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## Acting, Integrity, and Gender in *Coriolanus*

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*I*n the second act of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, the title character is urged by his mother to feign regard for the plebeians long enough to secure their votes and pass for consul. Although Coriolanus finds the artifice unseemly ("It is a part / That I shall blush in acting" [2.2.141–42]), he eventually accepts his mother's direction, donning the requisite costume and reciting the requisite dialogue.<sup>1</sup> His performance, however, does not fool anyone. Even the plebeians perceive that Coriolanus has not satisfied the most basic condition of performance: he has not subordinated himself to the part he is supposed to be playing. Consequently, Coriolanus is called upon to reprise the role—this time more credibly, more convincingly.

In his eyes, it is too much to ask. As his mother urges him to "perform a part / Thou hast not done before" and as Cominius cajoles "Come, come, we'll prompt you," Coriolanus protests in scandalized disbelief: "Would you have me / False to my nature? Rather say I play / The man I am" (3.2.109–10, 106, 13–15). For Coriolanus, it is one thing to go through the motions, but it is quite another to infuse those motions with meaning. He can bring himself to do the former but not the latter, inasmuch as it might prove transformative. "I will not do't," he declares,

Lest I surcease to honour mine own truth,  
And by my body's action teach my mind  
A most inherent baseness. (3.2.120–23)

Coriolanus's concern—that dissimulation might draw on depravity—is an antitheatrical commonplace in Shakespeare's day. Indeed, much of what Coriolanus says and stands for resonates with the antitheatrical ideologies of the play's early modern moment. In an earlier essay I have attended to this connection, arguing that the play enacts antitheatricalism in such a way as to lay bare its political investments, revealing it to be a

reactionary discourse interested in policing the status quo and preserving class privilege (Lehnhof 2000). To the degree that it does this, the stage-play anticipates and corroborates modern-day analyses emphasizing the sociopolitical dimensions and determinants of antitheatrical discourse.<sup>2</sup> In the present essay, I would like to shift my focus from questions of class/status to questions of sex/gender, endeavoring to trace the links between Coriolanus's antiperformative zeal and his ultra-masculine identity. For though it is true that Coriolanus opposes the dissimulation of others on political grounds (i.e., it creates social confusion), what causes him to reject play-acting in his own person is the sexualized fear that it will unman him (i.e., turn him into a squeaking virgin or crying boy). In this manner, the play presents Coriolanus's antitheatricalism as resting upon a gynophobic foundation—which can be said to anticipate yet another thread in modern-day criticism.<sup>3</sup> However, the play not only exposes this gynophobic foundation but also undermines it: first, by using the figure of the boy to show that Coriolanus's ostensibly antiperformative manhood is itself a theatrical effect; and, second, by using the figure of the maid to show that the “unmanly” subject positions Coriolanus scorns are not without virtue of their own. Throughout, the drama uses both the boy and the virgin to call into question Coriolanus's masculine quest for autonomy and integrity, casting it as a kind of anxious incoherence.<sup>4</sup>

That gynophobia informs Coriolanus's aversion to acting to a greater degree than any other consideration, classism included, is apparent. Were it not so, Coriolanus would be more tractable when urged by his mother to pander to the plebeians in the name of “your wife, your son, these senators, [and] the nobles” (3.2.65). Making an all-out appeal to her son's heightened sense of class interest, Volumnia presses him to playact for the sake of political empowerment. She assures him that such a course is analogous to the practice of wartime “policy,” but Coriolanus is unconvinced (3.2.43). He sees dissimulation as emasculating, and it is for this reason that he sarcastically readies himself for the proffered role by renouncing his masculine disposition and imagining himself transformed into a harlot or virgin:

Away, my disposition; and possess me  
Some harlot's spirit! My throat of war be turned,  
Which choired with my drum, into a pipe  
Small as an eunuch or the virgin voice  
That babies lull asleep! (3.2.111–15)

Insofar as he negatively associates play-acting with effeminacy, Coriolanus echoes the antitheatrical authors of early modernity. But in his acerbity, Coriolanus takes things too far and ends up outstripping the moral considerations that are supposed to be driving the antitheatrical machine. Coriolanus, it will be seen, heaps scorn on both the harlot and the virgin, as if the two were equally ignoble. His failure to distinguish between the sexually corrupt woman and the sexually pure woman confounds moral categories in such a way as to reveal that his primary concern is with sex/gender, not ethics/morality. His indiscriminate denigration of these two disparate female types reveals that “manliness, not morality, is the issue” (Stockholder 230). Just as his tirade against the tribunes reduces antitheatricalism to an elemental classism (see 3.1.93–115), this rant reduces it to an elemental sexism.

It is clear that Coriolanus recognizes the power of self-performance, but he refuses to exploit it out of fear of effeminacy. Volumnia can talk all she wants about class conflict and political expediency, but the only thing Coriolanus can think about is the harlot’s spirit, the eunuch’s pipe, and the virgin’s voice. What fixes him in his antiperformative attitude is masculine anxiety, pure and simple. Of course, one can hardly talk of Coriolanus’s anxiety as either “pure” or “simple.” As a number of scholars have shown, Coriolanus’s preoccupations with manliness manifest themselves in all kinds of complicated ways.<sup>5</sup> These complications, however, are particularly evident in his antitheatricity, and their overall effect is to call it into question. Over the course of the play, the gynophobia that undergirds Coriolanus’s quest for authentic self-expression is shown to be unstable, and this instability causes the gender identity that is premised upon it to pitch and sway.

We see some of this shakiness in Coriolanus’s metaphorical conflation of the virgin and the whore, but this is not the only curious confluence of that speech. When Coriolanus imagines himself an actor, he talks not only about virgins and whores but also about eunuchs, knaves, schoolboys, and beggars:

Away, my disposition; and possess me  
Some harlot’s spirit! My throat of war be turned,  
Which choired with my drum, into a pipe  
Small as an eunuch or the virgin voice  
That babies lull asleep! The smiles of knaves  
Tent in my cheeks, and schoolboys’ tears take up  
The glasses of my sight! A beggar’s tongue  
Make motion through my lips, and my armed knees,

Who bowed but in my stirrup, bend like his  
That hath received an alms! (3.2.111–20)

Cutting across boundaries of age, sex, and station, Coriolanus jumbles together a wide range of types in his antitheatrical zeal. The grouping is oddly disparate, but it does much to define Coriolanus's personal commitments, since the thing that connects all these figures is a lack of manliness, as Coriolanus conceives of it. Physically weak and sexually impotent, they lack the strength and virility he takes to be the hallmarks of manhood. Subordinate to patriarchal overseers such as fathers, husbands, schoolmasters, and magistrates, they lack the authority and mastery that are supposed to set men apart. Intemperate and untrustworthy, they lack the self-discipline and sincerity that Coriolanus sees as exclusive to men. And so on.

Though there is much to say about these unmanly identities, the figure of the schoolboy is of particular interest, for his insufficiency is only a temporary condition. Whereas women and eunuchs will never become men, schoolboys are not only eligible for this advancement but are also, presumably, well on their way. Nevertheless, the schoolboy's proximity to manhood appears to make him more, not less, threatening to Coriolanus. To be sure, Coriolanus cannot brook being called "boy." This much is apparent at the end, when Aufidius omits Coriolanus's honorific titles, refers to him as a "boy of tears," accuses him of treason, and calls for his present death. Amid all this, what really bothers Coriolanus is the "boy." He keeps coming back to it, incredulous and angry:

AUFIDIUS. Name not the god [of war], thou boy of tears.

CORIOLANUS. Ha?

AUFIDIUS. No more.

CORIOLANUS. Measureless liar, thou hast made my heart

Too great for what contains it. 'Boy'? O slave!—

Pardon me, lords, 'tis the first time that ever

I was forced to scold. Your judgments, my grave lords,

Must give this cur the lie (5.6.103–08)

Ten lines later, Coriolanus is still fuming at the perceived insult. Even as he is swarmed by his enemies, he continues to bark about being called "boy," as if the epithet has cut him more deeply than any blade can do:

Cut me to pieces, Volsces. Men and lads,

Stain all your edges on me. 'Boy!' False hound,

If you have writ your annals true, 'tis there

That, like an eagle in a dove-cote, I  
 Fluttered your Volscians in Corioles.  
 Alone I did it. 'Boy'! (5.6.112–17)

The intensity of Coriolanus's response is intriguing, in part because it glances back at the antitheatrical tracts of Shakespeare's day, where the figure of the boy (specifically the boy actor) also excites an inordinate amount of anxiety. As Laura Levine has observed, England's antitheatrical writers fret over the boy actor as if he were the embodiment of all that is alarming about performance and personality. Accordingly, Levine focuses on the boy in her own analysis, using him as a tool to anatomize antitheatrical ideology. In some ways, I see *Coriolanus* as doing something similar. By training our attention on boys and boyhood, the stage-play does much to expose and examine the assumptions and expectations that are implicit in Coriolanus's antiperformative impulses.

Without making the antitheatrical connection, a number of critics have noted how crucial the idea of the boy is to this particular play. In her careful stage history, Lucy Munro ties the tragedy—both materially and thematically—to several plays presented by boy companies on the same Blackfriars stage just prior to *Coriolanus*. According to Munro, Shakespeare's tragedy is overwritten by these children's productions, which incongruously impose heroic manly identities onto the bodies of young boy actors and thereby suggest the uncertain foundations of early modern masculinity. To demonstrate how Shakespeare cultivates these boyish connections, she points out that the play's first reference to Coriolanus presents him as a child striving to please his mother (1.1.30–34) and that this same mother celebrates her son's valor in her first on-stage appearance by referring to his childhood campaigns and the courage he displayed as a prepubescent child (1.3.5–15). Similarly, Eve Sanders finds it significant that Cominius's speech before the Senate, which comprises “the first elaborate full-scale praise we hear of the hero on the battlefield” does not present Coriolanus as a fully grown man but rather as an adolescent boy (396). And Robin Headlam Wells usefully observes that these recurrent invitations to imagine Coriolanus as a youth are unique to Shakespeare. Though Plutarch mentions that Coriolanus first went to war as “a stripling,” he says next to nothing about the hero's childhood (Plutarch 315). Shakespeare, on the other hand, invents a whole set of anecdotes and reminiscences about Coriolanus's boyish adventures and youthful attributes (Wells 405–6). The point of all this seems clear: to draw attention to the life-stage that antedates adult manhood. Assuredly, R. B. Parker is correct when he claims that the term “boy” is “both the psychological and political heart of *Coriolanus*” (48).

But what does it mean to be a boy in this play? Rightly speaking, there are two boys to consider: Coriolanus's son and Coriolanus himself. While the boyhood of young Martius is represented on-stage, by an adolescent actor, the boyhood of his father is represented imaginatively, through a series of recollected episodes. Indeed, one of the curious facts about *Coriolanus* is that we learn more about the childhood of its protagonist than we do the childhood of any other of Shakespeare's tragic heroes (Danson 152). And one of the things we learn is that as a child Coriolanus was first and foremost an object: an object of desire to all who gazed on his tender-bodied comeliness, a mere object hanging picture-like by the wall until stirred by honor or fame, and an object to be manipulated (sold, sent, or sacrificed) by his mother (1.3.5–21). In his maturity Coriolanus may be the quintessential man of action, but in his boyhood he is primarily a thing to be acted upon.

The idea of boyhood that emerges from this is one of unreadiness or inability. Such is the case with young Martius as well. In the pivotal meeting outside Rome, young Martius is said to kneel before his father in uncomprehending imitation of others, ignorant as to his own meaning and the current danger. "This boy," Volumnia says, ". . . cannot tell what he would have, / But kneels and holds up hands for fellowship" (5.3.175–76). Even when the boy becomes defiant, resisting his mother's and grandmother's self-presentation as quiescent victims to be trod upon, Martius acknowledges that he is incapable of much more. His only alternative is to run away: "A shall not tread on me. / I'll run away till I am bigger, but then I'll fight" (5.3.128–29). Awaiting a size and strength that are still far off, young Martius is an image of present incapacity. Though the boy looks to the time when he will be a man, that vision—along with the virility it entails—belongs to the future.

However, if the young boy who looks upon himself sees a future man, what does the present man see, when he looks upon the little boy? As is pervasively the case in poems and plays from the period, *Coriolanus* suggests that the man who looks upon his son sees himself. Boys are images, reflections, or copies of their fathers. As Volumnia says when presenting young Martius to Coriolanus outside Rome, "This is a poor epitome of yours, / Which by th' interpretation of full time / May show like all yourself" (5.3.67–69).<sup>6</sup> Although Volumnia's words defer complete correspondence between father and son into the future, young Martius already resembles his father to such a degree that he moves through the play more as a reiteration than a real character. His actions, attitudes, and aspects are all said to express—not his own character—but his father's.



Thus it is that when young Martius angrily “mammocks” a gilded butterfly, he is not said to have performed his own anger but is instead said to have expressed “One on’s father’s moods” (1.3.61–62). Re-enacting Coriolanus’s moods and propensities, young Martius reprises his father’s role in the rising generation. In so doing, the son is supposed to confer upon him father a measure of immortality, and Virgilia refers to this function when she reminds Coriolanus that she has “brought you forth this boy to keep your name / Living to time” (5.3.127–28). Nevertheless, Coriolanus does not appear to feel immortal or even empowered when he contemplates his “epitome.” Quite the contrary, young Martius seems to summon his father back to a state of immaturity, putting him in mind of his erstwhile impotence. This psychic experience is largely implicit in *Coriolanus*, but it is rendered more openly in *The Winter’s Tale*, the play most likely to have been written right after *Coriolanus*.

In *The Winter’s Tale*, Leontes studies his son’s face when he comes to suspect his wife of infidelity. However, Leontes does not find there what a cuckold would expect to see: namely, the features of another man, the boy’s real father. Instead, what Sicily encounters is himself:

...Looking on the lines  
 Of my boy’s face, methoughts I did recoil  
 Twenty-three years, and saw myself unbreeched,  
 In my green velvet coat; my dagger muzzled,  
 Lest it should bite its master, and so prove,  
 As ornament oft does, too dangerous.  
 How like, methought, I then was to this kernel,  
 This squash, this gentleman. (*The Winter’s Tale* 1.2.155–62)

Whereas this sight would seem to certify Leontes’s paternity, it gives him little comfort, for the self-image Leontes encounters—“unbreeched” and “muzzled”—is vulnerable, weak, and dependent. Instead of establishing his father’s paternity, virility, or immortality in a bracingly masculine sort of way, Mamillius imperils the king’s sense of self-determination by summoning him back to the embarrassing scene of childhood. In keeping with convention, the son acts as a mirror to the father, but the image he reflects is rather unflattering.<sup>7</sup> To use a recurring metaphor from *Coriolanus*, we might say that the boy represents his father as the grub he once was, rather than the butterfly he has become. And for Coriolanus, this is the principal problem. Whereas grubs become butterflies through a process of transformation as unmistakable as it is irreversible, boys become men in quite different fashion. Manhood, the play implies, is less

an outcome of elemental or substantial alteration than an unstable effect of addition, accumulation, and performance. Ultimately, the playtext proffers this as the cause of Coriolanus's concerns about acting and effeminacy. What drives his antitheatricalism is the disturbing knowledge that boys can never become men as completely or as conclusively as grubs can become butterflies.<sup>8</sup>

In his anxiety, Coriolanus is not alone. His worries are commensurate with early modern ideas about sexual difference, which preclude absolute or enduring distinctions between male and female. As scholars such as Anthony Fletcher (esp. 83–98), Stephen Greenblatt, Thomas Laqueur, and Stephen Orgel have amply established, neither the “one-sex” model nor the “two-seed” theory that prevailed in early modern England permitted men to perceive of themselves as elementally or essentially different from women. In the case of the one-sex model, the difference between men and women was merely a matter of degrees: men were thought to only differ from women in being slightly hotter or more vigorous. In the case of the two-seed theory, the difference was one of relative dominance: men only differed from women to the extent that the masculine element within them was thought to be stronger than the feminine element within them. In neither case was masculinity assured. Rather, what each of these models indicated was that every man begins as a female and only becomes manly by developing out of and away from his original femininity. Certain events in a boy's life were supposed to commemorate and accelerate this development (like breeching or being sent away to school), but it was understood that men could never break completely with their erstwhile effeminateness and, thus, were always at risk of regressing back into it. As Bruce Smith explains, early modern masculinity is not a natural given; it must always be *achieved* (2). And no Shakespearean character exposes this dynamic more dramatically than the protagonist of *Coriolanus*.

However, what is especially notable about *Coriolanus's* dramatization of this dynamic is the way it overlooks all other considerations to focus exclusively on combat. Notwithstanding Anthony Fletcher's observations (126–53) that manliness in the early modern period could be achieved and expressed through a wide range of attributes and abilities—including sexual prowess, paternity, erudition, holiness, hunting skill, and generosity—the principal characters in *Coriolanus* seem to care about only one thing: warfare. By all accounts, boys in this play become men by going to battle. As Joo Young Dittmann remarks, warfare operates as “an institutionalised site of maturation in which boys are constructed as men by learning to fulfil mandates of masculinity” (659). Thus it is that Volumnia

tells of sending her tender son to the cruel wars and receiving not a boy but a man in return. Reflecting on his triumphant homecoming, Volumnia gushes, "I sprang not more in joy at first hearing he was a man-child than now in first seeing he had proved himself a man" (1.3.13–15). Cominius's story is comparable. He remembers a sixteen-year-old boy who "drove / The bristled lips before him," notwithstanding his own "Amazonian chin." "In that day's feats," Cominius recalls, "When he might act the woman in the scene, / He proved best man i'th' field" (2.2.87–88, 91–93). In his relation, Cominius gives us a feminized boy turning away from his "pupil age" to emerge "Man-entered" (2.2.94–95). In her relation, Volumnia gives us a comely youth casting aside his softness to pass over from "man-child" to "man." For both, masculinity comes about as Coriolanus leaves womanliness behind by enacting the soldier's role.

There is additional overlap in the accounts of Cominius and Volumnia in that both talk of manly "proof." Volumnia exults that her son "proved himself a man," while Cominius boasts that the boy "proved best man i'th' field." Although each is describing a transitional moment in Coriolanus's masculine career, each does so in a way that downplays this transitionality, since to "prove" one's self a man is not to assume a new or different identity but to provide evidence of an identity that is already one's own. Thus, at the same moment that Volumnia and Cominius talk about the onset of manhood, they imply that it is a preexistent condition. Subtle as it may be, this rhetoric of "proving" symptomatically points to a profound tension in the play. Even as characters insist upon talking about manliness as if it were an inherent quality or native essence, the action implies that it is a fabrication, manufactured militarily. Of course, nobody experiences this tension as acutely as Coriolanus. Though he desperately wants his manhood to be essential and inalienable, the play pervasively hints that it is an accretion or overlay, arousing the insecurities that are expressed in his antiperformativity.

The play does this, in part, by presenting the boy as a blank. Smooth-chinned and smooth-skinned, the boy still in its mother's care is a mere placeholder for the future man. His space is a negative space, demarcated by what is not yet present (no beard, no reputation, no understanding, no ability). Accordingly, the cruel wars that make him a man do so by way of inscription. As the various accounts of Coriolanus's entry into manhood make clear, he becomes a man by being characterized in combat. When Coriolanus returns from the wars "man-entered," it is because his once-blank body now bears on and about it perceptible marks of masculinity: oaken garlands, noble titles, fresh wounds, unfeeling scars. Ostensibly,

these superficial inscriptions are only tokens, externally representing a reality within, but the determinative value they acquire over the course of the play indicate that they are more than just symbols of manhood. They might be the thing itself.

This is the knowledge Coriolanus tries to disown in his antagonism toward the plebeians. In all of his dealings, Coriolanus endeavors to distance himself as much as possible from those he disdains as so many parts and “fragments” (1.1.212). As one officer remarks, Coriolanus seeks the people’s hate “with greater devotion than they can render it him, and leaves nothing undone that may fully discover him their opposite” (2.2.17–19). His hatred would seem to be heated by the fear that he, like the citizenry, is merely a sum of parts. By aggressively reducing the commoners to a single part—such as their mouths, their bellies, their voices, the breath, or their stink—and then inveighing against this fragmentariness as if it were a lower class condition to which he is immune, Coriolanus attempts to misrecognize that his own identity is also a pastiche. As Janet Adelman advises, Coriolanus uses the crowd to bolster his identity by “accus[ing] them of being exactly what he wishes not to be” (135). Nevertheless, the strategy is not altogether successful. Although Coriolanus aspires to be all-of-one-piece, the play suggests that his manhood does not surpass an unstable assemblage of parts. On diverse occasions and in diverse places, his masculinity is shown to reside in his sword, his beard, his titles, his wounds, his weapons, his scars.

Coriolanus’s wounds are a case in point. When Volumnia and Menenius make an inventory of Coriolanus’s scars in 2.1, telling where and when each was received, they effectively assemble a man before our eyes, piecing him together bit by bit. And while these myriad wounds mark out Coriolanus as a man, they do so not by substantially altering the body of the boy but merely by covering it over. The manliness that ensues is only skin deep, the result of superficial “additions” and external impositions.<sup>9</sup> It is, in other words, primarily prosthetic—with the war wound serving as the prosthesis *nonpareil*.<sup>10</sup>

These prostheses, however, are insufficient in themselves: they must be performed. The commoners refer to this condition when they describe Coriolanus’s wounds as mouths that can be made to speak, if they are offered up to an audience in self-dramatization and display. “[I]f he show us his wounds and tell us his deeds,” one citizen explains, “we are to put our tongues into those wounds and speak for them” (2.3.5–7). In Plutarch’s account, Coriolanus straightforwardly complies with this requirement, “shew[ing] many woundes and cuttes apou his bodie, which

he had received in seventene yeres service at the warres" (332). However, Shakespeare's Coriolanus is unhistorically coy. He tells the plebeians, "I have wounds to show you which shall be yours in private," but he refuses to give a public performance (2.3.70–71). The situation is strange, since Coriolanus says this while standing "naked" in the street, wearing nothing but the gown of humility (2.2.134). In his denuded state, Coriolanus's wounds would seem to be available to all, especially since he bears twenty-seven of them about his body, including several "large cicatrices" on his neck, arms, and legs (2.1.132–42). Nevertheless, Coriolanus's antitheatrical obstinacy effectively obscures them. As one commoner complains at the conclusion of the scene, "No, no; no man saw 'em" (2.3.154). Even though everyone strains to see them, and even though they would seem to be in plain sight, right there on the surface of the skin, Coriolanus's refusal to theatricalize his wounds renders them invisible, as if they never existed.<sup>11</sup>

In the marketplace, Coriolanus's refusal to perform the prescribed role prevents the plebeians from participating in the construction of his heroic identity and, as such, can come across as an act of masculine self-determination. However, the antidramatic stance that is supposed to preserve the integrity of Coriolanus's manhood ends up producing other results. In exile and elsewhere, Coriolanus's unwillingness or inability to theatricalize his manhood puts him at the mercy of those with a flair for the dramatic, like Aufidius or Volumnia or Brutus and Sicinius. Attuned to the possibilities and subtleties of self-performance, these individuals invariably upstage him, as the tribunes do in the banishment scene, as Volumnia does in the parley outside Rome, and as Aufidius does at the close of the play. Indeed, the final scene has Aufidius stealing the spotlight from Coriolanus for once and for all by stripping him of the parts and roles that comprise his manhood. By calling his enemy "Caius Martius," "traitor," and "boy," Aufidius goes beneath or places under erasure the hard-won inscriptions of "Coriolanus," "hero," and "man" that have overwritten these earlier terms. Performing in such a way as to peel away the accumulated layers of his rival's manhood, Aufidius reduces Coriolanus to his base layer: the incapable, uncomprehending boy.

This unmanning is prefigured throughout the play by the onstage presence of Coriolanus's son. As an "epitome" of his father, young Martius recurrently calls to mind the boy Coriolanus was before he became a man as well as the boy he will become once more, when his manly accretions are stripped away. "Boyhood" is both the beginning and the end of this tragedy, and young Martius reminds us of this fact—especially in his last

appearance of the play, at the parley outside Rome. Though the boy does not say much during this climactic moment, he is nevertheless a significant element of the exchange. The scene, as Richard Wheeler has helped us see, is characteristic of Shakespeare's late plays in that it dramatizes a state of extreme crisis that spurs individuals to seek self-fulfillment in one of two polarizing ways, either through isolation/independence or through merger/union. Coriolanus is committed to the former path, but his mother pursues the latter. So while Coriolanus is on one side of the stage, endeavoring to "stand / As if a man were author of himself / And knew no other kin" (5.3.35–37), Volumnia is on the other, asserting their indissoluble bond. "There's no man in the world / More bound to's mother," she says (5.3.159–60). Even as she is staking her claim on her son, however, Volumnia is holding her grandson by the hand, using the boy to both establish and assert the maternal attachment of which she speaks. And Coriolanus appears to get the message. Referring to his mother as "the honoured mould, / Wherein this trunk was framed," Coriolanus notes that she holds "in her hand / The grandchild to her blood" (5.3.22–24). Her dominance is distressing, and Coriolanus tries to liberate his young son/surrogate from this stifling union by suggesting that Martius will someday prove "invulnerable" and will "stick i'th' wars / Like a great sea-mark standing every flaw" (5.3.73–74). Yet this imagined future is too far off to do any good. The boy's present plight clearly corroborates Volumnia's claim: that Coriolanus was once a simple child himself, led by the hand of his plenipotent mother. Confronted with his son's subjection, Coriolanus cannot sustain his posture of self-sufficiency. Moving over to his mother, he places his hand in hers and stands silently at her side—just like young Martius.<sup>12</sup> The mighty man has once more become a boy.

As does Mamillius in *The Winter's Tale*, young Martius appears to cause his father to "recoil": recoiling back in time, to remember when he was only an incapable boy, and recoiling in surprise, to realize that the incapable boy is still there, beneath all the masculine titles and tokens. Whether or not this is exactly true, it certainly becomes more difficult for Coriolanus to lay claim to a heroic manhood essentially and inalienably his own when the boy before him offers incontrovertible proof that men are not born but made. All innocence and inability, young Martius frustrates his father's self-aggrandizing fantasies by bringing him face to face with the superficiality and artificiality of his own manly identity.<sup>13</sup>

By making this masculine crisis the most immediate context for Coriolanus's words and deeds, the tragedy ties his antitheatrical outlook to

a gynophobic worldview wherein men are highly esteemed but highly susceptible, always at risk of regressing to an original state of effeminacy and impotence. Interestingly enough, this sexist sensibility is partially legitimized by the drama's portrayal of gender, identity, and performance. As staged in this play, masculinity is so fragile and play-acting so powerful that even a warrior as peerless as Caius Martius Coriolanus can be unmanned by a bit of theater. But if the stageplay endorses the idea that theatricality can effeminate men, it does much to discredit the more basic belief that authentic manhood is un- or antitheatrical. In spite of his best efforts, Coriolanus cannot escape the world of performance. Shakespeare's hero must play the man he is, whether he wants to or not. Over and against his antitheatrical premise that play-acting and masculinity are antithetical, *Coriolanus* indicates that its hero's manliness is itself a theatrical effect.

Yet even as the drama confirms that theater can make men effeminate, it blunts the force of this accusation by insinuating that the "unmanly" is not without virtue. It does this most intriguingly in the final act, when Coriolanus encounters an unmarried woman and responds rather unexpectedly to her. Coriolanus, it will be remembered, disparages the virgin in 3.2 as a thing of weakness and little worth: he refuses to dissemble lest he become like her. But when Coriolanus actually encounters a virgin in 5.3, he pauses and regales her with praise. When we reflect on this reversal or reappraisal, we can see how the tragedy twists antitheatrical ideology about on its antifeminist axis. Though Coriolanus's commitments once caused him to consider the virgin his opposite, he ends up relating to her as if she were a kindred spirit, another adherent to his antidramatic ideals of authenticity and integrity. Cutting against and through his gynophobic expectations, the otherwise-gratuitous figure of the virgin excites Coriolanus's admiration and stirs something in his soul. As such, she stands in contrast to the boy.

The virgin in this play, Valeria, appears courtesy of Plutarch, whose "Life of Caius Martius Coriolanus" mentions her presence at the parley outside of Rome. Yet Shakespeare's inclusion of her appears to aim at something more than fidelity to his source text. As Shakespeare stages the confrontation, Coriolanus comes face-to-face with his wife, his son, his mother, and Menenius, the man he calls "father" (5.1.3). And then there is Valeria, a woman so unrelated to Coriolanus that his mother is unsure he even knows who she is. As it turns out, Coriolanus not only recognizes Valeria but goes on to greet her in a most uncharacteristic manner:

VOLUMNIA. Do you know this lady?  
 CORIOLANUS. The noble sister of Publicola,  
 The moon of Rome, chaste as the icicle  
 That's candied by the frost from purest snow  
 And hangs on Dian's temple—dear Valeria! (5.3.63–67)

It is unusual for Coriolanus to speak so lyrically or so approvingly, and his effusiveness is doubly arresting in that it affords the virgin a very different value than she bore in the outburst against dissimulation in 3.2. To puzzle through the reasons for this reversal, it is useful to ponder the significance of the virgin, contrasting her meaning with that of the boy.

Both the classical past and the early modern present are of interest here, as each constitutes an important context for the character of Valeria. With regard to ancient Rome, Valeria's portrayal would seem to glance (among other things) at the Vestal virgins: women whose sexual purity set them apart, endowing them with special status and affording them exceptional agency. Upon becoming a Vestal virgin, a maid would undergo a ceremony officially severing her kinship relations, allowing her to inhabit the autonomous position that Coriolanus only affects. Once installed in her office, the Vestal was granted privileges unavailable to other women, such as the services of a lictor, the ability to give evidence in court, and the power to bequeath property in her own person. These privileges were directly connected to her virginity, as the Vestal's sexual abstinence was seen as ensuring the integrity of the entire society.<sup>14</sup> This Roman veneration of virginity acquired new life in England when Elizabeth I took the throne. As has been well-documented, Elizabeth's savvy and sustained deployment of classical and Christian discourses of virginity afforded her uncommon prestige, autonomy, and power. As the Virgin Queen, Elizabeth was able to assert a special sort of self-authorizing integrity, succinctly expressed in her royal motto: *Semper eadem* ("always the same"). Though Elizabeth claimed to be *sui generis* in this regard—alone among all her sex, as it were—she was unable to restrict to her royal self the empowering possibilities of female virginity. As a number of scholars have shown, virginity's meaning in the early modern period extended well beyond the office and body of the queen, coming to signify radical independence and self-sufficiency in a number of different contexts.<sup>15</sup> Such are the contexts and connections that Shakespeare puts into play when he has Coriolanus pause to praise Valeria, implicitly pitting her integrity and autonomy against the disturbing dependency of the boy by her side.

As we have seen, the presence of the boy both supercharges and subverts Coriolanus's antitheatrical stance by suggesting that his manli-



ness is itself an assemblage of theatricalized prostheses, parts, and roles. Lawrence Danson is undoubtedly correct when he observes that the world in which Coriolanus lives and moves is “a world of ‘fragments’ . . . populated not by men but by parts of men” (143). The virgin, however, floats above this fragmentary world, for she cannot be reduced to a set of parts or prostheses.<sup>16</sup> Her identity issues from a state of wholeness—the uncorrupted mind in the inviolate body—that stands over and against the spectacular synecdoches of manhood. Whereas Coriolanus acquires his manly *virtú* through acts of inscription and performance, Valeria’s virtue does not depend on either of these operations. Her virtue is always there, always complete, always full. Unlike the boy, who must mature into manhood, Shakespeare’s virgin does not need to earn or achieve a secondary state. She merely persists in her native state.

What’s more, the virgin, at least in this play, seems to exist outside of the arenas of policy, performance, and impersonation that Coriolanus abhors. Whereas virgins in both classical and early modern texts were conventionally called upon to exhibit their modesty in highly theatrical fashion, Valeria is not put to any such performance. No lowered eyes or rosy blushes for her. No keeping at home or keeping quiet. Quite the contrary, Valeria openly mocks Virgilia’s retiring, domestic solemnity (1.3.65–105). Instead of dissimulating her desires and demurring to a strict sense of propriety, Valeria displays a freedom of movement and frankness of speech that bears little relation to the stultifying social role customarily set aside for maids.<sup>17</sup> In this manner, she seems to be the singular exception to Manfred Pfister’s claim that everyone in this play participates more or less self-consciously in what he calls “the theatricality of acting the Roman, of acting *romanitas*” (44). To illustrate and establish his claim, Pfister asks his reader to think on Coriolanus, Cominius, Aufidius, Menenius, Sicinius, Brutus, young Martius, Volumnia, and Virgilia. The one character he does not mention is Valeria. And for good reason: Valeria appears to be the only one who is not caught up in some kind of role-playing. While everyone around her is pressured at some point to “perform,” Valeria is free simply to “do”: openly, authentically, and without artifice. So while Pfister is right to say that *Coriolanus* pervasively implies that identity is a performative construct—that “there is no being without playing” (41)—this maxim is curiously qualified in the case of the virgin. Unlike all the other Roman identities in the play, predicated as they are upon the performance of highly scripted behaviors, Valeria’s virginal identity has less to do with action than with inaction, with abstinence. Strictly speaking, she is who she is not because of what

she does but because of what she does not do. At a fundamental level, the virgin is supremely and uniquely antitheatrical in a way that Coriolanus can only pretend to be.

This, I think, is one way of accounting for the brief but impassioned response Coriolanus gives Valeria in the pivotal scene outside Rome. Throughout the play, Coriolanus has yearned for a wholeness of being that he associates with the manly self. In pursuit of this self, he rejects all forms of impersonation and dissimulation as emasculating. However, the gynophobic arc of Coriolanus's antitheatricalism unexpectedly brings him full circle, as an unpolluted maid momentarily models for him a species of innate, inalienable, and antiperformative integrity that surpasses anything he has achieved by way of his hyper-masculine posturing and super-human heroics. In a play obsessed with *virtú* and virility, the virgin unexpectedly supplants the soldier as the paragon of self-possession and self-determination. At play's end, it is she who exhibits most fully the integrity and self-determination that Coriolanus associates with masculinity. In this way, the figure of the virgin subtly subverts the sexist base on which antitheatricalism is built, hinting at the virtue to be found in the "unmanly" or "effeminate."

The staging of Coriolanus's antitheatricalism leaves little doubt as to its reliance upon masculinist assumptions about integrity, agency, and honor. However, the play's presentation of boys, virgins, and men so weakens these assumptions that they become unable to bear much weight. For even as Coriolanus aligns himself with the antitheatricalists in upholding masculinity as the *sine qua non*, the drama implies that manliness is not "the thing itself" but just so many "things" (e.g., titular additions, superficial inscriptions, and rigid social postures). By presenting masculinity in such a theatricalized and fetishized fashion, the drama makes it difficult to object to theatre on the grounds of its intrinsic unmanliness. Moreover, the play's portrayal of the virgin, which quietly calls attention to her radically antitheatrical identity and integrity, strikes a blow against any outlook that would vilify performance by associating it with weak and inconstant women. Insofar as it aggressively theatricalizes masculinity and implicitly valorizes virginity, Shakespeare's stage-play renders Coriolanus's antiperformative commitments less and less compelling, less and less coherent. This state of affairs is largely lost on Coriolanus—widely regarded as the least introspective of Shakespeare's tragic heroes—yet it need not be lost on us. Careful examination of the tragedy can give us greater insight into the peculiar and paradoxical quality of its protagonist's antitheatrical investments.<sup>18</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For the sake of clarity, I always refer to the protagonist of the play as “Coriolanus,” reserving “Martius” for the character of his young son.

<sup>2</sup>For sociopolitical analyses of early modern antitheatricalism, see Barish, Hawkes, Heinemann, Howard, Lake, MacCabe, and Reynolds. For other interpretations of *Coriolanus* oriented around the antitheatricalism of its protagonist, see Lunberry, Sanders, and Ormsby.

<sup>3</sup>For studies tying early modern antitheatricalism to early modern gynophobia, see Gough, Jardine, Lehnhof (2008), Levine, and Orgel.

<sup>4</sup>Although Coriolanus’s ideas about performance match up quite well with those of early modern polemicists like Stephen Gosson, Phillip Stubbes, and William Prynne, it falls outside the scope of this essay to evaluate how closely they align (e.g., by comparing Coriolanus’s words to Gosson’s). Instead, my aim is to examine how Shakespeare chooses to represent the antitheatrical impulses of his day: how he decides to dramatize the idea that play-acting can have insidious effects on social formations, moral dispositions, and masculine identities, and how his staging of this idea implicitly impugns it.

<sup>5</sup>For some of the more incisive explorations of masculinity in *Coriolanus*, see Adelman, Kahn, Lowe, Marshall, Sprengnether, and Wells.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. *King John*, where Prince Arthur is put forward as a condensed version, or “little abstract,” of his father:

Look here upon . . . Geoffrey’s face.  
 These eyes, these brows, were moulded out of his;  
 This little abstract doth contain that large  
 Which died in Geoffrey; and the hand of time  
 Shall draw this brief into as huge a volume. (*King John* 2.1.99–103)

According to David Lee Miller, this persistent desire to see the son as a copy of the father is a reaction to the alarming indeterminacy of early modern paternity (121–24).

<sup>7</sup>Whereas I read Leontes’s identification with Mamillius as upsetting, others have seen it as consoling—either because it offers a retreat from sexuality and the dangers of manhood (Orgel 15) or because it alleviates concerns about aging and mortality (Bloom). Such readings, however, run counter to Edel Lamb’s observation that childhood was routinely associated with exposedness and vulnerability in early modern texts and that terms like “boy” and “boyish” generally signified foolishness, susceptibility, and shame on the Renaissance stage (4–6). This would certainly seem to be the case with Coriolanus, who does not give a second thought to his age, his mortality, or the sexual fidelity of his wife. All Coriolanus cares about is autonomy; consequently, he is bound to be distressed by a vision of himself as a dependent child.

<sup>8</sup>For an extended discussion of the imagery of the butterfly and grub in *Coriolanus*, see Brown.

<sup>9</sup>The term is Cominius's. He refers Coriolanus's honorific surname as a manly add-on, exhorting him to "Bear th'addition / Nobly ever!" (1.10.64–65). In performance, this operation of imposition or "addition" would be especially obvious if the body of the actor playing Coriolanus were appliquéd with artificial scars.

<sup>10</sup>For a discussion of the prosthetic nature of early modern masculinity—focused on the beard rather than the scar—see Fisher.

<sup>11</sup>Dittmann overlooks this fact when alleging that Coriolanus is "scopically dissected in the marketplace scene by the gaze of the crowd" (658). Though the play prepares us to see something of the sort, Coriolanus's non-performance somehow prevents it. For influential interpretations of Coriolanus's refusal to exhibit his wounds, see Adelman, Calderwood, Fish, Jagendorf, and Marshall. Most recently, Pascale Drouet has linked Coriolanus's reticence to Renaissance practices of examining the marks on the bodies of vagabonds and beggars to authenticate their neediness or punish their imposture. "For the plebeians to be allowed to peer at Coriolanus' wounds, to see whether they are spectacular or not, would be reminiscent of that same humiliating process," Drouet writes (92).

<sup>12</sup>According to the stage direction in the Folio, Coriolanus "*holds her by the hand, silent*" (5.3.183 sd).

<sup>13</sup>For an account of how the interaction between Coriolanus and Martius has been staged, as well as Ian McKellen's sense that "it is the sight of his son, the sight of that child, that ultimately sways him," see R. Parker (5.3.76n).

<sup>14</sup>For more on the Vestal virgin's enlarged scope of action, isolation from kin, and extraordinary socio-cultural significance, see Beard, H. Parker, and Wildfang.

<sup>15</sup>See Berry, Jankowski, Rogers, and Schwarz.

<sup>16</sup>The unbroken hymen could potentially serve as a synecdoche for virginity, but widespread uncertainty about the hymen's existence and significance effectively rules it out as constitutive "part." Other signifiers convey the idea of virginity to early modern minds (e.g., roses, lilies, sieves), but these emblems do not "produce" purity in the same way wounds, swords, and beards produce manhood. For an account of the indeterminacy of the hymen in classical, medieval, and early modern times, see Loughlin.

<sup>17</sup>Shakespeare's deviations from Plutarch suggest a desire to distance Valeria from the play-acting that pervades the play. Whereas Plutarch credits Valeria with staging the women's embassy that overwhelms Coriolanus, Shakespeare makes Volumnia its instigator and director, effectively distancing Valeria from the melodrama of that meeting. In performance, it is entirely possible for Valeria to stand apart when Volumnia and the others take to their knees, keeping to herself and coolly observing as the spectacle plays out. She seems to have displayed a detachment along these lines in the 1989–90 RSC production (R. Parker, 23 n1).

<sup>18</sup>Early versions of this essay were presented at the 2009 meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America and the 2010 meeting of the Renaissance Society of America.

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