-103).

What Coriolanus means is that sharing power with the plebeians means giving up power altogether. Because of their sheer size, the plebeians' voices and calls for “peace, land, and bread” are bound to drown out the patricians.<sup>56</sup> As he puts it, it will not be long before “the crows . . . peck the eagles” (3.1.138). Moreover, the plebeians' demands will only increase now that they have representatives on their side and can institutionally vent their concerns. Coriolanus would surely agree with Walter Bagehot that “if you once permit the ignorant class to begin to rule you may bid farewell to deference for ever.”<sup>57</sup> Overall, it is not that Coriolanus believes that the mixed constitution is an impossibility—this is what Blits argues—but rather, it exists for a short time as a shaky quasi-democratic arrangement that then becomes a full-blown, pure democracy.<sup>58</sup>

In this regard, Coriolanus sounds a lot like Jean Bodin, who wrote that “the combination

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<sup>56</sup> This is an intentional reference to the Bolshevik Revolution. The Bolsheviks' demands in 1917 bore a striking resemblance to the plebeians' in the opening scene of *Coriolanus*.

<sup>57</sup> Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution*, ed. Miles Taylor (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 34.

<sup>58</sup> Blits, *Spirit, Soul, and City*, 121.

of royal, aristocratic, and democratic power makes only a democracy.”<sup>59</sup> In fact, Bodin and Coriolanus oppose the mixed constitution on the same grounds, namely, that mixing different forms of government together “corrupts” the state and gives rise to “storms of civil sedition.”<sup>60</sup> This naturally raises the question of whether Shakespeare was familiar with Bodin. It makes sense that he would have been, given that he was well-read and Bodin was well-known. Ben-Nun even argues that “many signals point to the possibility that Shakespeare was acquainted with Bodin’s thoughts on sovereignty and statecraft”—for example, they were contemporaries with similar interests and the latter spent some time in England—but the truth is that we cannot be sure.<sup>61</sup> Still, it is entirely possible that Shakespeare envisioned who he wanted Coriolanus to be in his mind—an aristocrat who is unwavering in his belief that sovereign power must be undivided and absolute—and then used Bodin’s popular *Six Books of the Commonwealth* as a point of reference. The similarities between their arguments certainly are noteworthy.

It is also possible that Coriolanus represents James I, as Barbara L. Parker argues and as I mentioned in Chapter 1 (p. 9). Particularly striking is the fact that they favored the same method for dealing with rebellious subjects: hanging.<sup>62</sup> Coriolanus repeatedly calls for the plebeians to be hanged, simply yelling, “Hang ye!” (1.1.179). Likewise, the leaders of the Midland Revolt—including the peculiar Captain Pouch—were captured and subsequently hanged, drawn, and quartered, presumably under James’ direction.<sup>63</sup> But what Parker misses in her comparison of these two harsh individuals is that they both felt entitled to political power, though for different

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<sup>59</sup> Jean Bodin, *On Sovereignty*, trans. Julian H. Franklin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), bk. II, ch. 1, p. 92.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Gilad Ben-Nun, “The Subjugation of International Law to Power Politics and Mystery of State (*Arcana Imperii*) in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*” in *As You Law It – Negotiating Shakespeare*, eds. Daniela Carpi and François Ost (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 97.

<sup>62</sup> Parker, *Plato’s Republic and Shakespeare’s Rome*, 71.

<sup>63</sup> Greenblatt, *Tyrant*, 157.

reasons. James was convinced that he had been ordained by God to be king, or, as he puts it, that God had “placed him as his lieutenant over [the people].”<sup>64</sup> This is known as the theory of divine right. Coriolanus, in contrast, does not lay a religious claim to the consulship, but believes that he deserves the job because he is a war hero. His conquests alone prove that he is worthy to be consul, and to ask for the plebeians’ approval would diminish what he has done on his own. As others have noted, Coriolanus desires, above all else, to be self-sufficient.<sup>65</sup>

What is more, Coriolanus and James both view the masses as children who need to be carefully watched and disciplined—lest they get out of hand, as kids often do. James writes that just as a father “nourishes” and “educates” his children, a king must do the same for his subjects, among other fatherly duties.<sup>66</sup> He goes on to say that because it is “monstrous” and “unnatural” for sons to rebel against their father, so the same goes for when subjects “rise up against” their king and seek to “control him at their appetite.”<sup>67</sup> Coriolanus echoes these arguments in his first meeting with the plebeians:

What’s the matter,  
That in these several places of the city  
You cry against the noble Senate, who,  
Under the gods, keep you in awe, which else  
Would feed on one another? (1.1.182-6).

This reveals that Coriolanus, unlike James, is not a monarchist; specifically, he does not believe that it is necessary for one man to wield political power to keep the plebeians “in awe,” but that

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<sup>64</sup> James VI and I, *Political Writings*, ed. Johann P. Sommerville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 262.

<sup>65</sup> Patricia K. Meszaros, “‘There Is a World Elsewhere’: Tragedy and History in *Coriolanus*,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 16, no. 2 (1976): 276-7, <https://doi.org/10.2307/449768>; Lisa Lowe, “‘Say I Play the Man I Am’: Gender and Politics in *Coriolanus*,” *The Kenyon Review* 8, no. 4 (1986): 94, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4335762>; Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics*, 178; Theodore F. Kaouk, “Homo Faber, Action Hero Manqué: Crafting the State in *Coriolanus*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (2015): 431, <https://doi.org/10.1353/shq.2015.0069>.

<sup>66</sup> James VI and I, *Political Writings*, 262.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.



the Senate—an aristocratic advisory body comprised of experienced politicians—can do the same thing. Like James, however, he sees the *demos* as a helpless mass incapable of doing anything on its own (3.1.33). For them both, the ideal relationship between those in power and those subject to power should be like that of a shepherd to his flock—an idea that is best articulated by Marco the Lombard in Dante’s *Purgatory*. Meeting Dante on the Terrace of the Wrathful, Marco explains to him that men are ignorant by nature and “therefore, [need] the restraint of laws,” and that it is a shepherd’s job to enforce these laws and act as a model for his flock, so they do not, as Coriolanus says, “feed on one another.”<sup>68</sup> This explains why Coriolanus mockingly asks Sicinius, in reference to the plebeians, “Are these your herd?” (3.1.33).

### **Coriolanus on Democracy**

It is important to recognize that Coriolanus’ rejection of the mixed constitution is more than just that; it is also a rejection of democracy, given that one of his main problems with the former is that it must lead to the latter (p. 22). But a common argument for democracy—for vesting the people with power—is the idea of the “wisdom of the crowd,” which was first introduced by Aristotle. He writes in the *Politics*,

There is this to be said for the many: each of them by himself may not be of a good quality; but when they all come together it is possible that they may surpass—collectively and as a body, although not individually—the quality of the few best, in much the same way that feasts to which many contribute may excel those provided at one person’s expense.<sup>69</sup>

Aristotle’s observation, simply put, is that groups can be, and often are, wiser than individuals.

Marsilius of Padua makes the same argument in the Aristotle-inspired *Defender of the Peace*. He rejects the notion that “citizens in the plural” are “wicked” or “undiscerning” and instead argues

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<sup>68</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy, Volume 2: Purgatory*, trans. Mark Musa (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), Canto XVI, lines 88-102.

<sup>69</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, bk. III, ch. 11, 1281a41-1281b2.

that “the universal body of the citizens or its prevailing part . . . is more able to perceive what ought to be chosen and what rejected than any of its parts by itself.”<sup>70</sup> It is this idea—this belief in the wisdom of the crowd—that Coriolanus refuses to accept or even entertain. He describes the tribunes as being “defenders [of the plebeians’] vulgar wisdoms” (1.1.213). In between asking for the plebeians’ votes to be consul, he patronizingly complains that he is being forced “to beg of Hob and Dick” (2.3.115). Granting the plebeians representation is like giving a voice to Hydra, the many-headed monster who was slain by Hercules (3.1.92). The insults continue throughout the play—recall his mention of the plebeians’ “general ignorance” (p. 21)—but Coriolanus’ feelings about the plebeians can be summed up in a few words: to him, they are absolutely worthless.

Coriolanus’ other reason for opposing democracy is that it is an unmanly or effeminate form of government—something that sounds odd but gets at the core of who he is. In Act 3, Scene 2, after the plebeians have turned against him, Volumnia is able to convince her characteristically stubborn son to apologize to the plebeians and “go, and be ruled” by them, but he has to prepare himself for this humiliating spectacle first (3.2.90). He does so as follows:

Away, my disposition, and possess me  
Some harlot’s spirit! My throat of war be turned,  
Which quired with my drum, into a pipe  
Small as an eunuch, or the virgin voice  
That babies lulls asleep! (3.2.112-6).

For Coriolanus, playing the role of politician and campaigning for votes requires taking on the persona of a eunuch or a virgin, that is, of a traditionally weak, feminine figure. To humble oneself before the masses is to be emasculated; to participate in a system of government that values compromise and consensus is to lose one’s “manhood.” The irony of this is that many

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<sup>70</sup> Marsilius of Padua, *The Defender of the Peace*, trans. Annabel Brett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Discourse I, ch. 13, par. 2.

commentators have observed that Coriolanus is not manly at all. For example, Janet Adelman and Coppélia Kahn's psychoanalytic interpretations of the text reveal that Coriolanus displays a childlike dependence on his mother, allowing himself to be swayed by her every demand.<sup>71</sup> Greenblatt concurs, writing that "we cannot help but see Coriolanus as . . . an extremely dangerous version of a little boy."<sup>72</sup> A certain plebeian—the First Citizen—is astute enough to realize that Coriolanus wants nothing more than "to please his mother," and that all he has accomplished militarily has been for her, not for Rome (1.1.37).

Closely related to this, the plebeians' political power poses a threat to Coriolanus' way of life, which is dedicated to war and conquest. Like Agamemnon in *The Iliad*, Coriolanus never "[hangs] back from the struggle" because the battlefield is, to him, "where men win glory."<sup>73</sup> He expresses a desire to "hunt" Aufidius at the beginning of the play, and even threatens to make war on his own men for retreating from the Volsci (1.1.234; 1.4.38-40). I should note that Coriolanus has sometimes been called a proto-fascist, and for good reason; in "The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism," Mussolini sounds remarkably like him in his defense of the utility of war. He declares,

Fascism . . . repudiates the doctrine of Pacifism—born of a renunciation of the struggle and an act of cowardice in the face of sacrifice. War alone brings up to its highest tension all human energy and puts the stamp of nobility upon the peoples who have the courage to meet it.<sup>74</sup>

This last sentence is particularly important, as the idea that war is a noble thing that delineates those who are worthy and those who are not is distinctly "Coriolanus-esque." Menenius also

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<sup>71</sup> Janet Adelman, "'Anger's My Meat': Feeding, Dependency, and Aggression in *Coriolanus*," in *Shakespeare: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1945-2000*, ed. Russ McDonald (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 323-37; Coppélia Kahn, *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds and Women*, (New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>72</sup> Greenblatt, *Tyrant*, 165.

<sup>73</sup> Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), bk. IV, lines 257-9.

<sup>74</sup> Benito Mussolini, "The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism," trans. Jane Soames, *The Political Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (1933): 344-5, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-923X.1933.tb02289.x>.

points out that Coriolanus “has been bred i’ th’ wars / Since he could draw a sword” and offers this as an excuse for why he is so incapable of using “bolted” (i.e., refined) language (3.1.320-3). He later says that Coriolanus “speaks not like a citizen,” but like a soldier, as if the two cannot go hand in hand (3.3.55-6).

Basically, what Menenius is saying is that democratic politics and the warrior ethos are incompatible, and indeed, a comparison of Rome and Antium reveals that the former is more inclined to peace precisely because it is a republic. That is, now that the masses—those who bear the brunt of war—have a voice, they have reined in the state’s militaristic outlook and turned Coriolanus into “something of an anachronism,” as Barton calls him.<sup>75</sup> In the aftermath of Coriolanus’ banishment, for example, Rome “sits safe and still” (4.6.38). Sicinius remarks that the “present peace / And quietness of the people” going about their business and enjoying their lives is refreshing and long overdue (4.6.2-3). We are left with the impression that most Romans prefer peace to war. In Antium, on the other hand, generals run the show and have instilled in the masses the notion that war is something to strive for. The three servingmen in Aufidius’ house glorify war as a “ravisher,” while “peace is a great maker of cuckolds” (4.5.237-8). As Barton notes, the Volsci “[seem] to regard war as a natural and even desirable condition of existence.”<sup>76</sup> They are a people who inhabit an “archaic warrior state.”<sup>77</sup>

It was Immanuel Kant who theorized that republics are inherently more peaceful than non-republics—in the latter, he argues, war is “the easiest thing in the world” because those who declare it are not those who have to fight—and *Coriolanus* bears this out.<sup>78</sup> A republican Rome

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<sup>75</sup> Barton, “Livy, Machiavelli, and Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*,” 76.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>78</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1983), 113.

is a more pacifist Rome—at least according to Shakespeare—and this is one reason why Coriolanus puts up such a fight against the plebeians and their tribunes. Historically speaking, however, Coriolanus' fear that the old Rome was gone was unfounded, as the Roman Republic remained an expansionist, war-driven state that, as we know, eventually subjugated the entire Mediterranean world and beyond.

### **Coriolanus and *The Prince***

Coriolanus is quite clearly a conservative who believes that Rome, as it was before the plebeians' political revolution, was Rome as it should be. Paul Stapfer—writing in the years after the establishment of France's Third Republic—likened him to conservative ministers of his own day who “wished to destroy the constitution of [their] country for the purpose of establishing what [they] conceived to be the right form of government.”<sup>79</sup> More than anything else—as Georg Brandes observes—“to Coriolanus, what is customary is right.”<sup>80</sup> Nevertheless, he is much more than an individual with ultra-conservative political beliefs, as interesting as they may be. Returning to the idea that I introduced earlier (p. 20), Coriolanus the man is really more like a beast.

John Middleton Murry, for instance, compares him to “Plato's man of impulse,” which means he is ruled by the appetitive part of his soul, as opposed to the rational or spirited parts.<sup>81</sup> On the surface, this comparison seems apt: Coriolanus is simultaneously reckless and indecisive, and always keen to satisfy his desire for war; he appears to be, in other words, a slave to his appetites. But he also fits Plato's description of the spirited man, one who is dedicated to physical training but is “a hater of reason and of music”: “He no longer makes any use of

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<sup>79</sup> George, *The Critical Tradition*, 206.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

persuasion but bulls his way through every situation by force and savagery like a wild animal, living in ignorance and stupidity without either rhythm or grace.”<sup>82</sup> Coriolanus’ “beastly” ways are recognized by his enemies and allies alike, that is, by plebeians and patricians. Brutus calls him a “lamb . . . that baas like a bear” (2.1.11). Sicinius says that he is a “viper / That would depopulate the city and / Be every man himself” (3.1.264-6). In the lead-up to their march on Rome, Aufidius predicts that Coriolanus will “be to [the city] / As is the osprey to the fish, who takes it / By sovereignty of nature” (4.7.33-5). Menenius even remarks that he has “grown from man to dragon” (5.4.13). The use of animal imagery in *Coriolanus* is pervasive—Maxwell analyzes this in detail—and it creates the sense that Coriolanus is a predator to the plebeians, and more broadly, to Rome’s entire political system.<sup>83</sup> He insultingly refers to the people as “the beast / with many heads,” and yet fails to realize that he is—as Plato would say—ruled by the multi-colored, many-headed beast inside himself (4.1.1-2).<sup>84</sup>

Yet it is too simplistic to say that Coriolanus is a beast because he is ruled by appetite or spirit; in *The Prince*, Machiavelli argues that a beast is one who fights “with no holds barred” and does not “respect the rules,” and this, to me, is a perfect description of who Coriolanus is.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, much of the conflict in *Coriolanus* stems from the fact that Coriolanus does not respect the basic rules of the polity that he lives in, consistently spurning its political norms. For instance, upon being named consul by the Senate, he tries his hardest to bypass having to appear before the plebeians in the marketplace. He begs Menenius,

I do beseech you,  
Let me o’erleap that custom; for I cannot  
Put on the gown [of humility], stand naked, and entreat [the plebeians]  
For my wounds’ sake to give their suffrage.

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<sup>82</sup> Plato, *Republic*, bk. III, 411d-e.

<sup>83</sup> Maxwell, “Animal Imagery in *Coriolanus*.”

<sup>84</sup> Plato, *Republic*, bk. IX, 588c-589b.

<sup>85</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 18.

Please you that I may pass this doing (2.2.134-8).

To be named consul with the consent of the plebeians reduces the worth of the position, according to Coriolanus. To ask for their “voices” is thus an embarrassment that he tries his hardest not to do. His resistance continues, as he says to Menenius,

What must I say [to the plebeians]?  
 “I pray, sir”—Plague upon’t! I cannot bring  
 My tongue to such a pace. “Look sir, my wounds.  
 I got them in my country’s service, when  
 Some certain of your brethren roared and ran  
 From th’ noise of our own drums” (2.3.48-53).

The effect of this passage is twofold: First, it illustrates that campaigning—the mere act of asking for support from the “herd” (p. 25)—is unnatural to Coriolanus. Second, it provides a snapshot of his contempt for the plebeians; in his eyes, they are mere cowards who have done nothing for Rome, while he has purportedly sacrificed so much. He clings obstinately to the belief that plebeian power is unlawful, and this is why his political “career”—if we can call it that—ends in disaster and disgrace.

In many ways, then, Coriolanus is the anti-Prince, meaning that his behavior flies in the face of nearly everything that Machiavelli says in his classic “how-to book,” *The Prince*.<sup>86</sup> First of all—and as I have already demonstrated—he does not know how to be “both an animal and a man,” but only the former.<sup>87</sup> Second, he ignores the warning that “if the masses are opposed to you, you can never be secure.”<sup>88</sup> He seemingly does not care that the plebeians want to kill him because he is adamant that he is right and they are wrong. His banishment is their loss. Third, he does not realize that winning over the populace is “easy to do if [you] protect their interests.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Angelo M. Codevilla, introduction to *The Prince*, by Niccolò Machiavelli (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), x.

<sup>87</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 18.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 9.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

That is, if he had simply acknowledged the legitimacy of the plebeians' problems and vowed to work with them, his nomination to the consulship would have sailed through. He was actually at an advantage to begin with, because as Machiavelli rightly observes, "people, when they are well-treated by someone whom they expected to treat them badly, feel all the more obliged to their benefactor."<sup>90</sup> The plebeians obviously did not expect much from Coriolanus—recall that he was their "chief enemy" (p. 12)—but they were more than willing to give him a shot, if only he sincerely asked for their votes. The Third Citizen even says, "If he would incline to the people, there was never a worthier man" (2.3.37-8).

Fourth, Coriolanus ends up "hated and despised," something that Machiavelli repeatedly stresses a ruler must avoid.<sup>91</sup> In fact, he goes out of his way to "[seek the plebeians'] hate with greater devotion than they can render it him" (2.2.18-9). As he sees it, those who are great "deserve" the plebeians' hate (1.1.175). Fifth, and finally, Machiavelli's prince is adaptable and able to change his behavior with changing circumstances. Machiavelli explains, "I . . . think a ruler will flourish if he adjusts his policies as the character of the times changes; and similarly, a ruler will fail if he follows policies that do not correspond to the needs of the times."<sup>92</sup> We have seen that Coriolanus is incredibly stubborn, persisting in his opposition to the mixed constitution long after the other patricians have accepted it in the interest of avoiding a civil war. From 494 BCE on—after the first Secession of the Plebs (p. 12)—the days of patrician hegemony were over, but for Coriolanus, it was as if the balance of power had not shifted at all. He was, to use Machiavelli's words, completely "out of step."<sup>93</sup>

I must mention that in one regard, Coriolanus does emulate the Prince: he has "no other

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<sup>90</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 9.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, chs. 16, 17, 19.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 25.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*



concern, no other thought, . . . aside from war.”<sup>94</sup> But because he is not yet consul—because he has no real political power—this proves to be yet another flaw. Of course, it is fine and well to “think only of military matters” when you are secure in your position—a consul’s role in the Roman Republic was to do just this—but in the political arena, the force of words is more important than that of arms.<sup>95</sup> Cicero writes that there are two ways to settle a dispute: by negotiation, which is “characteristic of human beings,” and by physical force, as beasts do.<sup>96</sup> Coriolanus opts for the latter in his dispute with the plebeians and makes this known with his declaration to “fight / Against [his] cankered country” (4.5.94-5). He does not speak to the plebeians; he yells at them. And when he is not excoriating them for their stupidity, he is threatening to kill them: “I’d make a quarry / With thousands of these quartered slaves as high / As I could pick my lance” (1.1.196-8). Shrank analyzes Coriolanus’ use of language and concludes that “he is unable . . . to obey the fundamental rule regarding rhetoric: the need for decorum, suiting your language to the time, place, matter, and audience.”<sup>97</sup> He sees the plebeians as an enemy—not as an ally in a common political project—and so he treats them as such. Dialogue is no use; being the beast that he is, war is his only recourse.

## Conclusion

To recap this chapter, there are three points to remember. First, Coriolanus is an elitist who rejects the mixed constitution for its empowerment of the people and tendency to lead to chaos, among other negative consequences. Second, he is a critic of democracy who refuses to play the role of democratic politician because it is emasculating and unfitting for a life-long

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<sup>94</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 14.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Cicero, *On Obligations: De Officiis*, trans. P. G. Walsh (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), bk. I, par. 34.

<sup>97</sup> Cathy Shrank, “Civility and the City in *Coriolanus*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (2003): 419, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3844056>.

warrior such as himself. Third, he participates in politics as a beast would, refusing to play by the rules and using violence as his preferred means of dealing with political opponents—something that makes him an outcast in the new Roman Republic and ultimately leaves him without a *polis* to call his own. Now that we are thoroughly familiar with Coriolanus, it is time that we analyze the political system he comes up against and threatens to tear down: the mixed constitution. This will be the focus of the next chapter.

## Chapter 3: On the Mixed Constitution

After he is formally banished from Rome, Coriolanus says his goodbyes to his family and friends. He tries to console his mother by telling her what she used to tell him: “Extremities [are] the trier of spirits” (4.1.4). Polybius says something similar in the *Histories*, arguing that it is only in abnormal times—namely, in times of extreme hardship or success—that one is able to discern who a person really is.<sup>98</sup> He adds that this also applies to systems of government, and proceeds to discuss why and how the Roman Republic was able to withstand the massive changes that accompanied the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BCE.<sup>99</sup> With this in mind, I want to explore the stress that is put on the Roman Republic in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, as Shakespeare depicts it. Specifically, I will focus on how the Republic is able to weather the storm that is Coriolanus. My analysis yields the following conclusion: the Republic’s unique system of government—a system that ensures that sovereignty is not held by a single individual or group on its own—foils Coriolanus’ attempts to seize the reins for himself, or for those like him (i.e., military elites). Thus, what we see in *Coriolanus* is a mixed constitution working as it was designed to; power is checked by power, and the patricians and plebeians cooperate with each other to ensure that the Republic does not collapse. Put simply, *Coriolanus* endorses the mixed constitution as a desirable form of government.

### A Mere Chimera?

Alexis de Tocqueville, in his in-depth look at early American political life, *Democracy in America*, writes that the mixed constitution seems to him to be “a mere chimera.”<sup>100</sup> His reasoning for this is that “in all communities some one principle of action may be discovered

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<sup>98</sup> Polybius, *The Histories*, bk. VI, par. 2.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: The Complete and Unabridged Volumes I and II*, trans. Henry Reeve (New York: Bantam Classics, 2000), vol. I, ch. 15, p. 302.

which preponderates over the others.”<sup>101</sup> For example, the United Kingdom might be said to have a mixed constitution—monarchy is represented by the king or queen, aristocracy by the House of Lords, and democracy by the House of Commons—but in reality, Tocqueville argues that it was “an essentially aristocratic State” in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>102</sup> One can say the same about the United States; our constitution theoretically seems mixed or balanced—the president is like a constrained, elective monarch, the Senate is an aristocratic assembly, the House of Representatives a democratic one—but at its core, the U.S. is a representative democracy. This is an important objection to the mixed constitution to consider, and one that I must first respond to before I get into my main argument, as I said in Chapter 1 (p. 19). The question I will answer in the next few pages, then, is this: is the constitution in *Coriolanus* really mixed, or is it—as Tocqueville says—merely a chimera?

The simple answer to this is yes, *Coriolanus* is a play about the mixed constitution, but demonstrating that this is the case requires thinking about this form of government as Polybius does, that is, as a “balance of classes.”<sup>103</sup> On this view, the mixed constitution consists of separate political bodies controlled by different groups, with each one embodying one of the pure forms of government. We clearly see this in *Coriolanus*; indeed, Shakespeare ignores the multiple assemblies that made up the Roman constitution—including the very important Centuriate Assembly—and simplifies the Republic’s political structure by breaking it into just three distinct parts: there is one consul (as opposed to two), the Senate, and the tribunes. (Aediles—helpers of the tribunes—are also briefly seen.) Rome’s two orders fit neatly into this scheme; controlling the consulship and the Senate are the patricians, while the tribunate was

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<sup>101</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. I, ch. 15, p. 302.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> Bellamy, “The Political Form of the Constitution,” 441.

established for plebeians by plebeians. Furthermore, in the consul is a strong “monarch”—albeit a restrained one who is chosen by his fellow citizens—in the Senate is a wise body of aristocrats, and in the tribunate is a voice for the *demos*, which is necessary in any well-balanced polity. It is only Coriolanus who exists outside this structure, as I will show later on.

Another way to think of the mixed constitution is the Aristotelian way: as a “mingling of classes,” meaning that there exists “a social mixture amongst . . . political officers.”<sup>104</sup> This is *not* apparent in *Coriolanus*, as positions like consul and tribune are reserved exclusively for patricians and plebeians, respectively. But if we use the term “mingling” in a different way—taking it to mean that there is interaction and cooperation between the orders—then this surely applies. The patricians and plebeians are separate from each other in an institutional sense but also in constant contact, and mutual consent is needed to get things of monumental importance done—for example, to elect the consul. One important thing to note—and something that Shakespeare seems to miss in his portrayal of Rome—is that the patricians and plebeians were not economic classes, hence why I call them “orders.” That is to say, the patricians were not exclusively wealthy, nor the plebeians exclusively poor; they were social groups that one was born into. In fact, there were some very wealthy plebeians—they often served as tribunes—and a destitute man born into a noble family would still be a patrician. No matter how we understand these two groups, though, *Coriolanus* shows them engaging in politics on a relatively level playing field.

I would like to conclude this section by responding to Parker and Huffman’s claim that what we see in *Coriolanus* is mob rule and chaos (p. 19). This is incorrect for a few reasons. First, neither the consulship nor the Senate break down in the course of the play; the patricians

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<sup>104</sup> Bellamy, “The Political Form of the Constitution,” 441.

remain major players in Roman politics. Second, if Shakespeare wanted us to think that the plebeians were mob-like, he would have deliberately made them seem as ignorant as those who murder Cinna the poet in *Julius Caesar*.<sup>105</sup> Instead, they are willing to listen to and follow the advice of their tribunes and even back down from sentencing Coriolanus to death in Act 3, Scene 1. They are, in other words, shown to have good sense. Third, one might point to Sicinius' famous line, "What is the city but the people?" as proof that the plebeians have seized Rome for themselves (3.1.200). Paster makes an argument of this sort, writing that "definitions of the city split sharply along class lines."<sup>106</sup> But in fact, to say that the city belongs to the people does not exclude the patricians, because they are, of course, people too. To believe in Sicinius' quote is to believe in an ideal that any self-proclaimed republic—including the Romans—should accept: that the state belongs to no one person or privileged group, but to all its citizens.

### **Breaking Down the Mixed Constitution**

Now that we have established that Rome's constitution *is* mixed, I would like to analyze its three constituent parts, beginning with the consulship. This very important office is occupied by the patrician Cominius, who, despite his high status, is reduced to a somewhat minor character. He is significant not for his own feats, but for telling us about Coriolanus', which he does before the Senate in Act 2, Scene 2, declaring that "the deeds of Coriolanus / Should not be uttered feebly" (2.2.81-2). He also leads the campaign against the Volsci in Act 1, but is upstaged by Coriolanus—an apparently regular occurrence. As Brutus observes, "Half all Cominius' honors are to Martius. / Though Martius earned them not" (1.1.271-2). It would make

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<sup>105</sup> In Act 3, Scene 3 of *Julius Caesar*, a group of angry plebeians attack and kill an innocent man named Cinna simply because he shares a name with one of the conspirators who killed Caesar. Cinna insists that they have the wrong man, but one of the plebeians responds, "It is no matter. His name's Cinna. Pluck but his name out of his heart, and turn him going" (3.3.34-6). They subsequently "tear him" to pieces (3.3.37). This story is lifted directly from Plutarch's *Life of Caesar*.

<sup>106</sup> Gail Kern Paster, "To Starve with Feeding: The City in *Coriolanus*," *Shakespeare Studies* 11 (1978): 126-7.

sense for Cominius to be upset by this, but in fact, he is more than willing to let Coriolanus have all the attention. He showers him with praise for his defeat over the Volsci, giving him his cognomen and stressing that he “wears [the] war’s garland” (1.9.59). In this respect, he is the anti-Aufidius (p. 15); he is perfectly fine with taking a backseat to Coriolanus and being overlooked as a hero. He recognizes that success for Coriolanus is success for him, as they are partners with a shared goal: preserving the military power of Rome.

However, in contrast to Coriolanus, Cominius is not stubborn to a fault. He acknowledges that there are times when the patricians must yield to the plebeians, and he even says to Coriolanus—who is so self-conscious about looking manly—that “manhood is called foolery when it stands / Against a falling fabric” (3.1.247-8). Additionally, although he does not necessarily like the tribunes and their tactics—for example, he chastises them for revoking Coriolanus’ election and for inciting the plebeians against him, saying that this is “the way to lay the city flat”—he realizes that it is through dialogue, not violence, that conflict is best resolved (3.1.205). The clearest instance of this is in Act 3, Scene 3, just before Coriolanus is banished for good. In the uproar of this scene, Cominius pleads with the plebeians, “Let me speak” (3.3.109). He attempts to calm them down by bringing up the fact that he “can show for Rome / Her enemies’ marks upon [himself],” but he is, as per usual, ignored (3.3.110-1). Overall, what we have in Cominius is an individual who is uniquely fit—at least among the characters in Shakespeare’s Rome—for the military-civilian institution that is the consulship. He is “beastly” on the battlefield, and a politician at home, but he receives little recognition for this, living in Coriolanus’ shadow.

The next institution for us to consider is the Senate. We are not introduced to any senators by name, but Menenius Agrippa, a veteran politician, is their intellectual spokesman.

Stopford Augustus Brooke and R. B. Parker both describe Menenius as a pure opportunist, as someone who holds no consistent political principles.<sup>107</sup> While this assessment is not entirely wrong, I do not see it as an outright character flaw; instead, it is indicative of Menenius' adaptability as a politician and tendency to change his behavior when necessary, much like Machiavelli's prince. For example, he "[presents] himself as the people's friend" when it seems like they pose a threat to aristocrats like him—e.g., in Act 1, Scene 1—but then denigrates them when he has the upper hand, as in Act 2, Scene 1.<sup>108</sup> In this scene, he says to the tribunes that their "abilities are too infantlike for doing much alone" and that he "[finds] the ass in compound with the major part of [their] syllables" (2.1.35; 2.1.56-7). He departs from them by saying, "More of your conversation would infect my brain, being the herdsmen of the beastly plebeians," sounding a lot like Coriolanus (2.1.90-2). But Menenius changes his tune as the play progresses—wavering in his belief that the plebeians are undeserving of respect—and unlike Coriolanus, he never advocates getting rid of the tribunate. He rightly sees that as a very dangerous political move—an idea I will return to in a bit.

For now, it is worth looking at Menenius' opinion of the plebeians in more detail. The Second Citizen remarks that he "hath always loved the people," but what he says to them in Act 1, Scene 1 indicates otherwise (1.1.50). He begins by calling the plebeians his "countrymen," "good friends," and "honest neighbors," though this flattery should not be mistaken for genuine affection (1.1.53; 1.1.60-1). Menenius very clearly believes that the plebeians are more like children than citizens, and therefore, that they are too incompetent to participate in government; recall that this is the same argument that Coriolanus and James I make (p. 24). In his first speech to the plebeians, Menenius assures them that their problems stem not from the patricians—who

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<sup>107</sup> George, *The Critical Tradition*, 286; Parker, "Coriolanus and 'th' Interpretation of the Time," 269.

<sup>108</sup> Greenblatt, *Tyrant*, 160.



care for them “most [charitably]”—but from the gods (1.1.63). Accordingly, he tells them that there is no use in trying to lobby the patricians for change, and is dismayed that they would even think to “slander / The helms o’ th’ state / who care for [them] like fathers” (1.1.74-5). This line is particularly interesting, as it makes use of Plato’s famous image of the “ship of state.”<sup>109</sup> In Menenius’ view, the patricians are like captains keeping Rome on course; to allow the plebeians to have any say in where it is going is, at this point, unthinkable. Although the plebeians’ discontent is an “impediment” to Rome, it seemingly poses no real threat to its functioning as a patrician-dominated state (1.1.70).

Menenius’ conversation with the plebeians in Act 1, Scene 1 is really more of a lecture, and the most important component of it is “a pretty tale”: the famed and oft-analyzed “fable of the belly,” which comes directly from Plutarch’s *Life of Coriolanus* (1.1.88).<sup>110</sup> This is a story about the parts of the body rebelling against the belly for supposedly being “idle and unactive,” while they do all the heavy lifting and are tasked with a variety of jobs, like seeing, hearing, walking, etc. (1.1.97). The belly responds with the claim that it is “the storehouse and the shop / Of the whole body” and that without it, the body would cease to function (1.1.131-2). This might sound abstract, but its connection to Rome is easy to see: the plebeians are the rebellious parts of the body, and the Senate is the belly, which receives no thanks for all the work that it does. Menenius’ purpose in telling this story, according to Rabkin, is to “[degrade] . . . the plebes.”<sup>111</sup> Similarly, Shrank says that he means to “convince them to play their (subordinate) social role.”<sup>112</sup> I agree with this interpretation, though I would add that Menenius’ objective is not to

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<sup>109</sup> Plato, *Republic*, bk. VI, 488a-489d.

<sup>110</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Coriolanus*, in *Plutarch’s Lives Volume 1*, trans. John Dryden (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 295.

<sup>111</sup> Norman Rabkin, “*Coriolanus*: The Tragedy of Politics,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (1966): 197, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2867716>.

<sup>112</sup> Shrank, “Civility and the City in *Coriolanus*,” 413.

make an enemy of the plebeians, as Coriolanus succeeds in doing—this is no way to calm them, after all—but to make them think that going up against a powerhouse like the Senate is impossible.

Ironically, Menenius is quickly “proven wrong” and thus made to look a bit foolish.<sup>113</sup> Indeed, the plebeians disregard Menenius’ fable and are able to wring from the patricians a very significant concession: representatives of their own. I have already said a bit about the tribunes, Brutus and Sicinius (p. 14), but I want to focus specifically on who they are and how they fit into Rome’s constitution. Many have argued that they are pure demagogues, including Nelson, who writes that they “rule Rome by manipulating the mob.”<sup>114</sup> Charles Knight sees the plebeians as “mere tools of their weak though crafty leaders.”<sup>115</sup> Barrett Wendell simply calls them “the twin demagogues.”<sup>116</sup> If this assessment is accurate, Brutus and Sicinius are like Cleon—“the most drastic of the [Athenians]”—in Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*.<sup>117</sup> Just as Cleon exploits the anger of his fellow citizens to try to convince them to “take . . . vengeance” on the rebellious Mytilenaeans, Brutus and Sicinius do the same in regard to Coriolanus.<sup>118</sup> That is, because they personally dislike Coriolanus and fear that his acquisition of power will cause them to lose theirs, they cynically use the plebeians to advance their own agenda. They rile up the plebeians—“[suggesting] . . . in what hatred / [Coriolanus] still hath held them”—and then set them loose on the patricians (2.1.240-1). This is the view that the patricians themselves hold, including Cominius, who complains that “the people are abused, set on” (3.1.58).

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<sup>113</sup> Ann Kaegi, “‘How Apply You This?’ Conflict and Consensus in *Coriolanus*,” *Shakespeare* 4, no. 4 (2008): 368, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450910802501089>.

<sup>114</sup> Nelson, “Shakespeare and the Best State of a Commonwealth,” 268.

<sup>115</sup> George, *The Critical Tradition*, 127.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>117</sup> Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Martin Hammond (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), bk. III, par. 36.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, bk. III, par. 40.

But to say that the tribunes are no better than demagogues—exploiters of the common people—is to misunderstand how they feel about and interact with their constituents. If the plebeians were merely pawns in Brutus and Sicinius’ game, we might expect the latter to insult them when they are not around. The opposite is the case. In private, they express a real belief in the plebeians and speak of them not as puppets to be manipulated in any way they want but as having thought-out political views of their own. This is evidenced by the following quote, said by Sicinius to Brutus:

Doubt not  
The commoners, for whom we stand, but they  
Upon their ancient malice will forget  
With the least cause [Coriolanus’] new honors (2.1.221-4).

The idea that the commoners should not be doubted is significant—in a way, it is reminiscent of what Aristotle and Marsilius of Padua say about the wisdom of the crowd (p. 25)—and importantly, it receives no objection from Brutus. Both tribunes are confident that the plebeians are not so naïve as to be won over by Coriolanus’ “new honors”; rather, they will quickly realize, as soon as he provokes them, that the fact that he has fought for Rome does not mean he will fight for them. Moreover, Brutus and Sicinius never speak of forcing the plebeians to give into their demands, but view themselves as advisors to the plebeians, whose role is to “suggest” to them the right course of action (2.1.240; 2.1.248). This is not to say that they are completely selfless, as they do privately voice their concern that “[their] office may, / During [Coriolanus’] power, go sleep” (2.1.218-9). But their defense of the tribunate and their interest in maintaining it is about more than themselves; its abolition would hurt the plebeians just as much as it would them, if not more.

In a few words, the best way to think of the tribunes is as individuals who “refine and

enlarge the public views.”<sup>119</sup> (This is one of the advantages of representation that James Madison identifies in *Federalist* No. 10.) The plebeians are new to self-government and need some help in “[discerning] the true interest of their country,” and this is where Brutus and Sicinius come in.<sup>120</sup> For instance, in Act 2, Scene 3, after the plebeians have assented to Coriolanus becoming consul, all of them—except for one holdout—suspect that he “mocked” and “flouted” them in asking for their voices (2.3.158-60). Brutus and Sicinius turn this suspicion into a firm conviction among the plebeians that Coriolanus will “crush” them, now that he has the power to do so (2.3.203). And in this, they are not wrong; Coriolanus has consistently shown that he is not on the plebeians’ side, and never will be. He even expresses, in front of the tribunes, his intent to deceive the plebeians when asking for their votes, grumbling that “it is a part / That I shall blush in acting, and might well / Be taken from the people” (2.2.144-5). Brutus’ speech drives this point home:

When [Coriolanus] had no power,  
 But was a petty servant to the state,  
 He was your enemy, ever spake against  
 Your liberties and the charters that you bear  
 I’ th’ body of the weal; and now, arriving  
 A place of potency and sway o’ th’ state  
 If he should still malignantly remain  
 Fast foe to th’ plebeii, your voices might  
 Be curses to yourselves (2.3.177-185).

Moreover, for the tribunes to imply that Coriolanus aspires to be a tyrant—that he wants to “[affect] one sole throne / Without assistance,” as Sicinius later says—is not out of the realm of possibilities (4.6.33-4). We have already seen that he aspires for total self-sufficiency, especially in war (p. 24), so why would the same not hold in the political realm? The tribunes are right that

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<sup>119</sup> James Madison, *Federalist* No. 10 in *The Federalist*, ed. Robert A. Ferguson (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2006), 56.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

the plebeians' election of Coriolanus was "ignorant," and in urging them to reverse what they have done, they are doing what tribunes should, that is, defending and protecting their constituents from patrician abuse—specifically, from a beast-like enemy who desires to swallow them whole (2.3.219).

### ***Coriolanus* as a Defense of the Mixed Constitution**

Having discussed each component of Rome's constitution, I have, at last, arrived at my main point: these components come together to create the impression that the mixed constitution is a desirable form of government. Central to this claim is the fact that Shakespeare does not side with the patricians over the plebeians, or vice versa; instead, to quote H. N. Hudson, "the play may be cited as a strong instance of dramatic evenhandedness: impartial justice seems to have been the moral law of the composition."<sup>121</sup> It is impossible to know if this was a conscious decision on Shakespeare's part, but it seems highly likely, given that he goes out of his way to stress that neither order in Rome is more deserving of political power or more capable of wielding it than the other. Both are shown to have faults and strengths, and thus, power-sharing is a good thing.

The patricians, for example, are selfish and wildly out of touch with the plebeians, who they disingenuously claim to "care" for (1.1.63). Their refusal to take seriously the plebeians' grievances drives the latter to the brink of despair, prompting the First Citizen to famously proclaim, "Let us revenge this with our pikes ere we become rakes; for the gods know I speak this in hunger for bread, not in thirst for revenge" (1.1.21-3). The patricians' sole interest—at least at the start of the play—is in enriching themselves at the plebeians' expense. Still, Shakespeare does not condemn them outright; they are much more cautious than the plebeians,

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<sup>121</sup> George, *The Critical Tradition*, 132.

as evidenced by Act 3, Scene 1, when they insist on dealing with Coriolanus in a lawful way. Additionally, Coriolanus, Cominius, and Titus Lartius are praised for their military accomplishments. Their service on behalf of Rome is acknowledged by all, plebeians included. The Third Citizen even says that he feels obligated to give Coriolanus his “noble acceptance” because of the many “noble deeds” he has done (2.3.8-9).

The plebeians’ faults include being impulsive and too quick to turn to violence to get their way. This is apparent on two occasions: in Act 1, Scene 1—when the threat of famine hangs over them—and in Act 3, Scene 1, after they have taken back Coriolanus’ election and subsequently attempt to seize him, repeatedly shouting, “Down with him!” (3.1.230). And while their allegiance to Rome is unwavering, they are, in other ways, quite fickle. The most obvious example of this is that they nullify their own votes, but they also seem to regret banishing Coriolanus in the first place. In Act 4, Scene 6, the First Citizen says, “I ever said we were i’ th’ wrong when we banished him” (4.6.157-8). The Second Citizen responds, “So did we all” (4.6.159). What we have here is the “immediate commencement of historical revisionism.”<sup>122</sup> In a moment of crisis—when it seems like Coriolanus is poised to burn Rome to the ground—the plebeians distance themselves from what they have done. This is an understandable response, but it shows us that they are fundamentally unsure of themselves. Sicinius, however—playing the role of plebeian advisor (p. 43)—urges them to not be “dismayed” and to “show no sign of fear” (4.6.152; 4.6.155). Naturally, the tribunes “do not like [the] news” of Coriolanus’ return, but they hold firm that banishing him was for the good of the Republic (4.6.160-1).

As for the plebeians’ strengths, they are, first of all, surprisingly self-aware. The Third Citizen admits to his fellow plebeians, “Truly I think if all our wits were to issue out of one skull,

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<sup>122</sup> Greenblatt, *Tyrant*, 180.

they would fly east, west, north, south, and their consent of one direct way should be at once to all the points o' th' compass" (2.3.20-2). Even more remarkably, they are able to cogently formulate and put into words exactly what their grievances against the patricians are. The First Citizen responds to Menenius' defense of the Senate in forceful terms:

Care for us? True, indeed! [The patricians] ne'er cared for us yet: suffer us to famish, and their storehouses crammed with grain; make edicts for usury, to support usurers; repeal daily any wholesome act established against the rich, and provide more piercing statutes daily to chain up and restrain the poor. If the wars eat us not up, they will; and there's all the love they bear us (1.1.77-84).

This is a scathing indictment of patrician selfishness. The plebeians understand that they are not only being neglected by their so-called "fathers," but exploited, and this is why Marxist readers of the play—like A. A. Smirnov—have tended to identify with them.<sup>123</sup> What is more, their political demands are not extreme or unrealistic; they simply want something to eat and someone to fight on their behalf. Coriolanus puts it like this:

[The plebeians] said they were anhungry, sighed 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. With these shreds  
They vented their complainings (1.1.203-7).

"These shreds" are completely reasonable. For the plebeians to be treated like animals—really, worse than them—is blatantly unjust. They are right that corn is not "for the rich men only," and it reflects badly on Coriolanus that he takes issue with such a basic truth and refuses to acknowledge what Shakespeare implies throughout the text: that the plebeians are competent enough to have a say in how Rome is run. Chanan sums it up: "[The plebeians] are as varied as any group of people would be, but in general thoughtful and analytical as they forge a course of

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<sup>123</sup> A. A. Smirnov, *Shakespeare: A Marxist Interpretation* (Folcroft, PA: Folcroft Library Editions, 1970).

action to meet their collective predicament.”<sup>124</sup>

One advantage of the mixed constitution, then, is that it awards representation to two groups who are deserving of it. Neither side ought to be excluded from politics, and a power-sharing arrangement such as the one established in Act 1, Scene 1 ensures that this is not the case. But the mixed constitution has many advantages, and so the rest of this chapter will be devoted to going through them one by one.

To begin, patrician insolence and greed is checked by the newly-empowered plebeians. The best evidence of this is that the plebeians are no longer desperate for food and on the brink of starvation; their newfound voice has enabled them to convince the patricians to take care of them once and for all. One development that is particularly significant but is mentioned only in passing (by Brutus) is that corn was “given [to the plebeians] gratis,” meaning for free (3.1.43). Coriolanus, unsurprisingly, objects to this proto-welfare measure and handouts of any sort, complaining that feeding the plebeians is akin to “[feeding] / The ruin of the state” (3.1.117-8). But on this, he receives no support from his fellow patricians. Even Menenius—who was adamantly opposed to helping the plebeians in any way (p. 41)—tells him, “No more of that” (3.1.115). The consensus among the patricians has shifted from one of complete plebeian disregard to an acknowledgement that their demands are legitimate and must be addressed. This is thanks to the mixed constitution, that is, to the limiting of patrician power and the checking of it by the plebeians.

Moreover, we are presented with a glimpse of what a normally functioning Rome is like in Act 4, Scene 6: “Tradesmen [are] singing in their shops and going / About their functions friendly” (4.6.8-9). In Coriolanus’ absence, life for the plebeians is good, and Rome, as a whole,

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<sup>124</sup> Gabriel Chanan, *Shakespeare and Democracy: The Self-Renewing Politics of a Global Playwright* (Kibworth Beauchamp, Leicestershire, UK: Troubador Publishing, 2015), 92.



is at peace. Compare this to the situation in oligarchic Rome, when “fellows ran about the streets / Crying confusion” and the two orders viewed each other as enemies (4.6.29-30). The significance of this is that it belies Coriolanus’ prediction that granting the plebeians power would “throw forth greater themes / For insurrection’s arguing,” and in a twist of irony, the only insurrection that Rome must face is one from him, in his planned attempt to take the city back by force (1.1.218-9). This does not mean that Rome is entirely devoid of tension, though; Menenius, for instance, still disagrees with the plebeians that Coriolanus aspired to be a tyrant (4.6.34). But this is to be expected; *Coriolanus* is about the very start of the Struggle of the Orders—a period that would last for hundreds of years, until 287 BCE—and so it makes sense that disagreements between the patricians and plebeians would persist and that in times of crisis, conflict would flare up.<sup>125</sup> Nonetheless, this does not discredit the mixed constitution; the plebeians have reined in the patricians, and as a result, made Rome a better place to live.

Likewise, the patricians’ institutional power allows them to rein in the plebeians’ worst impulses, which are on full display in Act 3, Scene 1, when Brutus and Sicinius sentence Coriolanus to death and declare that he be thrown off the famous Tarpeian Rock (3.1.215). Menenius calmly intervenes in this moment, speaking directly to Brutus: “Be that you seem, truly your country’s friend, / And temp’rately proceed to what you would / Thus violently redress” (3.1.219-21). He is ignored for the time being, but throughout this ordeal, he appeals to the plebeians to eschew violence and instead formally bring charges against Coriolanus. He finally gets through to them by saying, “Proceed by process, / Lest parties . . . break out / And sack great Rome with Romans” (3.1.314-6). The fact that this is possible—that the plebeians can

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<sup>125</sup> This is what happens when the patricians and plebeians hear that Coriolanus plans to march on Rome. Menenius yells at the tribunes, “You have made good work, / You and your apron men, you that stood so much / Upon the voice of occupation and / The breath of garlic eaters!” (4.6.97-100). Cominius echoes him, “You have brought / A trembling upon Rome, such as was never / S’incapable of help” (4.6.120-2).

“proceed by process” in the first place—tells us that the mixed constitution affords them not only a political voice but a legal one. In fact, Machiavelli praises the Roman political system for this reason. He argues in the *Discourses*,

There is nothing that makes a republic more stable and more solid than that its laws should provide for the expression of those resentments that have built up within the community . . . for when there are no institutionalized mechanisms to allow this, extralegal methods will be employed, and without doubt these have much worse consequences than legal ones.<sup>126</sup>

Being as rash as they are, the plebeians would prefer to kill Coriolanus on the spot—giving into their “tiger-footed rage”—than wait for the legal system to solve their dispute with him (3.1.312). It is only because of the patricians that they opt for the latter method, which shows us that *Coriolanus* is not a pro-democracy text that endorses giving the masses unlimited power. Indeed, it takes an unnamed senator coming to Menenius’ defense to win the plebeians over for good:

Noble tribunes,  
It is the humane way. The other course  
Will prove too bloody, and the end of it  
Unknown to the beginning (3.1.326-29).

This convinces Sicinius, who replies, “Noble Menenius, / Be you then as the people’s officer. / Masters, lay down your weapons” (3.1.330-3). What we see here is both sides acknowledging the other as “noble”—a sign that they view each other as legitimate political actors. More importantly, the patricians prevent the plebeians from seriously harming Rome by carrying out an extrajudicial killing. According to Machiavelli, this would have had “evil consequences . . . for [it] would have been an attack by private individuals on a private individual.”<sup>127</sup> What Machiavelli sees in the story of Coriolanus—as told by Livy—is a lesson about the necessity of

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<sup>126</sup> Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, bk. I, ch. 7.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

avoiding “unauthorized violence,” and Shakespeare demonstrates that the mixed constitution is the best form of government for preventing this.<sup>128</sup> The splitting of political power between the patricians and plebeians diffuses the tension between them, as they no longer talk past each other—like in Act 1, Scene 1—but rather, as equals who are responsive to each other’s objections and concerns. Rome is more stable because of this.

So, to review, the patricians and plebeians are able to check each other; but I have yet to explain how they work together to check Coriolanus. Specifically, they uphold Rome’s mixed constitution against Coriolanus’ attacks on it and ensure that he cannot seize power through illegitimate means. For example, in Act 2, Scene 2, after the Senate has approved Coriolanus as consul, Menenius tells him that he now must “speak to the people” (2.2.133). But Coriolanus—in typical fashion—asks that he be able to “o’erleap that custom” (2.2.135). I have already spoken about what this tells us about Coriolanus (p. 31), but what comes next is even more important. Sicinius and Menenius both insist that no exception will be made for Coriolanus and that he must receive the approval of the plebeians. Sicinius speaks first: “Sir, the people / Must have their voices; neither will they bate / One jot of ceremony” (2.2.138-40). Menenius then backs him up:

Put [the tribunes] not to’t.  
Pray you, go fit you to the custom and  
Take to you, as your predecessors have,  
Your honor with your form (2.2.141-4).

It is not surprising that Sicinius defends the plebeians and refuses to allow Coriolanus to deny them a voice—this is what a tribune should do—but that Menenius agrees with him is remarkable, given that he shares Coriolanus’ view that the plebeians are fundamentally ignorant and ought to subordinate themselves to the patricians. Still, realizing that times have changed, and being the adaptable politician that he is (p. 40), he does not believe that the plebeians should

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<sup>128</sup> Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, bk. I, ch. 7.

have no power whatsoever, nor do the other patricians. Coriolanus is the odd man out, protesting against the plebeians long after it is clear that it is in Rome's best interest—for the sake of peace—that they be involved in the political process.

Coriolanus is also alone in his calls to abolish the tribunate. The patricians very easily could have “thrown [the plebeians'] power i' th' dust”—as Coriolanus implores them to do—but that they express no desire to is quite telling (3.1.169). Although they do not defend the tribunate outright, their silence during Coriolanus' long speeches against it speaks volumes. And when they do speak, it is only to urge Coriolanus to say “no more words” (3.1.76). What the patricians realize is that the tribunate cannot be gotten rid of without provoking a full-scale plebeian rebellion. They might not personally like the plebeians—Menenius still believes that they “have but little [wit],” for example—but the mixed constitution is something they have come to accept (3.1.253). As Cominius says, “Now 'tis odds beyond arithmetic”—a wise political calculation that a hopelessly terrible politician like Coriolanus could never make (3.1.246). The plebeians have numbers on their side, and accordingly, every patrician save Coriolanus knows that it is useless to oppose them. An unnamed patrician—assessing the situation in Act 3, Scene 1—even laments that Coriolanus “has marred his fortune” (3.1.255). That is, the tribunes are not the cause of Coriolanus' problems; he has only himself to blame. Together, the patricians and plebeians foil Coriolanus' plans to take Rome back in time and prevent him from upsetting the balance of power that exists in the city after Act 1, Scene 1. He represents the mixed constitution's first major test, and it says a lot about this form of government that it emerges unharmed.

The patricians and plebeians not only save Rome from within, however; they are also instrumental in making sure that it is not destroyed from without. In Act 4, Scene 6—immediately after receiving the news that Coriolanus has allied himself with Aufidius to attack

Rome—it seems as if the patricians and plebeians have reverted back to their old ways of fighting and bickering with each other. Menenius calls the plebeians “clusters” and accuses them of having “made the air unwholesome, when [they] cast / [Their] greasy caps in hooting at / Coriolanus’ exile” (4.6.132-6). But in Act 5, Scene 1—once they have had time to gather their thoughts and process the impending doom that Rome faces—they work out a plan to try to save the city. The tribunes convince Menenius to go to Coriolanus and try to persuade him to make peace. Sicinius extends an olive branch to him, promising that even if he fails, Menenius’ “good will / Must have that thanks from Rome” (5.1.45-6). Cominius, for his part, remains unconvinced that Menenius’ pleas will win over Coriolanus, and therefore devises a separate plan with the tribunes:

All hope is vain  
 Unless his noble mother and his wife [Valeria],  
 Who, as I hear, mean to solicit him  
 For mercy to his country. Therefore let’s hence,  
 And with our fair entreaties haste them on (5.1.70-4).

Cominius ceases insulting the plebeians and in this moment, sees them as allies. In a slightly more speculative vein, the significance of him saying “let’s hence” seems particularly important. Indeed, it creates the impression that it is the patricians and plebeians, working in concert, who convince Volumnia and Valeria to meet with Coriolanus. Thus, although the patricians deem Volumnia their savior upon her return to Rome (p. 15), it makes more sense to say that it is cooperation between the orders—an immediate consequence of the mixed constitution—that prevents Rome from falling into Coriolanus and Aufidius’ hands.

I said before that *Coriolanus* is not a democratic text (p. 50), but I would like to expand on this. The example of Antium, I think, is revealing of Shakespeare’s thoughts on democracy. He means to show us that in a state in which the plebeians are all-powerful and the nobles’

voices are ignored, chaos is the inevitable result. This is precisely why Coriolanus is killed in Antium, and not in Rome. This event plays out as follows: In the final act of the play, the plebeians in Antium yell, “Tear [Coriolanus] to pieces! Do it presently! He killed my son! My daughter! He killed my cousin Marcus! He killed my father!” (5.6.119-21). The plebeians here are just as angry as those in Rome in Act 3, Scene 1, who called for Coriolanus’ death. In response to this, a lord—the Volscian equivalent of a senator—tries to step in:

Peace, ho! No outrage. Peace!  
 [Coriolanus] is noble and his fame folds in  
 This orb o’ th’ earth. His last offenses to us  
 Shall have a judicious hearing. Stand, Aufidius,  
 And trouble not the peace (5.6.122-6).

Sounding almost identical to Menenius—especially in his insistence that Coriolanus be afforded “a judicious hearing” (p. 49)—this lord is ignored by all, and Coriolanus is, as we know, killed. Though there exists a process in Antium whereby Coriolanus can be dealt with lawfully, the nobles have too little power to ensure that it is followed by the masses and the generals who are leading them. Shakespeare’s message is clear: Antium is a foil for Rome; they are not at all “mirror images” of each other, as Barbara L. Parker claims.<sup>129</sup> That is, while the latter has a form of government that promotes discussion and joint action between the orders, the constitution of the former appears very undesirable.

Finally, I would like to make one last point: the downfall of Coriolanus is not just that of a single man, but represents a pivotal moment in Roman history. Namely, the idea that Rome should be ruled by patricians, for patricians, dies when Coriolanus does. From 494 BCE on, the Roman Republic’s mixed constitution would last for centuries and garner praise from numerous

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<sup>129</sup> Parker, *Plato’s Republic and Shakespeare’s Rome*, 64.

political thinkers, including the American Founders—a topic that Chinard explores.<sup>130</sup> It even seems probable that Shakespeare was attracted to Plutarch’s biography of Coriolanus in the first place because it is a story about the transformation of the Roman state into an actual republic. Overall, the point I mean to stress is this: *Coriolanus* not only invites us to think about what the mixed constitution is and how it works in practice; it draws our attention to the many advantages of this form of government.

### Conclusion

In his discussion of Rome’s constitution in its prime—in the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, during the Second Punic War—Polybius identifies its two main benefits: First, the Roman state had an “extraordinary” ability to respond to external threats because of the cooperation of the three estates—the consul, the Senate, and the people.<sup>131</sup> Second, no one estate could become more powerful than the others, which promoted stability and the “building [of] durable consensuses.”<sup>132</sup> As Polybius writes, “Everything [remained] in its assigned place, . . . either because its impetus [was] checked, or because right from the start it [was] afraid of being curbed by the others.”<sup>133</sup> Although *Coriolanus* is set over two hundred years before Rome would face the threat of Hannibal, the constitution of the very early Roman Republic—as Shakespeare portrays it—has these same virtues. I have shown that the patricians and plebeians come together to defeat the internal (and later external) threat that is Coriolanus. Moreover, the “checking” mechanism that Polybius describes is present throughout the play, as the patricians and plebeians restrain each other on multiple occasions and in the process, make Rome a more peaceful place.

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<sup>130</sup> Gilbert Chinard, “Polybius and the American Constitution,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 1, no. 1 (1940): 38-58, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2707009>.

<sup>131</sup> Polybius, *The Histories*, bk. VI, par. 18.

<sup>132</sup> Edward J. Watts, *Mortal Republic: How Rome Fell Into Tyranny* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), 22.

<sup>133</sup> Polybius, *The Histories*, bk. VI, par. 18.

In the next chapter, I will look at what liberty means to the plebeians and how it relates back to the mixed constitution.



## Chapter 4: Plebeian Liberty as “Non-Domination”

The plebeians in Shakespeare’s Rome are revolutionaries who succeed in remaking the political structure of their city without any bloodshed, ushering in the mixed constitution. Their strong opposition to Coriolanus is not so much the result of personal hatred, but about ensuring that they are not reduced to the position they were in in Act 1, Scene 1, that is, to living a miserable existence in which they are afforded no voice whatsoever. But the mixed constitution, to the plebeians, is more than just a set of offices and a framework by which power is divided between them, as important as that may be. It also occupies a central role in their conception of liberty, and without it, they would not be free. I will explore this idea by drawing on multiple passages from the text in which the tribunes bring up the plebeians’ “liberties.” I will also focus on how Coriolanus’ wish, at its core, is to make the plebeians “slaves” again.

### Liberty in *Coriolanus*

Hunger is the impetus of the plebeians’ uprising in Act 1, Scene 1, but they soon desire something greater than food: liberty (or freedom).<sup>134</sup> Modern readers of *Coriolanus* might automatically assume that the plebeians think of this fuzzy concept in a “negative” sense: freedom *from* external interference.<sup>135</sup> Indeed, this conception of liberty is the default among us moderns, rooted in Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*—liberty is “the absence of external impediments,” as he writes—and later popularized by 18<sup>th</sup>-century liberals like Jeremy Bentham and William Paley.<sup>136</sup> On this view, one is free to the extent that he/she is left alone by authority and able to act unimpeded. It follows that “liberty in this sense is not incompatible with some

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<sup>134</sup> I use these terms interchangeably.

<sup>135</sup> Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 121.

<sup>136</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, part. I, ch. 14, par. 2; Philip Pettit, *On the People’s Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 8-9.

kinds of autocracy, or at any rate with the absence of self-government” because as long as the state stays out of an individual’s life, he/she is free, irrespective of how that state is organized politically.<sup>137</sup>

Although the patricians are generally negligent when it comes to taking care of the plebeians—opting for a more hands-off approach—the First Citizen notes that there is direct interference on their part: they are passing “piercing statutes daily to chain up and restrain the poor,” a line that evokes the image of the plebeians as slaves to the patricians (1.1.81-2). Thus, we can say that the patricians are explicitly depriving the plebeians of their negative liberty by depriving them of the ability to make their own choices and “pursue [their] own good in [their] own way,” to use Mill’s phrase.<sup>138</sup> Put another way, the source of the plebeians’ “unfreedom” is the patricians’ oppressive laws, and so the counterfactual to this is obvious: were the latter to *not* enact these laws, the former would be free. Moreover—and most importantly—within the framework of negative liberty, Rome’s oligarchic constitution is theoretically not an impediment to the plebeians’ freedom. Specifically, proponents of negative liberty would say that the fact that the patricians have arbitrary power is not a problem in itself; rather, the problem is that they have used this arbitrary power for iniquitous purposes: to enrich themselves and to enslave the plebeians, as opposed to leaving them to their own devices.

In actuality, the plebeians do not subscribe to this negative conception of liberty—a fact that is unsurprising once we consider that as ancient Romans, it would have been completely unfamiliar to them. In fact, early on in the play, it becomes clear that the plebeians’ main problem with the patricians is not that they are constantly interfering in their lives, but that they view themselves as “masters” over the plebeians, as existing above them and therefore being

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<sup>137</sup> Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 129.

<sup>138</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2002), ch. 1, p. 10.

untouchable and immune to criticism from below. As the situation stands in Act 1, Scene 1, the plebeians are dependent on the patricians' goodwill for everything—even for the most basic necessity, food—and this is what they take issue with and seek to change with political action. As the First Citizen complains, “We are accounted poor citizens, the patricians good. What authority surfeits on would relieve us. If they would yield us but the superfluity while it were wholesome, we might guess they relieved us humanely, but they think we are too dear” (1.1.14-8). In short, the plebeians' discontent stems from the patricians' refusal to recognize them as equals.

This brings me to my main point: the plebeians' conception of liberty is distinctly Roman in character, grounded in the belief that to “fall into a condition of political subjection or dependence” is to be “rendered unfree,” no matter the circumstances.<sup>139</sup> What the plebeians come to realize is that having the patricians provide for them is not enough; what they really want is to provide for themselves—to be independent from the patricians entirely—and this requires having a political structure of their own through which they can influence Roman politics (i.e., the tribunate). The mixed constitution, then, is the means by which the plebeians' goal of self-government is realized, and self-government and liberty are, in their view, one and the same. To reference Benjamin Constant's famous essay, the plebeians desire the so-called “liberty of the ancients”—something that “consisted in an active and constant participation in collective power.”<sup>140</sup> Indeed, even if they lived happy lives in which the patricians provided for all their material needs, if the plebeians were still thought of as their “dependents” with no political rights, they would be just as unfree as before.

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<sup>139</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 69.

<sup>140</sup> Benjamin Constant, *Political Writings*, trans. Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 316.

Pettit calls this idea “freedom as non-domination,” and so plebeian liberty specifically means not being dominated by the patricians.<sup>141</sup> In other words, what the plebeians want is to be slaves to no one, subject only to themselves. It is important to point out that this is distinct from Berlin’s concept of positive liberty, which says that freedom consists in “self-mastery,” in being ruled by your “real” self rather than being a slave to your passions or “immediate pleasures.”<sup>142</sup> At no point do the plebeians speak of conquering their desires and acting only according to reason; conversely, they are sometimes quite impulsive (p. 46), and drawing a distinction between their different selves is too abstract a topic for them. Their sole objective is to make their own political decisions, because they believe the only way to be the master of yourself is to live in a “free state.”<sup>143</sup>

This connection between liberty and a specific form of government—a state that is free—is discussed by Skinner in *Liberty Before Liberalism*. A free state, as he explains it, is one in which citizens govern themselves, or, put another way, “a community in which the actions of the body politic are determined by the will of the members as a whole.”<sup>144</sup> This means that a “not free” state is one in which a single individual or only a segment of the citizen body has a say in its political affairs. Accordingly, “only a republic can be a free state.”<sup>145</sup> Skinner traces this idea back to Livy’s *History of Rome*—a text that Shakespeare was familiar with, according to Barton—and explores it in more detail by looking at the works of English political theorists like Henry Neville, James Harrington, Marchamont Nedham, and Algernon Sidney, who were active during the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>146</sup> These thinkers, like the plebeians, agree that “unless you live under a

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<sup>141</sup> Pettit, *On the People’s Terms*, 5.

<sup>142</sup> Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” 131-2.

<sup>143</sup> Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism*, 60.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 44; Barton, “Livy, Machiavelli, and Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*,” 68.

system of self-government you will live as a slave.”<sup>147</sup>

Taking this into account, it is obvious that the Roman Republic, prior to the establishment of the tribunate, was a republic in name only. At the start of the play, it was not free in the sense that it was the sole property of the patricians, existing only for their well-being. The plebeians were refused political power and had no stake in the success of the state because the patricians never acknowledged them as a meaningful part of the city to begin with. As a matter of fact, Menenius identifies the patricians exclusively with Rome—they are the state—and the plebeians with its “rats,” a pest that must be dealt with if the city is to prosper (1.1.160). With the introduction of the mixed constitution, however, the Republic transforms into an enterprise that belongs to no one in particular and is administered by patricians and plebeians alike, in cooperation with each other. It is a free state from this point forward, and the plebeians’ overriding goal throughout the play is to guarantee that it stays that way.

### **The Tribunes on Liberty**

In a nutshell, the plebeians believe that the mixed constitution is the reason for their personal freedom *and* Rome’s. The necessary consequence of its destruction is servitude. Algernon Sidney writes that “to depend upon the will of a man is slavery,” and the plebeians endorse this argument in rejecting the notion that they should depend on the patricians for anything.<sup>148</sup> But given that the plebeians are governing themselves for the first time in Roman history (p. 44), Brutus and Sicinius must continually remind them to be careful not to surrender their liberties by playing into Coriolanus’ hand. This section will be spent looking at the tribunes’ speeches on this topic, so that we can clearly see how Shakespeare frames the concept

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<sup>147</sup> Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism*, 76.

<sup>148</sup> Algernon Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government*, ed. Thomas G. West (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Inc., 2009), ch. 1, section 5.

of liberty in *Coriolanus*.

The first mention of “freedoms” in *Coriolanus* is in Act 2, Scene 1, when Brutus and Sicinius are discussing the possibility of Coriolanus becoming consul. Brutus’ speech is most relevant to our discussion:

We must suggest the people in what hatred  
 He still hath held them; that to’s power he would  
 Have made them mules, silenced their pleaders and  
 Disproportioned their freedoms, holding them,  
 In human action and capacity,  
 Of no more soul nor fitness for the world  
 Than camels in their war, who have their provand  
 Only for bearing burdens, and sore blows  
 For sinking under them (2.1.240-8).

Brutus says a lot here—that Coriolanus will turn the plebeians into “mules,” that he will silence them completely, that he will take away their “freedoms”—but the crux of what he is saying is that Coriolanus’ objective in seeking the consulship is to restore the plebeians to a position of dependence on the patricians. Coriolanus sees them as less than human—as having “no more soul nor fitness for the world / Than camels”—and wants to ensure that they are treated as such. The “freedoms” that Brutus is talking about are not delineated by him, but we can assume from looking at the rest of the passage that he means the tribunate, and more generally, the plebeians’ right to make their political opinions known to the patricians.

Brutus repeats this message to the plebeians after they have agreed to make Coriolanus their consul. He tells them in two separate passages that Coriolanus will seize their “liberties” from them. I quoted the first passage earlier—see p. 44—in which he reminds the plebeians that Coriolanus has always been their foe and that he will jump at the opportunity to crush them, which he can easily do. The second passage is worth analyzing here. Brutus advises a group of plebeians,

Tell those friends [of yours],  
 They have chose a consul that will from them take  
 Their liberties; make them of no more voice  
 Than dogs, that are as often beat for barking  
 As therefore kept to do so (2.3.213-7).

Again, Brutus tries to persuade the plebeians that their lot under Coriolanus would be no better than animals', whether they be mules—as in the previous example—or dogs. To have a political voice is to be free; to be reduced to silence—to be politically disenfranchised—is to be a slave. Just as dogs are meant to bark—as Brutus says, they are “kept to do” just that—a state’s citizens are meant to be involved in its running and subject to the arbitrary will of no one. Livy opens the second book of his *History of Rome* with a quote that connects to this idea. His conception of a “free nation” is one that is “governed by annually elected officers of state and subject not to the caprice of individual men, but to the overriding authority of law.”<sup>149</sup> I bring this up because it summarizes the tribunes’ view of things: that is, Rome is free, as are its citizens, because the plebeians are no longer under the yoke of the patricians. They have their own elected representatives and an ability to influence public policy and even make laws of their own. An unwritten constitution—the mixed constitution—is the law of the land, and it applies to everyone, including Coriolanus.

Sicinius emphasizes this point in the chaos of Act 3, Scene 1. The plebeians quiet down for a moment to hear him speak, and he warns them, “You are at point to lose your liberties. / Martius would have all from you, Martius, / Whom late you have named for consul” (3.1.195-7). The message here is the same as Brutus’: Coriolanus is an enemy to all plebeians who will use his position as consul to strip them of their political rights and leave them with nothing at all. Menenius objects to this suggestion and complains that Sicinius is “kindling” the plebeians’

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<sup>149</sup> Livy, *The Early History of Rome, Books I-V*, trans. Aubrey De Selincourt (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2002), bk. II, par. 1.

anger, not “quenching” it (3.1.199). But this is in fact Sicinius’ objective; his brief, three-line statement is meant to encourage the plebeians not to back down from Coriolanus and to remain firmly opposed to him and his machinations.

### **Coriolanus on Liberty**

One thing I have yet to mention about Coriolanus is that he likes to think he is free, specifically, free from the plebeians—while the other patricians are so concerned with placating them—and after his banishment, free from a city that is so “thankless” as Rome (4.5.74). He is, in his view, his own master, while the plebeians are mere slaves. He repeatedly makes this feeling known, as in Act 1, Scene 1, when he says that he would kill the plebeians—who he explicitly calls slaves—if only the patricians would let him (1.1.195-8). Moreover, inside the town of Corioles—after he has captured it—Coriolanus rebukes plebeian soldiers for reveling in the spoils of war. He says,

See here these movers that do prize their hours  
At a cracked drachma! Cushions, leaden spoons,  
Irons of a doit, doublets that hangmen would  
Bury with those that wore them, these base slaves,  
Ere yet the fight be done, pack up. Down with them! (1.5.4-8).

To Coriolanus, these men are “base slaves” for caring about material things—he is free from such trivial desires—and for losing sight of the ultimate prize: complete victory over the Volsci.

But the best example of Coriolanus denigrating the plebeians as slaves is in his speech to Aufidius. It is there that he summarizes his predicament:

The cruelty and envy of the people,  
Permitted by our dastard nobles, who  
Have all forsook me, hath devoured the rest,  
And suffered me by th’ voice of slaves to be  
Whooped out of Rome (4.5.78-82).

This passage is revealing in two respects. First, it shows us that Coriolanus blames both orders in



Rome for his exile; the plebeians were able to banish him because the “dastard nobles” (the patricians) “permitted” it. In this sense, it was a joint effort. Second, he does not accept his exile as legitimate because it was effected by “th’ voice of slaves.” In Act 3, Scene 3, he acts as if his banishment does not matter to him—as he says, he “despises” Rome and will “turn [his] back” on it—but this is not the whole truth (3.3.134-5). He despises only the new Rome—the one in which the plebeians are free—because to him, natural slaves should naturally have no rights. His decision to take up arms against the Republic can be seen as a move to take back what he thinks is rightfully his: the Rome of old and his place in it.

Shakespeare indicates that this view—that the plebeians are slaves—is wholly misguided. He shows us that the plebeians are not meant to be passive subjects, but active citizens in the Roman Republic (p. 47). Coriolanus, for his part, is unable to recognize this political truth because he never actually listens to the plebeians or tries to understand their problems. He writes them off immediately as a bunch of “curs,” and holds firm in this belief for the duration of the play (1.1.166). On the one occasion that he does get to know a poor man—a prisoner in Corioles—he acts uncharacteristically compassionate and asks Cominius to “give [the man] freedom” (1.9.85). Cominius is eager to do this, but Coriolanus cannot remember his name, supposedly because he is “weary” and his “memory is tired” (1.10.90). Coriolanus seems to have formed, at the very least, a surface-level connection with this commoner, but his inability to recall the most basic fact about him tells us that, deep down, he is incapable of relating to or caring about the common man. He denies the plebeians their personhood and acts as if they “have no names.”<sup>150</sup> On the contrary, it is clear that they are deserving of freedom—Shakespeare stresses this point and Coriolanus seems to recognize it for a split second—but the latter never

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<sup>150</sup> Greenblatt, *Tyrant*, 159.

accepts this, as his fellow patricians do.

### **Conclusion**

Liberty means different things to different people. We saw that Isaiah Berlin's concept of negative liberty is the typical view today but makes no sense in the context of *Coriolanus*. The plebeians do not want to be left alone by the patricians—they are not demanding that the patricians not “tread” on them (as the Gadsden flag says)—but to be seen as political equals. The mixed constitution grants them this recognition of equality, and that is why they work so hard to maintain it, and on the flip side, why Coriolanus works so hard to tear it down. In the next chapter—the final chapter of this paper—I will examine how *Titus Andronicus* and *Coriolanus* compare on the topic of the mixed constitution.

## Chapter 5: *Titus Andronicus* vs. *Coriolanus*

Titus Andronicus, like Coriolanus, is a celebrated Roman general—“Rome’s best champion,” as he is called—who is urged by others to run for the state’s highest office (1.1.65). He also desires to take revenge on those who have wronged him, like Coriolanus feels after he is banished from Rome. But the similarities between these two tragic figures end here. For starters, Titus is not a foe to the plebeians; rather, he has always been their “friend in justice” (1.1.180). Moreover, he resists being pressured into becoming something that he is not. He plainly declares that he has no desire to transition into political life after his victory over the Goths: “Give me a staff of honor for mine age, / But not a scepter to control the world” (1.1.199-200). Nonetheless, *Titus Andronicus* and *Coriolanus* are alike in that they both make the case for the mixed constitution, though in slightly different ways. Specifically, the former does not focus so much on the actual workings of the mixed constitution—as the latter does—but instead emphasizes that it is a form of government that is uniquely conducive to peace and consensus-building, and hence, very desirable.

### Overview of *Titus Andronicus*

*Titus Andronicus* was written in the early 1590s, making it Shakespeare’s very first tragedy. It is unpopular—even more so than *Coriolanus*—and virtually unknown to the general public, perhaps because of how gory it is.<sup>151</sup> Indeed, *Titus* is a play in which nearly every character is murdered and many are dismembered. It is no easy play to perform, nor easy for audiences to stomach. Titus’ daughter, for example, is mutilated and left without her eyes and tongue. Titus himself cuts off his hand in order to save his two sons who have been framed for murdering the emperor’s brother, though to no avail; their heads are cut off and subsequently

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<sup>151</sup> According to the same YouGov poll mentioned earlier (p. 10), only 3% of Britons have seen or read *Titus*.

delivered to their horrified father. At the end of the play, Titus kills the queen's sons and grounds their remains into a pie that he then serves to her. No other play by Shakespeare is so bloody as this one, and until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was largely believed to be an "un-Shakespearean monstrosity" for this reason.<sup>152</sup> T. S. Eliot—who you might recall loved *Coriolanus* (p. 10)—felt particularly strongly about it, attacking it as "one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written."<sup>153</sup>

Much value has since been found in *Titus*—the consensus today is that it is not simply a meaningless play with gratuitous violence—and in the last twenty years or so, several chapters and articles have been written specifically about what its political meaning is. In fact, Hadfield and Taylor make the same argument on this topic: that it is a play that rejects monarchy and argues for the mixed constitution. Hadfield, in particular, argues that *Titus* demonstrates that chaos is the natural consequence when an individual rules without "the consent and support of both the people and the aristocracy," and thus, that "the form of government [it] advocates is a mixed constitution."<sup>154</sup> Taylor echoes this, writing that Shakespeare "implicitly endorses the mixed constitution in *Titus*" because "the well-being of Rome" is clearly linked to its having "a constitution that . . . maintains an equilibrium of forces."<sup>155</sup> What I want to do, then, is connect *Titus Andronicus*' endorsement of the mixed constitution with *Coriolanus*', because Shakespeare's portrayal of this form of government is much the same in both plays, even though they were written decades apart.

I first want to explain what *Titus* is about, although the simplicity of its plot will make

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<sup>152</sup> Quentin Taylor, "'To Order Well the State': The Politics of *Titus Andronicus*," *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 32, no. 2 (2005): 129.

<sup>153</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays, 1917-1932* (London: Faber & Faber, 1932), 82.

<sup>154</sup> Andrew Hadfield, "Tarquin's Everlasting Banishment: Republicanism and Constitutionalism in *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Titus Andronicus*," *Parergon* 19, no. 1 (2002): 96, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pgn.2002.0022>.

<sup>155</sup> Taylor, "'To Order Well the State,'" 146-7.

this fairly brief. I have already said that *Coriolanus* and *Titus* are two of Shakespeare's Roman plays (p. 7). But the latter is completely fictional—a product of Shakespeare's imagination—and not based on one of Plutarch's many biographies, as his other plays about Rome are. Thus, *Titus* is set in Rome, but not during any clearly identifiable period in its history. There is an emperor, but the plebeians and their tribunes wield considerable influence over him, and so what we are presented with is a sort of quasi-imperial state. T. J. B. Spencer explains this peculiar setting as follows: "The play does not assume a political situation known to Roman history; it is, rather, a summary of Roman politics."<sup>156</sup> Compare this to *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, which recount the end of the Roman Republic in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE. These plays carefully follow the historical record, depicting Caesar's victory over Pompey and assumption of dictatorial powers, his assassination at the hands of Brutus and his fellow conspirators, and Mark Antony and Cleopatra's eventual defeat by Octavian, who would become the first emperor of Rome as Augustus.

As for *Titus*, it is best summarized as a play about revenge. This is not immediately clear from the outset, though, as it opens with a seemingly normal and orderly election taking place. The emperor has just died, and now his two sons, Saturninus and Bassianus, are competing for the crown. What is particularly interesting is that in this conception of Rome, the monarchy is elective, and therefore, these two men must campaign for votes and receive the people's approval if they hope to acquire political power. It is at this point that Titus Andronicus returns from a victorious campaign against the Goths. He is very popular with the plebeians, and his brother, Marcus—a tribune—asks him to run for emperor and thereby "help to set a head on headless Rome" (1.1.186). Titus refuses, and instead, with the approval of the people, names Saturninus

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<sup>156</sup> T. J. B. Spencer, "Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Romans," *Shakespeare Survey* 10 (1957): 32.

emperor.

From this point on, Rome becomes “a wilderness of tigers,” with “no prey / But [Titus] and [his own]” (3.1.55-7). Saturninus marries Tamora, Queen of the Goths, who has a vendetta against Titus for having just killed her son. She enlists the help of her boyfriend, Aaron, to orchestrate an elaborate campaign of revenge against him. They are initially successful in this; Titus’ daughter, Lavinia, is attacked, his two sons, Martius and Quintus, are beheaded, and another son, Lucius, is banished from the city. Like Coriolanus, Lucius plans to unite with the enemy—in this case, the Goths—to march on Rome and wrest the city from an oppressive government and make “Saturnine and his empress / Beg at the gates like Tarquin and his queen” (3.1.303-4). In the end, Lucius returns to Rome to attend an elaborately planned dinner party, at which almost everyone is killed: Lavinia and Tamora by Titus, Titus by Saturninus, and Saturninus by Lucius. The patricians and plebeians agree that Lucius is the only one who can set Rome back on course, and so they elect him emperor. The play ends with Aaron being sentenced to death for his crimes and Lucius declaring that Tamora’s dead body will be “[thrown] . . . forth to beasts and birds to prey” (5.3.200).

### **“Knitting” Rome Back Together**

*Titus Andronicus*, unlike *Coriolanus*, opens with the mixed constitution already in place. The patricians and plebeians, together, are tasked with electing a new emperor, and it is not evident that either order is more powerful than the other. It is apparent, however, that there is a sort of competition between them, and that they each vote as a bloc. Saturninus, in his campaign speech, appeals directly to the “noble patricians” to make him emperor because he was the previous emperor’s first-born son (1.1.1). That is, he lays a hereditary claim to the throne. Bassianus, in contrast, addresses the Roman people as a whole, asking them to “let desert in pure

election shine” and to “fight for freedom in [their] choice” (1.1.16-7). This message is “more obviously populist” than Saturninus’; Bassianus styles himself as the people’s champion—promising to stand up for their freedoms—and his argument is that he deserves the throne not because he was born to rule but because he is the best fit.<sup>157</sup>

When the tribune Marcus steps in and declares that the people want Titus Andronicus to be emperor, both candidates are surprisingly cordial and dismiss their supporters for the time being. Bassianus even says that he “[affies] / In [Marcus’] uprightness and integrity” and loves and honors him and his family (1.1.47-50). This shows us that the mixed constitution is not only possible in practice—pushing back against the notion that it must instantly break down and devolve into chaos (p. 21)—but a system in which political opponents are willing to abide by the same norms and show respect for each other. Also, like Brutus and Sicinius, Marcus takes his job as tribune very seriously and sees himself as the plebeians’ “trust” and defender (1.1.181). He is their representative, and this is why he pushes so hard for Titus to be emperor: it is what the people want.

Nonetheless, Saturninus becomes impatient once it is clear that Titus has no desire to be emperor. He threatens to use violence to get his way:

Romans, do me right.  
 Patricians, draw your swords and sheathe them not  
 Till Saturninus be Rome’s emperor.  
 Andronicus, would thou were shipped to hell  
 Rather than rob me of the people’s hearts (1.1.205-9).

This is a dangerous move—and the first sign that something is rotten in the state of Rome, to reference *Hamlet*—but Saturninus does not, in fact, disregard the mixed constitution, as Coriolanus was so wont to do. Rather, he acknowledges that he needs the “people’s hearts” in

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<sup>157</sup> Hadfield, “Tarquin’s Everlasting Banishment,” 100.

order to be emperor, and he is angry at Titus only because he is more popular with the plebeians. Sensing that trouble is at hand, Titus asks for the plebeians' "voices" and "suffrages"—just as Coriolanus begrudgingly tried to do—and is able to persuade them to vote for Saturninus (1.1.220). Shakespeare emphasizes the mixed nature of Rome's constitution by having Marcus finalize the vote in the following way:

With voices and applause of every sort,  
Patricians and plebeians, we create  
Lord Saturninus Rome's great emperor,  
And say "Long live our Emperor Saturnine" (1.1.232-5).

The patricians and plebeians elect Saturninus together—they "create" him—though this proves to be a terrible decision.

It is not that Saturninus makes himself into a "decadent" tyrant, however (as Taylor claims)—he does not seek or even have absolute power—but his major flaw is that he allows himself to be "ruled" completely by the scheming Tamora (1.1.450).<sup>158</sup> She is the tyrant in this scenario, not him. She has no qualms about murdering Titus' whole family, even though the Roman people hold them in such high regard. Saturninus, on the other hand, acknowledges that he owes his position to the people and that he is obligated to work for them because of this. He recognizes that he is in a politically precarious position because he does not have their backing—because he has allowed himself to be complicit in Tamora (and Aaron's) many misdeeds—and laments the fact that the commoners "love" Lucius more than him (4.4.75-6). For Tamora, this is no problem; she asks him, "Why should you fear? Is not your city strong?" (4.4.81). Saturninus' response to her tells us a lot about him and where he stands: "Ay, but the citizens favor Lucius / And will revolt from me to succor him" (4.4.82-3). Like Sicinius and the rest of the plebeians in *Coriolanus*, Saturninus believes that the people are the city (p. 38). They are the ones who will

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<sup>158</sup> Taylor, "To Order Well the State," 132.



decide who rules Rome—sovereignty rests with them—and Tamora and Coriolanus’ inability to accept this leads to their downfalls, as the former gets caught up in a scheme to trick Titus that ultimately ends in her death at his hands.

It might seem as if Rome devolves into anarchy after Saturninus comes to power—that life in the city is now “nasty, brutish, and short” for all—but the important thing to realize is that the mixed constitution lurks in the background of the play the entire time.<sup>159</sup> It is not done away with—no one seeks to destroy it in the way that Coriolanus wanted to—nor does it fracture on its own. Yes, Tamora is an extremely disruptive figure who upsets the balance of power in the city, but the Senate and the people are not formally deprived of any of their powers. In the aftermath of her death, they quickly re-emerge as active political players who will be instrumental in “knitting” Rome back together and making it whole again (5.3.71). This is the best evidence that the play endorses the mixed constitution as “the most successful form of government,” as Hadfield first pointed out.<sup>160</sup> That is, the mixed constitution emerges as the solution to Rome’s recent “civil wound,” as Shakespeare emphasizes that “all three parts of the state [are] working together to re-establish political order” (5.3.88).<sup>161</sup> Marcus and Lucius even trust so fully in the Roman people and their judgment that they are willing to give up their lives for them (5.3.137-8). But this proves unnecessary—the people rightly recognize that they have done nothing wrong—and Aemilius, a patrician, proposes the following course of action, speaking directly to Marcus:

Come, come, thou reverend man of Rome,  
And bring our emperor gently in thy hand,  
Lucius our emperor, for well I know  
The common voice do cry it shall be so (5.3.139-42).

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<sup>159</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, part I, ch. 13, par. 9.

<sup>160</sup> Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics*, 129.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

The election of Lucius—like that of Saturninus—is decided by the patricians and plebeians together. Though this time the decision is truly their own, and not urged on by someone like Titus. Lucius thanks them for hailing him as their “gracious governor” in a passage that is particularly important (5.3.148):

May I govern so  
To heal Rome’s harms and wipe away her woe!  
But, gentle people, give me aim awhile  
For nature puts me to a heavy task (5.3.149-52).

Lucius’ request that the people “give [him] aim” tells us that he is fully on board with the mixed constitution; he recognizes the value of the people—unlike Tamora and Coriolanus—and knows that it is only with their help that he will be successful. Rome is internally stable again, but to keep it this way is “a heavy task” that all Romans must be involved in—something that the mixed constitution ensures.

### **Comparing *Titus* with *Coriolanus***

In their endorsements of the mixed constitution, *Titus Andronicus* and *Coriolanus* differ in a few ways. The most noticeable difference is that the plebeians have only a small role in *Titus*. Individual citizens are not given any lines—they do not make their political opinions known nor do they voice any specific concerns during Tamora and Aaron’s reign of terror—and the plebeians appear as a group only in the first and final scenes of the play. But this is not to say that the plebeians are left out because Shakespeare thinks they are irrelevant; we already saw that Saturninus knows how important a role they play in Roman politics (p. 72). And in the scenes in which they do appear, they are the central players in two very consequential elections. Overall, however, this lack of attention to the plebeians—and the patricians, for that matter—means that we do not get to see the two orders checking each other and cooperating to the extent that we do in *Coriolanus*.

Another difference is that the mixed constitution in *Coriolanus* prevents a civil war from breaking out, while in *Titus*, it brings the city back together in the aftermath of great internal strife. Still, in both plays, the mixed constitution is shown to be a peaceful form of government; in *Coriolanus*, it keeps the peace, and in *Titus*, it restores it after a brief, but bloody intermission. Notably, the mixed constitution does not prevent Tamora from seizing power, but there is a good reason for this: she does not occupy an official political role in Rome and therefore there was no way for the patricians and plebeians to restrain her in the first place, as they do with Coriolanus. She is a foreign foe who disingenuously claims to be “incorporate in Rome,” and then uses her position as empress to carry out a number of nefarious plots (1.1.472). The failure in *Titus* is not one of institutions—as Taylor says—but of individuals driven by revenge, and Shakespeare shows us the havoc they can wreak on even the strongest political systems.<sup>162</sup>

The clearest similarity between *Titus* and *Coriolanus* is that they both demonstrate that the concentration of political power—no matter whose hands it is in—leads to abuse and the oppression of those who are disempowered. In the case of *Titus*, we see that monarchy can give way to tyranny when someone has bad intentions. Tamora is governing for herself, by herself, paying no heed to the Roman people and certainly not allowing them to constrain her in any way. This matches Aristotle’s definition of tyranny, namely, that it is “bound to exist where a single person rules over people who are all his peers or superiors, without any form of accountability, and with a view to his own advantage rather than that of his subjects.”<sup>163</sup> In *Coriolanus*, oligarchy and democracy are shown to be equally undesirable; the patricians should not have absolute power—remember the chaos of Act 1, Scene 1—and neither should the plebeians, as they are prone to govern as a mob if left unchecked. Together, *Titus* and *Coriolanus* bring

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<sup>162</sup> Taylor, ““To Order Well the State,”” 145.

<sup>163</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, bk. IV, ch. 10, 1295a18-21.

Aristotle's "perverted" forms of government to life, arrangements which aim at personal enrichment and completely ignore the common good.<sup>164</sup>

The result of these arrangements is the same in both plays: Rome is devoid of justice. Titus' hope after the election of Saturninus was that the latter's "virtues" would "ripen justice in [the] commonweal," but as we know, the exact opposite happens (1.1.227-9). When he is at his lowest point, Titus declares that Astraea—the goddess of justice—has "fled" from the earth (4.3.4-5). Desperate and running out of options, he appeals to the gods to bring her back in order to "wreak [Rome's] wrongs" (4.3.53). Similarly, in *Coriolanus*, the plebeians rail against the injustice of the patricians in Act 1, Scene 1. Later, Coriolanus claims to be a defender of justice in front of the patricians:

Th' honored gods  
Keep Rome in safety, and the chairs of justice  
Supplied with worthy men! Plant love among's!  
Throng our large temples with the shows of peace,  
And not our streets with war! (3.3.33-7).

Of course, he means none of this—he has no love for the plebeians and obviously does not prefer peace to war—and his call for justice, given his lawless behavior throughout the play, seems farcical more than anything else. Menenius and an unnamed senator, however, genuinely believe that this is "a noble wish" (3.3.38). They believe in the Roman conception of justice—which Marcus defines in *Titus* as "suum cuique," meaning "to each his own"—and along with the plebeians, they see that justice is served when Coriolanus is banished (1.1.283). Because he refused to "stoop" for the plebeians—as one of Aufidius' conspirators remarks in the final scene of the play—he got what he deserved: exile (5.6.28).

In *Titus* and *Coriolanus*, the mixed constitution is the embodiment of justice. It

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<sup>164</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, bk. III, ch. 7, 1279b4-8.

distributes political power to those who deserve it, and for Shakespeare, this includes all parts of the city: nobles and commoners alike. The injustice that the plebeians suffered at the beginning of *Coriolanus* ends when the mixed constitution is put in place; they are given food and granted political institutions of their own, two things that they—by virtue of being human—deserve. In *Titus*, “the perversion of communal justice produces a veritable convulsion . . . in the commonwealth,” but the full restoration of the mixed constitution marks its restoration as well.<sup>165</sup> Aaron is rightly put to death, and Tamora—who acted like a “ravenous tiger” when in power—is left to be devoured by her fellow beasts (5.3.197). The rest of Rome, meanwhile, is given back what was taken from them: their political voices.

### **Conclusion**

*Titus Andronicus* and *Coriolanus* are two overtly political plays about Ancient Rome, but the connection between them goes beyond that. Though the former was written at the very start of Shakespeare’s career, and the latter at the end, they endorse the same form of government—the mixed constitution—because it promotes peace and fairness, among other advantages. This raises the question: Was Shakespeare truly a believer in the mixed constitution, à la Polybius? And more broadly, can we say anything definitive about his “politics” at all? I will explore these questions and more as I draw my paper to a close.

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<sup>165</sup> Sommers, Alan. “‘Wilderness of Tigers’: Structure and Symbolism in *Titus Andronicus*.” *Essays in Criticism*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1960): 282, <https://doi.org/10.1093/eic/X.3.275>.

## Conclusion

In 1912, the influential Shakespearean A. C. Bradley gave a lecture on *Coriolanus* in which he described our tragic hero as an “aristocrat” politically and “a huge boy” personally.<sup>166</sup> Interestingly, he externalizes Coriolanus’ downfall and places the blame squarely on his mother, a view that I think is incorrect (p. 73).<sup>167</sup> But Bradley’s most thought-provoking insight comes at the beginning of his lecture, when he declares that it is “extremely hazardous to ascribe to [Shakespeare] any political feeling . . . and ridiculous to pretend to certainty on the subject.”<sup>168</sup> Those who subscribe to this view—i.e., that we should refrain from speculating about Shakespeare’s politics—tend to do so for two reasons: First, we do not know much about Shakespeare’s life, let alone his political views.<sup>169</sup> Second, as Skinner said in a lecture in 2014, “we [cannot] . . . identify authors with . . . the expressed beliefs of their fictional characters.”<sup>170</sup> Many pre-20<sup>th</sup> century commentators on *Coriolanus* failed to consider this point, prompting them to conclude that because Coriolanus hated the common man, Shakespeare must have too. John Masefield, for example, writes that the play “contains most of the few speeches in Shakespeare which ring with what seems like personal bitterness . . . [against] the servile, insolent mob mind.”<sup>171</sup>

I agree that it is impossible to point to any one character in *Coriolanus* as representing Shakespeare’s own views, but it does not follow that the text tells us nothing about his personal convictions, or that analyzing the play’s political themes is an exercise in futility. On the

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<sup>166</sup> George, *The Critical Tradition*, 328-9.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 332-3.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

<sup>169</sup> Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, introduction to *Coriolanus*, by William Shakespeare (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), xxvii.

<sup>170</sup> Quentin Skinner, “Belief, Truth, and Interpretation” (November 8, 2014), <https://youtu.be/VJYsTJt8vxg>.

<sup>171</sup> George, *The Critical Tradition*, 322.

contrary, Shakespeare's impartial portrayal of Rome's two orders and the interaction between them indicates that he did not intend to lionize one order over the other. Nor does he celebrate Coriolanus as a model of virtue; we are continually reminded of his faults, and his undoing as a politician is a reminder that refusing to adapt to changing times is an unsustainable path. To be sure, we cannot definitively know if Shakespeare was a proponent of the mixed constitution—he does not come out and say this, of course—but *Coriolanus* and *Titus Andronicus* provide compelling evidence for the affirmative.

Still, these are just two plays in the Bard's large canon. Other works of his are ripe for political analysis—in fact, most of them are—and it is possible that looking at them with the mixed constitution in mind might reveal that they too make the case for political power-sharing. As Hadfield writes, “Shakespeare remained interested in republican issues throughout his writing career,” and so there is much for political theorists to explore.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Republicanism*, 205.

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