

# Shakespeare's Treatment of the Source in *Coriolanus*

Kim, Kwang-Ho

## 1

In the Elizabethan Age, plays, "often put together by writers hired to revise and patch the work of others, were scarcely regarded as literature",<sup>1)</sup> and playwrights had no need to be original in the plots of their plays. Likewise, Shakespeare did not demonstrate his originality in the invention of novel plots. He found the subject-matter of his plays in various sources—familiar stories, historical chronicles, biographies, or plays written by his predecessors. As a matter of fact, each of all his plays can be traced to at least one definite source, with only one exception, *Love's Labour's Lost*, the plot of which is thought to have been invented by the dramatist himself, though it contains many contemporary topical allusions.

A comparison of any one of Shakespeare's plays with its source is "a sound instinct and a natural and fruitful approach"<sup>2)</sup> to the study of his dramaturgy. Certainly it may be one of the most effective ways of understanding not only the play itself, but the essentials of his unequalled dramatic art. *Coriolanus* is a good example of his resourcefulness in transforming the lifeless dull story of the original into a higher artistic form.

Shakespeare found the source of *Coriolanus* chiefly in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, in which the lives and careers of celebrated Greeks and Romans were described in pairs—e. g. Alexander and Caesar, Dion and Brutus, Demetrius and Antony, etc.—and comparisons between them were given. The life of Coriolanus was set against that of Alcibiades, an Athenian politician and general who, like the former, made a war against his fellow-countrymen.

Plutarch was a moralist as well as a historian, who, writing history in the form of biographies of worthies, primarily attempted to draw the nature and character of man rather than to relate the political and social events in the classical history. To his intention and method in the biography he himself referred, at the beginning of his *Life of Alexander*:

—my intent is not to write histories, but only lives. For the noblest deeds do not always show men's virtues and vices; but oftentimes a light occasion, a word, or some sport, makes men's natural dispositions and manners appear more plain than the famous battles won wherein are slain

1) E.F.C. Ludowyk, *Understanding Shakespeare*(C.U.P., 1962), p.258.

2) Hardin Craig, "Shakespeare's Choice of Material," in *Shakespeare Criticism*, 1953~1960, ed. Anne Ridler(O.U.P., 1963), p.37.

ten thousand men, or the great armies, or cities won by siege or assault.<sup>3)</sup>

As he had keen insight into character as well as narrative skill, he succeeded in making his biographical sketches in a grand and dramatic manner, with the result that the minds of great men in every age have sufficiently been attracted to his book.

It is quite natural that Shakespeare should have also been greatly interested in Plutarch's *Lives*, where he found the complex psychology of man depicted through minute details of personal behaviour and anecdotes. From the biography he acquired his concept of antiquity more than from any other single book, learning "more essential history —than most men could from the whole British Museum."<sup>4)</sup> It was not, however, through the Greek original that Shakespeare, with his "small Latin, and less Greek," gained access to the biography. In the middle of the 16th century a version was translated into French by Jaque Amyot and Sir Thomas North translated this French rendering into English. North's translation was first published in 1579, as *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes, compared together by that grave learned Philosopher and Historiographer, Plutarke of Chaeronea*. It was rendered in noble and vivid English, embellished by the translator's excellent style, to which MacCallum refers:

It is chiefly on the extraordinary wealth of his vocabulary, his inexhaustive supply of expressions, vulgar and dignified, picturesque and penetrating, colloquial and literary, but all of them, of indisputable Anglicity—it is chiefly on this that his excellence as stylist is based, an excellence that makes his version of Plutarch by far the most attractive that we possess.<sup>5)</sup>

North's *Plutarch* not only fascinated the readers of the Elizabethan Age, but also exerted a powerful influence on the contemporary prose. Accordingly, Shakespeare must have been acquainted with it from his youth. Before the composition of *Coriolanus* (1608), he had already owed to it his *Julius Caesar* (1599), *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607), and, in part, *Timon of Athens* (1607). But it "did more than supply Shakespeare with matter for his plays; it excited his imagination and possessed his thought."<sup>6)</sup>

North's *Plutarch* surely possessed fine contents, but also it contained defects. Plutarch, living under the Roman domination, primarily attempted to give the Greeks, his compatriots, moral guidance by the examples of the eminent men who had lived in the former times. Accordingly, he tended towards moral lectures, often suspending his narrative and inserting his own opinions. And his biography, though excelled in the details of description, was far from being flawless as regards an organic unification of the whole. Besides,

3) T.J.B. Spencer, ed., *Shakespeare's Plutarch* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), pp. 7-8.

4) T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and Individual Talent," in *Selected Essays*, 3rd ed. (1951; rpt. London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 17.

5) M.W. MacCallum, *Shakespeare's Roman Plays and Their Background* (1910; rpt. London: Macmillan, 1967), pp. 159-60.

6) Walter Raleigh, *Shakespeare* (London: Macmillan, 1950), p. 74.

the life of Coriolanus, perhaps owing to the fact that he was a legendary person in remote antiquity, lacked vividness of description, as compared with the other lives that dealt with more historical persons.

In the composition of his play from such a source, both fine and defective, how has the dramatist used, transformed and added to the details given in the source, and what artistic purpose prompted him to do so? To grasp this tersely and to the point, we must now proceed to consider the general relation of the play to the source, and, in doing this, it might be convenient to study the subject in three main points: diction, characterization and construction.

## 2

When we compare Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* with North's *Plutarch*, the first impression we acquire is that the former is "little more than a scenic replica"<sup>7)</sup> of the latter. Often the dramatist's obligation to the source is so great that it is almost difficult to distinguish what he has added from what he has received. He follows the source more closely than in *Antony and Cleopatra* and even in *Julius Caesar*.

This closeness to the source is most remarkable in diction, and we see the dramatist often following North's prose in very faithful detail and at length. This is most conspicuously the case in the following great declamatory speeches:

- 1) Coriolanus' attack on the distribution of free corn and on the tribunate (III, i, 64-161);<sup>8)</sup>
- 2) his speech to Aufidius (IV, v, 57-104); and
- 3) Volumnia's pleading to her son (V, iii, 94-182).

Comparing these passages to the corresponding portions of North's *Plutarch*,<sup>9)</sup> we are surprised to see how deliberately Shakespeare adheres to his authority: North's actual phraseology is transcribed almost phrase by phrase and word by word in many parts. Indeed, many of Shakespeare's lines are no more than North's splendid narrative rendered into blank verse. It is curious that, reading these passages, the dramatist's mighty spirit could say almost nothing more than what he had read. It is as if he were, as George Wyndham says, "saturated with North's language and possessed by his passion."<sup>10)</sup>

Though less strikingly, we can see the similar adherence to North's diction in Menenius's tale of the belly (I, i, 95-145), and in parts of the description of the campaign at

7) MacCallum, *op. cit.*, p. 484.

8) The text of the play used in this essay is that of *Coriolanus*, in the *New Cambridge Edition of Shakespeare*, ed. John Dover Wilson (C.U.P., 1964). Line references are also to the same edition.

9) Cf. Spencer, ed., "The Life of Martius Coriolanus," in *op. cit.*, pp. 322-4; 337-8; 354-7, respectively.

10) Quoted in A.W. Verity, ed., "Introduction," to *Coriolanus*, in the *Pitt Press Shakespeare Edition* (C.U.P., 1955), p. xvi.

Corioli (e.g., I, iv, 57-62; I, vi, 51-57; and I, ix). Besides these, the dramatist's lines to exemplify his fidelity to North are too numerous to be mentioned here.<sup>11)</sup>

Sometimes, the dramatist's close adherence to the source even makes it possible to supplement a deficiency in the First Folio, in which the play was first published, where the lines 234-43 of II, iii read:

Say we read lectures to you,  
How youngly he began to serve his country,  
How long continued; and what stock he springs of,  
The noble house o' th' Marcians, from whence came  
That Ancus Marcius, Numa's daughter's son,  
Who after great Hostilius here was king;  
Of the same house Publius and Quintus were,  
That our best water brought by conduits hither;  
And nobly named so, twice being censor,  
Was his great ancestor.

Here, in the last two lines, it is clear that something dropped out, some words or a whole line. By referring to North's *Plutarch* we can supplement the gap, (1) as most editors do, or (2) as Dover Wilson does:<sup>12)</sup>

- (1) And [Censorinus], nobly named so,  
Twice being [by the people chosen] censor,  
Was his great ancestor.
- (2) [And Censorinus that was so surnamed]  
And nobly named so, twice being censor,  
Was his great ancestor.

This passage also shows how Shakespeare's close adherence to the source lets him fall into anachronism. He makes Brutus say what Plutarch said, thus making Coriolanus' ancestors of persons who lived long after him.<sup>13)</sup>

Again, in lines 57-62 of I, iv, to which I have already referred as an instance of the dramatist's fidelity to the source, he makes a wrong chronology:

Thou wast a soldier  
Even to Cato's wish, not fierce and terrible  
Only in strokes; but with thy grim looks and  
The thunder-like percussion of thy sounds

11) Cf. MacCallum, *op. cit.*, pp. 484-93.

12) Cf. Wilson, *op. cit.*, pp. 194-5.

13) The dates for them are: Ancus Marcius (640-616 B.C.), Coriolanus (c. 490 B.C.), Censorinus (265 B.C.), and aqueduct of Publius and Quintus Marcius (139 B.C.).

Thou mad'st thine enemies shake, as if the world  
Were feverous and did tremble.

The First Folio has *Calues*, and the Second Folio *Calves* for *Cato's*, but the corresponding passage in the source shows the true reading.<sup>14)</sup> Plutarch instanced Cato (the elder Cato, the Censor, 234-149 B.C.) as a comment on Coriolanus' bravery, while the dramatist puts the statement into the mouth of the person, who lived about 250 years before Cato.

As we have seen so far, Shakespeare's indebtedness to North's *Plutarch* is undeniable, but it would be unfair to insist that the play lacks in originality. Surely we know no other play of Shakespeare that is more faithful to its source than the play, yet this is not to say his creative powers wane in the composition of the play, as often is alleged.<sup>15)</sup> Carefully reading his lines, even those in which he follows the source most literally, we are lost in admiration at his genius revealed in animating Plutarch's narrative with the vivid life and play of dialogue, and at his power over words with which he transforms North's excellent prose into his even more excellent verse. Besides, as a critic points out:

In these passages the ideas, the arrangement of the ideas are practically the same in the translator and in the dramatist: yet, with a few almost imperceptible touches, a few changes in the order of construction, a few substitutions in the wording, the language of North, without losing any directness or force, gains a majestic volume and vibration that are only possible in the cadences of the most perfect verse.<sup>16)</sup>

Shakespeare nearly always adds some heightening touch that transfigures the whole, and this is the case even in those passages where he follows North most closely.

For example, Volumnia's great speech to her son is "the longest continuous passage in which Shakespeare relies closely on a particular source, while the entire scene offers a clear opportunity of our watching the dramatist's creative imagination at work."<sup>17)</sup> Here the terrible last lines:

Come, let us go:  
This fellow had a Volscian to his mother;  
His wife is in Corioli, and his child  
Like him by chance. Yet give us our dispatch.  
I am hushed until our city be a-fire,  
And then I'll speak a little. (v, iii, 177-82)

are the dramatist's own addition. As A.C. Bradley points out, it is this terrible dialogue

14) Cf. Spencer, *op. cit.*, p. 307.

15) Cf. Stopford A. Brooke, *On Ten Plays of Shakespeare* (London: Constable, 1905), p. 222.

16) MacCallum, *op. cit.*, pp. 163-4.

17) Hermann Heuer, "From Plutarch to Shakespeare: a Study of Coriolanus," in *Shakespeare Survey* 10 (1957), p. 50.

of Volumnia that makes her son's firm resolution break down at once, though it has long been tottering.<sup>18)</sup>

When his dramatic purpose demands, Shakespeare also invents the by-play of the action. Thus, in the play we find at least seven scenes that have no counterparts in the source:

Act I, Scs. ii, iii, x; Act II, Sc. i; Act III, Sc. ii; Act IV, Sc. ii; and Act V, Sc. iv.

In addition to these, the play contains many scenes, parts of which have been actually added by the dramatist himself; e.g., the dialogues in the streets between groups of citizens and their tribunes(II, iii), the humorous dialogues of Aufidius's servants(IV, v), and Menenius's humorous but pathetic self-assurance with Volscian sentinels(V, ii). And again we find a remarkable contrast between Menenius's fable of belly given by the source and that expanded by the dramatist lively and dramatically with all of the interruptions and rejoinders(I, i).

In diction, as seen so far, the dramatist began by borrowing other's material, but what he has produced out of it may be said to be completely his own.

### 3

In the preceeding chapter we have seen how Shakespeare supplements and embellishes the diction of North's *Plutarch*, but, as Thomson points out,<sup>19)</sup> verbal magic alone does not make a play: persons in the play must be given vivid and natural characterization. It is the commonplace of criticism that, though Shakespeare often changes the time and place of the incidents in composing historical plays, he seldom misrepresents character or fact. This is also the case with *Coriolanus*, and Shakespeare's hero is not essentially different from the character depicted in the source. But carefully comparing the character of Shakespeare's Coriolanus with that of Plutarch's Coriolanus, we can find many slight transformations that heighten some traits in his character.

He is an altogether nobler character than he is made out to be by Plutarch, who gives him many virtues but also represents him as "chollericke and impacient...churlishe, uncivil" for "lacke of education." Shakespeare's Coriolanus is choleric, too, but it would be a travesty of truth to say that the total impression he leaves upon us is that of "an uncivilized nature; and whenever he is "chollericke and impacient", he is so as much through a pretty pride of caste as through a soldier's dislike of political sharp practices and a perfectly honorable pride in his profession<sup>20)</sup>

Shakespeare closely combines the good and bad qualities of Coriolanus which were dep-

18) A.C. Bradley, "Coriolanus," in *Studies in Shakespeare*, ed. Peter Alexander (O.U.P., 1964), p. 236.

19) Cf. J.A.K. Thomson, *Shakespeare and the Classics* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1952), p. 236.

20) Sailendra Kumar Sen, "What Happens in *Coriolanus*," in *Shakespeare Quarterly IX* (1958), p. 334.

icted separately by Plutarch. In the source his two sets of qualities issued from separate origins; the good from his noble birth, and the bad from a lack of proper education owing to his early loss of the father. But in the play they are made into elements so inseparable and interdependent that a paradox is created in his character. "Coriolanus' virtue and strength," says Wilson Knight;

are shown not as two distinct attributes, but rather as a single quality in the pattern of his nature. Each is curiously intrinsic to the other.<sup>21)</sup>

Through the hand of Shakespeare his pride is made into the sole origin of his virtue and weakness, and the paradox of his character is that in his pride exists everything noble as well as everything vicious. Thus, in the play his pride has two very contradictory faculties. On one hand, it is the virtue in his character that has power to elevate the nobility in his spirit. On the other, it is the tragic flaw in his character that has power to poison the nobility in his spirit.

Thus, Shakespeare focuses the central tragic element of this tragedy upon the deeply flawed yet noble human character of the hero. "The subject of *Coriolanus*," says Dowden, "is the ruin of a noble life through the sin of pride."<sup>22)</sup> As Macbeth's ambition, Lear's rashness and Antony's love of pleasure bring upon their owners inevitable ruin, so is Shakespeare's Coriolanus ruined by the flaw of his character, which is his aristocratic pride.

The life of Coriolanus as related by Plutarch is a straightforward piece of biography that begins with an account of his ancestors and upbringing and ends with his death. Accordingly, in the source the hero stood alone and the subordinate persons were very vague and shadowy; all of them, Volumnia excepted, scarcely more than names. In the play, though the hero likewise dominates the action, the other characters are also drawn with full of interest and life.

Menenius and Virgilia are greatly developed from the very scanty material in the source. The former, who was introduced by Plutarch to deliver a short story of the belly and its members in defense of the patricians, is worked up to an important person of the play. In Shakespeare's hand this old man has become not only the closest friend to the hero, but also a humorous and pleasant patrician as well as the mouthpiece of common sense and reasonable compromise.

On the other hand, Virgilia in the play is actually a new character, grown out of no more than a suggestion given in the source. She is made into a wife with a firm devotion to her husband, who is in turn also faithful to her. Shakespeare's Virgilia is almost wordless and spoken to with very few words, but she leaves us a very definite and pleasing

21) Wilson Knight, "The Royal Occupation: an Essay on *Coriolanus*," in *The Imperial Theme* (London: Methuen. 1951) p. 166.

22) Edward Dowden, *Shakespeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art* (1875; rep. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), p. 317.



impression. She has all the womanly weaknesses that her mother-in-law wants so conspicuously, and it is chiefly through her gentle heart that we find some human warmth in the hero, and that he wins our sympathy which was hardly extended to him in the source. His short greeting to her who is standing speechless before him, when he returns from the war, is the dramatist's own invention:

My gracious silence, hail!  
 Wouldst thou have laughed had I come confined home,  
 That weep'st to see me triumph? Ah, my dear,  
 Such eyes the widows in Corioli wear,  
 And mothers that lack sons. (II, i, 173-77)

This impressive dialogue envelopes her in "a radiance which is reflected back upon himself."<sup>23)</sup>

Shakespeare has also greatly developed the character of Volumnia from what he found in the source, where she was less important and less domineering than in the play. Plutarch's Volumnia was the cause of Coriolanus' love of honour, but she was not made responsible so expressly for the formation of his character as in the play. In the source he was driven to battle by an irresistible impulse of his own nature, while in the play he is always his mother's puppet and forced by her to become a soldier and to exult in the blood and sweat of war. In the play it is also by her influence that Coriolanus determines to move from war to politics against his own nature and temperament. Plutarch depicted her as an essentially womanly woman, noble and dutiful, sympathetic and affectionate, whereas the dramatist has given her a harshness of character and ferocity in exultation in her son's exploits. The admirable scene in which she urges him to cheat the plebeians (III, ii) is Shakespeare's own addition. Thus, our impression of her in the play is that she represents an austere patrician woman of early Rome and a domineering mother of grim warriors.

In the source it was Varelia who took the initiative in the salvation of Rome, leading the hero's mother, wife and little son to plead with him, whereas in the play the whole responsibility is transferred to Volumnia, who persuades him to sacrifice himself and to spare his country. To her important role in the play, Dover Wilson justly refers:

Volumnia serves not only to infuse a lively human interest into what would else consist almost wholly of politics and fighting, but as an additional character that enables Shakespeare to impose dramatic shape and unity upon the rather disparate elements of Plutarch's history.<sup>24)</sup>

Shakespeare has also expanded Aufidius's character to a great extent. In the source he did not appear until Coriolanus sought him at Antium, and his appearance was only inci-

<sup>23)</sup> Bradley, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

<sup>24)</sup> Dover Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. xxiv.



dental, while in the play he is introduced much earlier (I, ii) and given an important role in the action of the drama. Shakespeare has also created the admirable scene of his encounter with the hero (I, viii), which reveals their personal rivalry vividly, out of Plutarch's bare hint of the former's antagonism against the latter. In Shakespeare's Aufidius we see a struggle between a certain generosity of nature and an unscrupulous jealousy; this struggle was outlined in the source, but it was not brought to a head as seen in the play.

As for the less important characters, such as Lartius, Cominius, young Marcius, and the tribunes of the people, Shakespeare has also given their respective peculiarities and functions. In the source they entered for a moment and were dismissed, while in the play they are made to accompany the action of the play effectively, illustrating and influencing the hero's character.

#### 4

It is Shakespeare's usual device in his tragedies that, though he follows the source closely, he gives to each of the borrowed details a new interpretation or a heightened colouring. A play is not "a collection of the biographies of those who appear in it," but "a grouping of certain facts and events around a single centre, so that they may be seen at a glance."<sup>25)</sup> In transforming a historical episode into a tragedy, it is necessary for the dramatist to render the story visible upon the stage and comprehensible to the common play-goers. To obtain this object, he must give vividness to the events, concentration and unity to the plot construction.

The most conspicuous fact we note in the construction of this play is that the dramatic interest is centered around the hero himself. It seems as if the historical material given in the source interested the dramatist only when it revealed the hero's character and the causes of his downfall. He retains the story unchanged in so far as it suits to this purpose, but, when it does not, he transmutes it, suppressing, condensing and rearranging the details, so as to fit his dramatic purpose.

This play may be divided into two parts, with the turning point at the hero's departure from Rome. In the first part the dramatist greatly simplifies the complicated accounts of the incidents in Rome. He condenses Plutarch's three uprisings of the Roman plebeians into one. In the source there were two seditions due to the oppression of usurers, before the war with the Volscians. When the first broke out in the city, the enemies of Rome began to invade the territories of Rome. Then the Senate ordered the people to go to the wars, but the latter refused to fight for the state, withdrawing in a body to the Mons Sacer (Holy Mount). Accordingly, the Senate sent Menenius with some patricians to pacify the secessionists, who, persuaded by Menenius's fable of the belly, agreed to return

<sup>25)</sup> Raleigh, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

to Rome, on a condition that the establishment of the tribunate should be granted to protect their interests. Later, after the capture of Corioli, there arose another rebellion of the people due to the scarcity of corn. Through the hand of the dramatist, these three troubles are combined and condensed into a single incident, and introduced at the beginning of the play.<sup>26)</sup>

In the source, again, the plebeians' rejection of Coriolanus for the consulship was only one of the complicated events in the conflict between them, and it did not immediately lead to the hero's banishment, which occurred some time later on quite another occasion. But in the play, the rejection is made to be the real center of the whole struggle, and the other incidents are grouped around it, serving as supplementary circumstances in it. For example, in the source there followed an incident about the corn, in which the hero was strongly against its free distribution to the people, accusing the latter of their seditious tendencies. The dramatist makes use of this incident, but it is referred to in the tribunes' charge of Coriolanus and his reply in the course of the election. The rejection of the hero for the consulship, in the source, did not bring about any immediate result, though it increased the hero's anger greatly, whereas in the play, it directly results in his banishment.<sup>27)</sup>

In this handling of the rejection, Shakespeare makes two important modifications. In the first place, he emphasizes the hero's insolence and choler greatly. Plutarch's Coriolanus did not raise any difficulties in wearing the humble gown and showing his wounds, when he sought the people's voices. They were aged customs that any man suing for any office had to follow, and the hero actually followed them unoffensively and without humiliation, on his part. But the dramatist seems to have perceived that any such compromise of the hero with the people would contradict to his impossibly self-sufficient, egoistic character. We must note that, though like the dramatist the biographer made the hero proud, unlike the former the latter did not mark this defect as the deciding factor in the hero's ruin. In the source Coriolanus' banishment was the result of his opposition to the plebeian demand for free corn, while in the play it is the direct result of his insolent behaviour to them, as MacCallum points out:

It is Coriolanus' pride that turns his candidature, which begins under the happiest auspices, to a snare. It is still his pride that plays into the tribunes' hands and makes him repeat in mere defiance his offensive speech. It is again his pride, not any calumny about his misapplying the profits of his raid, that gives the signal for the adverse sentence.<sup>28)</sup>

In the second place, the people as a whole are made less reasonable than in the source. Although Plutarch's plebeians had no reason to love the hero at any time, they were willing

26) As for this paragraph, cf. *Coriolanus*, I. i. and *The Life of Martius Coriolanus*, pp. 300-6 and 314-6.

27) As for this paragraph, cf. *Coriolanus*, III. i. iii. and *The life*, pp. 321-32.

28) MacCallum, *op. cit.*, p. 512.

to elect him consul after all his services to their country. On the day of election their love and goodwill suddenly turned to hate and envy toward him, but they had a reasonable motive: they feared the danger that would arise from their giving such authority as the consulship to the patrician who had always despised them. In the play, however, more prominence is given to the machinations of the tribunes, and so, in the election, the commons are made to act on the instigation of their leaders, rather than on their free will. In the play they are no more than "the poor dupes of the tribunes, fickle weathercocks that shift with every wind of suggestion, every gust of passion and vanity."<sup>29)</sup>

Shakespeare simplifies and condenses the narrative of the source very much after the hero's banishment. In the source, on the hero's arrival at Antium, Volscian leaders saw that they had good time offered to make war with the Romans, who were in great dissension after his banishment. But all of them, only except Aufidius, were ashamed to attack Rome, because of their pledge to keeping peace for two years. They only consented when the Romans gave them a good excuse by proclaiming that all the Volscians in Rome should leave the city. Then Coriolanus and Aufidius invaded the Roman territories, before the Romans heard any news of their attack, and returned to Antium with many spoils and without any loss of men. Coriolanus repeated the invasion, Aufidius remaining home to defend his country, and approached within forty furlongs of Rome, with the result that the whole city was driven in a great fear. He received embassies from Rome, to whom he proposed the conditions on which to end the war. Under a thirty days' truce, he departed again with his army from the Roman territories. The time of truce expired, he returned into the Roman dominions, and the Romans sent two embassies to make peace in vain. But at his mother's entreaty he eventually made peace and withdrew. These complicated incidents are condensed to a single invasion, which is made to follow closely on the hero's arrival at Antium, in the play. In the source, Coriolanus, first invading the Roman territories, destroyed the whole country, but was very careful not to harm and burn the lands and goods of the nobles, attempting to increase the malice and dissension between the nobles and the commons. In the play, however, he does not make any such distinction either from policy or from partisanship. He rages against all the inhabitants of Rome just alike, cursing the cowardly patricians quite as much as the disgusting plebeians.<sup>30)</sup>

In the last scene that deals with the murder of the hero, we can find again a notable difference between the source and the play. In the source, the hero, after his return to Antium, was demanded by Aufidius to resign his office, and answered that he was willing to give up his post, if all of the lords required it. He was also willing to give an account of his action to the people, if they consented to hear it. Thereupon the people called a common council, where certain orators stirred up the people's feeling against him. The

29) Verity, *op. cit.*, p. xxi.

30) As for this paragraph, cf. *Coriolanus*, IV. v.-V. iii. and *The Life*, pp. 336-58.

moment Coriolanus stood to prove his innocence, he was slain by the conspirators Aufidius employed. In the play, however, his ungovernable insolence and choler are made to bring on his death. All might be well, if, when Aufidius hurts his pride with insult and mockery, he did not forget himself in a rage and excite the passions of his hearers.<sup>31)</sup>

As we have seen so far, Shakespeare treats the historical material with relative freedom, suppressing, condensing and rearranging it for his dramatic purpose. In the composition of this play, his interest consists in "dramatic art and nothing else, and particularly here in giving effective artistic form to a tragic hero he has not previously attempted to create."<sup>32)</sup> The hero is great and noble enough to win our admiration, but he is too harsh and offensive to attract our hearts. As a character he can not compete in interest with any heroes of the dramatist's other tragedies, for he has neither the warmth and imagination of Othello nor the inner conflicts of Hamlet, which move our hearts deeply. Shakespeare is too masterly a dramatist to overlook that such an unsympathetic character as Coriolanus cannot possibly hold our interest, and that a play with such a hero can succeed only through the dramatic power of its action. Accordingly, he adopts only one plot in the play, which, once begun, marches straight to its conclusion. The dramatist almost completely rejects digression by subplots or comic reliefs, his usual devices in his tragedies, with the result that an unusually tense and heightened tragic atmosphere is effectively maintained throughout the action of the play.

The play is surely the most unified and symmetrical of all Shakespeare's tragedies, and this is the result of the intense concentration of a single plot on the figure of the hero. The whole action reveals his character and his inevitable downfall, for the dramatist selects only such incidents that are directly related to that purpose, omitting everything that is irrelevant to it. There is no other play of Shakespeare's that is so completely dominated by one man. All the other characters in the play only illustrate him, bringing out some new element in his personality.

Group of people—tribunes, citizens, servants, officers laying cushions in the Capitol, travelers on the highway, the ladies of his household—are forever exchanging opinions on the subject of Coriolanus. And the individuals who share with him the bulk of our attention are here for no other purpose than to make leading remarks about him.<sup>33)</sup>

Thus, the dramatist succeeds in composing a play almost complete in its construction, inspired through all its parts by one main idea that unifies the whole. *Coriolanus* is a long play, yet there is nothing loose or sprawling about it, for all that happens in it and all that is said strictly pertinent to the total experience it conveys.

31) As for this paragraph, cf. Coriolanus V. iv. and *The Life*, pp. 360-2.

32) Dover Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. xxi.

33) Mark van Doren, *Shakespeare* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1953), p. 244.

The play is notable for its craftsmanship. It is the work of a man who knows what the effect of each stroke will be, and wastes not one of them. And while ease and simplicity may sometimes be lacking, an uncertain or superfluous speech it would be hard to find.<sup>34)</sup>

## 5

*Coriolanus* has never been a very popular play of Shakespeare, and it has been a commonplace of criticism that it is a frigid and harsh play. Many critics have even suggested that the dramatist reveals some ebbing of his usual imaginative vitality. But "an important minority"<sup>35)</sup> have not overlooked its quality as a tragic masterpieces. One of them, Swinburne spoke most highly of it, commenting on it as follows:

A loftier or more perfect piece of work was never done in all the world.<sup>36)</sup>

Some modern scholars have also been attracted by the play. Hudson thought it to stand for Shakespeare's "highest maturity of thought and power."<sup>37)</sup> Middleton Murry commended "its economy, its swiftness, its solidity, its astonishing clarity and poignancy of language", seeing it as a "magnificent example of creative control."<sup>38)</sup> And Bradley said of it, "if not one of Shakespeare's greatest creations, it is certainly one of his biggest."<sup>39)</sup>

It is undeniable that the play is deprived of many attractions that the other tragedies of Shakespeare have. It is cold and realistic in atmosphere, and is afforded with little of his beautiful poetry. This is, however, an inevitable result of his subjecting the language of the play to the severe dramatic treatment. He adopts North's simple, unadorned and vigorous diction in the main, making rhetoric and eloquence take the place of fancy and imagination completely.

The verse matches the action. Austere, rugged and often harsh, it is a perfect vehicle for the tirades, the exhortations, the eulogies and the accusations with which the play is filled. Almost devoid of lyricism, the poetry of *Coriolanus* has a hard, stony or metallic timbre that is peculiarly its own...<sup>40)</sup>

This brings on the play a remarkable effect that the form and the substance harmonize

34) Harley Granville-Barker, "*Coriolanus*," in *Prefaces to Shakespeare, Vol. II* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1958), p. 150.

35) D.B. Traversi, *An Approach to Shakespeare* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1956), p. 216.

36) Quoted by John Palmer, *Political Characters of Shakespeare* (London: Macmillan, 1945), p. 308.

37) *Ibid.*

38) *Ibid.*

39) Bradley, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

40) G.R. Hibbard, ed., "Introduction," to *Coriolanus*, in the *New Penguin Shakespeare Edition* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 7.

with each other to such a degree as are never seen in any other play of the dramatist's whole canon.

We must admit that *Coriolanus* is a fine play for its peculiar artistic quality, for, however unsympathetic we may be to the play, the fine craftsmanship and perfect construction of the play are not to be overlooked. T.S. Eliot once said in his essay on *Hamlet* (1919):

*Coriolanus* may be not as interesting as *Hamlet*, but it is with *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare's most assured artistic success.<sup>41)</sup>

Dramatically, *Coriolanus* may be said to be more formal than *Antony and Cleopatra*. Although it is inferior in variety of scenes and characters, along with great scale and beauty of noble poetry, it surely exceeds its predecessor in a well-proportioned beauty of construction. It is artistically a more perfect work of art even than *Julius Caesar*, in which our interest is broken to a certain degree by the early disappearance of the titular hero.

Though greatly indebted to the source in the composition of the play, Shakespeare's task of transforming a historical story into a poetic drama seems never to have been easy or simple. He does not invent the plot, and adopts North's diction faithfully and at length in many parts. But he animates the complicated, dull story and the vague and shadowy characters of the source with vivid life. Especially as for the hero, Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* is supremely guilty of the vicious pride, but at the same time he is supremely noble in the virtuous pride. The dramatist not only takes great care to strike balance between the virtues and defects of his hero, but also with wonderful surety arranges each action to meet the demands of his characterization. Granville-Barker justly says that *Coriolanus* is "a play of action dealing with men of action; and none that Shakespeare wrote do action and character better supplement and balance each other."<sup>42)</sup>

Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* provides us with a good example revealing his great genius and masterly skill of art, abundantly displayed in the selection and rearrangement of incidents, in fitting the details so as to reinforce one another, and especially in giving the tragedy a peculiar artistic quality. Indeed, we can praise him with MacCallum:

Never did any one borrow more, yet borrow less than Shakespeare. He finds clay ready to his hand, but he shapes it and breathes into it the breath of life, and it becomes a living soul.<sup>43)</sup>

This outcome is solely brought about by his skilful handling of the source through his crowning dramatic art. Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* is undoubtedly his great and noble work of art, in which his gifted dramaturgy deserving our unqualified admiration is fully demonstrated.

41) Eliot, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

42) G.-Barker, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

43) MacCallum, *op. cit.*, p. 186.