

## INTRODUCTION

### Date, theatre, chronology

While there is no early quarto or Stationers' Register entry before that of 1623 for the First Folio and no record of performance to assist in dating *Coriolanus*, it is generally agreed to have been written late in Shakespeare's sequence of Jacobean tragedies. Although their evidence is not decisive, stylistic tests place *Coriolanus* after *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra* (that is, later than 1606),<sup>1</sup> and contemporary allusions suggest it was known, at least to some, by late 1609.

The 1605 publication of William Camden's *Remaines of a Greater Worke, Concerning Britaine*, sets one firm limit, for Menenius's phrasing in the belly fable (1.1.79–129) is closer to Camden's version than to that in North's Plutarch.<sup>2</sup> Edmond Malone, who pointed out the Camden parallels in 1790, also noted Ben Jonson's recollection in *Epicoene* of a distinctive phrase in Cominius's speech to the senate.<sup>3</sup> *Epicoene* was possibly performed in late 1609, for after 7 December the plague death-rate seems to have been low enough to have permitted reopening the playhouses, though the authorities might have delayed out of caution;<sup>4</sup> certainly it was played in early 1610, when Lady Arabella Stuart complained of a personally offensive allusion, and the Venetian ambassador reports the play's suppression in a letter dated 8 February 1610.<sup>5</sup>

Two other apparent references suggest that *Coriolanus* was well enough known by this date to be worth alluding to. Coriolanus tells Menenius that when the citizens heard their petition for tribunes had been granted, 'they threw their caps / As they would hang them on the horns o'th'moon' (1.1.195–6), and this phrasing seems echoed in Robert Armin's preface to his verse translation of an Italian novella, *The Italian Tailor and his Boy* (1609): 'A strange time of taxation, wherein every Pen & inck-horne Boy, will throw up his Cap at the hornes of the Moone in censure' (A4<sup>r</sup>).<sup>6</sup> Finally,

<sup>1</sup> Philip Brockbank (ed.), *Coriolanus*, 1976, p. 28; Stanley Wells *et al.*, *Textual Companion*, 1987, p. 131; and see p. 2 n. 2 below.

<sup>2</sup> Brockbank notes the chance that Shakespeare might have seen a pre-publication manuscript copy of *Remaines*, since Camden's dedicatory epistle is dated June 1603, and they may have known each other (p. 24). For North's Plutarch, see pp. 10–11 below.

<sup>3</sup> Cominius describes Coriolanus's deeds of valour as having 'lurched all swords of the garland' (2.2.95). In *Epicoene* Truewit remonstrates that Dauphine has 'lurch'd your friends of the better half of the garland, by concealing this part of the plot' (5.4.203–4); quotation taken from L. A. Beaurline (ed.), *Epicoene*, 1966.

<sup>4</sup> In *Politics, Plague, and Shakespeare's Theater*, 1991, Leeds Barroll assumes that, after more than a year of severe plague, the authorities would not have acted hastily, on the basis of one week's promising death-toll (p. 182).

<sup>5</sup> Beaurline (ed.), *Epicoene*, p. xix.

<sup>6</sup> T. W. Baldwin, *The Organization and Personnel of the Shakespearean Company*, 1927, suggests that Heminges played Menenius and Armin First Citizen (p. 241). Martin Holmes (*Shakespeare and Burbage*, 1978, p. 194), R. B. Parker (ed.), *Coriolanus*, 1994, and I believe Menenius was Armin's part; in either case, Armin was on stage in 1.1. While he cites the parallel, Parker is not convinced that Armin's phrasing can be traced to *Coriolanus* (p. 3).

*The Tragedy of Coriolanus*

[2]

John Fletcher's topsy-turvy version of *The Taming of the Shrew* in *The Woman's Prize, or, The Tamer Tam'd* (c. 1611<sup>1</sup>) appears to make comic capital out of alluding to Coriolanus's heroic valour. Both Beaumont and Fletcher were prodigious borrowers and parodists, and they had shown a particular fondness for Shakespeare even before they began writing for the King's Men as well as the boy companies in 1609.<sup>2</sup> In *The Woman's Prize*, after twenty-one lines describing the ways she has tormented her foolish wooer Moroso, which might themselves be a parodic version of Cominius's account of Coriolanus's 'deeds', Livia sums up her accomplishments with a boast that seems meant to play off Coriolanus's final self-assertion to Aufidius: 'All this villany / Did I: I Livia, I alone, untaught' (5.1.96–7).<sup>3</sup>

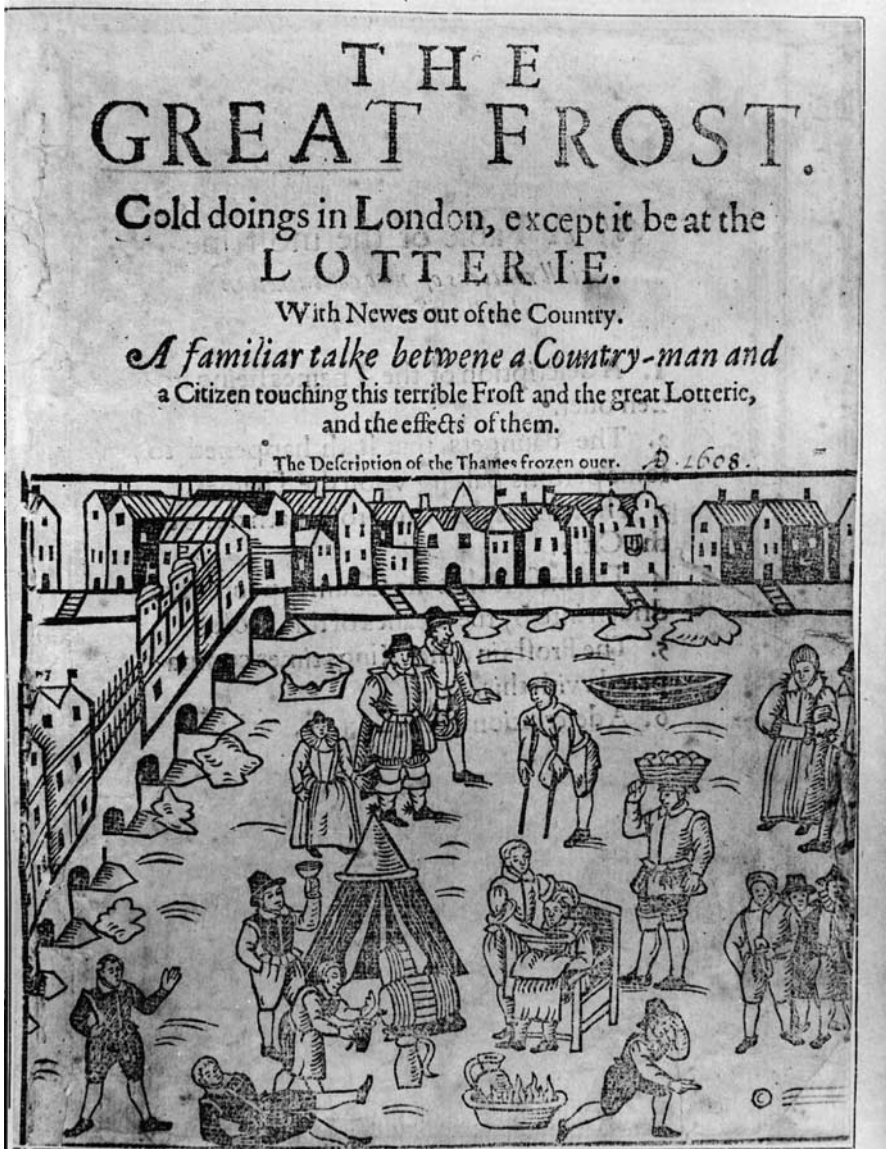
Within this period – 1605 to late 1609 – some non-literary events are pertinent to narrowing the parameters. In condensing Plutarch's narrative Shakespeare had immediate reasons to skip the Roman citizens' first protest, over usurers, to concentrate on the second, over grain: the anti-enclosure riots of late spring 1607 and the fact that the dearth they anticipated lasted throughout 1608 (see pp. 17–20 below). Helping to pinpoint the date of composition a bit more closely, the River Thames froze solid in December 1607 and January 1608 (the first time since the winter of 1564–5), and one of Coriolanus's analogies for the citizens' untrustworthiness probably alludes to this event: they are 'no surer, no, / Than is the coal of fire upon the ice' (1.1.155–6). The title page of the Thomas Dekker (?) 1608 pamphlet *The Great Frost* (see illustration 1) shows children at play on the ice and adults conducting trade, and his citizen interlocutor says to the countryman, 'Are you colde with going over? you shall ere you come to the midst of the River, spie some ready with pannes of coales to warme your fingers' (B1<sup>v</sup>).<sup>4</sup> The freezing of the Thames is not crucial to the analogy, but it is more unusual than its companion phrase, 'Or hailstone in the sun', and memories of a recent severe winter would have given it sharper point.

<sup>1</sup> Although not recorded in the Stationers' Register until 4 September 1646, for the Beaumont and Fletcher First Folio, topical allusions and possible reminiscences of Jonson's *Epicoene* (1609) and, less certainly, *The Alchemist* (1610) suggest a first performance in early 1611. The most persuasive attempt at dating *The Woman's Prize* is Baldwin Maxwell, *Studies in Beaumont, Fletcher, and Massinger*, 1939 (rpt 1966), ch. 4. See also Fredson Bowers's introduction in *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*, gen. ed. Fredson Bowers, 10 vols., 1966–96, IV, 3; the quotation is taken from this edition.

<sup>2</sup> In *The Woman Hater* the comic parasite Lazarello parodies not only Hamlet with his ghostly father but also Antony's speech on joining Cleopatra: in a mock-heroic lament for the loss of his umbrana fish, he cries out, 'I will not sure outlive it, no I will die bravely, and like a Roman; and after death, amidst the Elizian shades, Ile meete my love againe' (3.2.112–14); see the edition by George Walton Williams, in *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*, 1. *The Woman Hater* was entered in the Stationers' Register on 20 May 1607 but acted sometime before the Paul's boys stopped playing; their last recorded performance was in July 1606.

<sup>3</sup> In 'Coriolanus' on Stage in England and America, 1609–1994, 1998, pp. 51–2, John Ripley suggests that the mother–son vignette in Beaumont and Fletcher's *A King and No King* (1611), 3.1.47–52, owes a good deal to *Coriolanus* 5.3.53–62. He also hypothesises continued popularity or a recent revival to explain the echo of Coriolanus's lines to Virgilia (5.3.46–8) in the Fletcher/Massinger/Field collaboration *The Queen of Corinth* (1616–17), 1.2.58–62. (Fletcher references are to the editions in *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon* (see above, n. 1): *A King and No King*, ed. George Walton Williams, in vol. II, and *The Queen of Corinth*, ed. Robert Kean Turner, in vol. VIII.)

<sup>4</sup> See also Chamberlain's letter to Dudley Carleton of 8 January 1608, in *The Letters of John Chamberlain*, ed. Norman McClure, 2 vols., 1939, I, 253, and Edmund Howes's continuation of Stow's *Annales* (1631), quoted in Bullough, *Sources* v, 559–60.



1 Title page from Thomas Dekker [?], *The Great Frost* (1608)

Some have seen another topical allusion in Coriolanus's warning to the patricians that the power-hungry Sicinius will 'turn your current in a ditch / And make your channel his' (3.1.97–8). On 20 February 1609 work began on the goldsmith Hugh Myddelton's project to bring fresh water to London by channels from Hertfordshire, a project that

*The Tragedy of Coriolanus*

[4]

according to Stow met with ‘many causeless hindrances and complaints of sundry persons through whose ground he was to cut his water passage’.<sup>1</sup> A contemporary reference does not seem necessary here, since the idea of disputed water-rights is sufficient and seems equally applicable to farming. It is worth noting, however, that the plan for transporting water was being discussed as early as March 1608.<sup>2</sup> Finally, Malone’s suggestion that Volumnia’s advice to her son to act ‘humble as the ripest mulberry’ (3.2.80) alludes to a royal proclamation of 19 January 1609 encouraging mulberry cultivation is unpersuasive, since references to mulberries appear in two much earlier Shakespearean works, *Venus and Adonis* (line 1103) and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (3.1.159).

Such topical allusions cannot be decisive, but they do coincide with stylistic evidence for composition later rather than earlier in the period bounded by Camden’s *Remaines* and Jonson’s *Epicoene*. If the ‘coal upon the ice’ does derive from the experience of the Great Frost of 1607–8, the earliest date of composition would be that winter and the earliest date of performance would be spring 1608, between March and late July, the only months that year when the theatres were not closed because of plague.<sup>3</sup> This is the period favoured by Brockbank, John Dover Wilson and David George, although George specifies performance ‘in early June or before’ at the indoor Blackfriars Theatre rather than the Globe.<sup>4</sup> I am less confident of an early 1608 performance, though composition may have begun as early as March, when the theatres were temporarily closed as punishment for the production by the Children of Blackfriars of George Chapman’s two-part *The Conspiracy and Tragedy of Charles Duke of Byron*. The king vowed that the children ‘should never play more, but should first begg their bred’ and ordered their troupe dissolved.<sup>5</sup>

At this point the King’s Men might fairly have expected soon to come into possession of the fashionable private theatre across the river which Burbage owned but had leased to the children. *Coriolanus* appears to be Shakespeare’s first play written with the Blackfriars in mind as a possible venue. It is divided into acts; more importantly, and unlike the scenic construction of its predecessor *Antony and Cleopatra*, it is composed in terms of the five-act structure common at the indoor private theatres, where there were intervals between acts. Act 1 is concerned with exposition and Coriolanus’s military success; it ends with Aufidius announcing his envy and his intention to defeat Coriolanus by ‘wrath or craft’. Coriolanus’s triumphal return to Rome, nomination to the consulship and initial confirmation occupy Act 2, which

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in G. B. Harrison, ‘A note on *Coriolanus*’, in *John Quincy Adams Memorial Studies*, ed. J. G. McManaway et al., 1948, p. 240.

<sup>2</sup> David George, ‘*Coriolanus* at the Blackfriars?’, *N&Q* 236 (December 1991), 490.

<sup>3</sup> See Barroll’s chart on plague closings, *Politics, Plague, and Shakespeare’s Theater*, p. 173.

<sup>4</sup> Brockbank, p. 29; Wilson (ed.), *Coriolanus*, 1960, p. x; George, ‘*Coriolanus* at the Blackfriars?’, p. 492. E. K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare*, 2 vols., 1930, I, 480, also, though more tentatively, dates performance in early 1608. It seems doubtful, however, that the King’s Men would have begun playing at the Blackfriars before the new leases were executed on 9 August 1608, by which time all theatres were closed.

<sup>5</sup> There were actually two offending plays; the other, possibly by Marston, has not survived. The French ambassador, in a letter dated 29 March 1608, reported that all the theatres were closed, though the other owners were petitioning to reopen (E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols., 1923, II, 53); the quotation is from an 11 March letter from Sir Thomas Lake to Robert Cecil (II, 54).

also concludes on an ominous note as the tribunes persuade the citizens to rescind their vote. Act 3 works out the first consequences of that decision, descending into near civil war and, on the tribunes' urging, Coriolanus's banishment. Act 4 builds to Coriolanus's gaining the means to take his revenge on Rome, switches to Rome's reception of the news of imminent attack, and concludes with Aufidius again contemplating his enemy and vowing to destroy him. Finally, a series of pleas for mercy culminate in Coriolanus's confrontation with his mother and decision to spare Rome, followed by Aufidius's long-predicted revenge.<sup>1</sup> Two of what I suspect to be scenes added or at least expanded in the process of revision (the final scene of Act 1 and, especially, the final scene of Act 4) accentuate the formal breaks by returning to Aufidius; they strengthen the contrast between him and Coriolanus and focus our attention on questions of character rather than physical prowess.<sup>2</sup> These unPlutarchan scenes also counterpoise the protagonist's apparent progression toward acknowledged superiority and public acclaim, first in Rome and then among the Volscians. Acts 2 and 3 are virtually continuous in action but so structured that Act 3 replays in a more desperate key Act 2's movement: apparent civic success cut short not only by Coriolanus's own behaviour but by the tribunes' stratagems. Whether or not the actual act notations were first entered in the hand of the author, Shakespeare composed *Coriolanus* to be playable with intervals that reinforce its structure. Stage directions also repeatedly call for cornets, instruments with a mellower tone than trumpets and associated with the indoor private theatres.<sup>3</sup>

*Coriolanus* would also have been an appropriate opener for the Blackfriars Theatre's more affluent and educated clientele. Chapman was Shakespeare's most serious rival as a tragedian, and he specialised in heroic tragedy. His *Bussy D'Ambois* (performed 1603; Q 1607) had been an earlier Blackfriars success, and the Byron plays were now notorious (they were printed later in 1608 in a truncated version, presumably in part to take advantage of the public's curiosity). Both Byron and *Coriolanus* were military heroes turned renegade, willing to destroy their country rather than submit to it. Shakespeare's own interest in heroic individualism would have nicely coincided with an opportunity to take on Chapman on his home ground while also providing the Blackfriars audience with a play in a genre for which it had a known taste.<sup>4</sup> *Coriolanus*'s intense political debates and prominent use of legal terminology would also have appealed to the law students of the nearby Inns of Court, who frequented the Blackfriars and often themselves entered politics, and these features would have

<sup>1</sup> Parker argues that the F division between Acts 3 and 4 'seems a mistake' and is perhaps therefore unShakespearean; yet since in his designation of three main movements in the play's action the first also overlaps an act division (between 1 and 2), he concludes that 'the asymmetry may be intentional' and retains F's notation of Acts 3 and 4 (p. 28).

<sup>2</sup> The theatrically effective pause and ironic foreshadowing created by the conversation between Roman and Volscian spies in 4.3 might be another scene added in revision to heighten effects already sketched out in the first draft; it is of a length to fit on one sheet of paper, easily inserted into what had already been composed.

<sup>3</sup> See John H. Long, *Shakespeare's Use of Music: The Histories and the Tragedies*, 1971, p. 222, and W. J. Lawrence, *Shakespeare's Workshop*, 1966, pp. 52–3.

<sup>4</sup> In *Possessed with Greatness*, 1980, Richard Ide goes further: 'Shakespeare, I suspect, designed *Coriolanus* to respond not only to the *Byron* plays but to Chapman's theory of titanic heroism as well' (p. 170).

*The Tragedy of Coriolanus*

[6]

benefited from ‘the more intense audience concentration which the smaller theatre allowed’.<sup>1</sup>

Composition could have begun in March 1608, but it is also possible that it was delayed by other company responsibilities until after plague closed the theatres again in late July. In August Shakespeare brought suit in Stratford against John Addenbrook; his mother died on 2 September and was buried on the 9th. Shakespeare may have attended the christening in Stratford of his nephew, Michael Hart, two weeks later, and on 16 October he stood as godfather to the son of an old friend.<sup>2</sup> Some or all of these events could have been handled by proxy, but possibly he resided in Stratford more or less continuously, avoiding the plague in London and writing *Coriolanus* while also attending to family business. He may even have consciously begun his gradual withdrawal from playwriting for the King’s Men, although he certainly chose to invest in the Blackfriars venture by becoming a sharer in the new leases signed in August.<sup>3</sup> As it turned out, plague closed the theatres not only for the remainder of 1608 but for nearly all of 1609 as well. Such a disaster for the theatrical troupes could not be predicted, however; it seems reasonable to suppose that there were hopes that cooler weather would bring an abatement in plague deaths and that Shakespeare’s target was an autumn 1608 Blackfriars opening.

A probable literary borrowing from Chapman’s translation of the first twelve books of the *Iliad* would suggest that Shakespeare was (still?) writing after the Stationers’ Register entry for Chapman’s book (14 November 1608) and its subsequent publication. Yet we do not know the rate at which Shakespeare composed *Coriolanus*, and the line might have been added later, or Shakespeare could have had access to a manuscript.<sup>4</sup> That he would be interested seems likely: he had already used the earlier *Seaven Bookes of the Iliads* (1598) when writing *Troilus and Cressida*, and since he was still writing about epic heroes, there was likely to be pertinent material in the newly translated Books III–VI and XII. Chapman’s version of Zeus’s paradoxical words to Hera when he consents to the destruction of Troy – ‘I grant thee willingly, although against my will’ (*Iliad* IV, 43) – becomes in *Coriolanus* a comic expression of the citizens’ confused

<sup>1</sup> Martin Wiggins, ‘The King’s Men and after’, in *Shakespeare: An Illustrated Stage History*, ed. Jonathan Bate and Russell Jackson, 1996, p. 29. On the pervasive use of legal terminology, see G. Thomas Tanselle and Florence W. Dunbar, ‘Legal language in *Coriolanus*’, *SQ* 13 (1962), 231–8.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Eccles, *Shakespeare in Warwickshire*, 1961, p. 110. Parker assumes Shakespeare’s personal attendance at all of these events (pp. 6–7); Eccles is more cautious.

<sup>3</sup> *Coriolanus*’s often unusually full, narrative stage directions may indicate semi-retirement and an author who knew that he might not be present at rehearsals. In March 1613 Shakespeare purchased a house in London near the Blackfriars Theatre, but this may have been simply a real-estate investment; see S. Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life*, 1987, pp. 272–3, and for the document itself, Chambers, *William Shakespeare*, II, 154–7. In contrast, E. A. J. Honigmann takes the Blackfriars investments as a sign that Shakespeare ‘intended . . . to resume his career in London’ (‘“There is a world elsewhere”: William Shakespeare, businessman’, in *Images of Shakespeare*, ed. Werner Habicht *et al.*, 1988, p. 43).

<sup>4</sup> Among the rather tightly-knit group of playwrights for the Children of Blackfriars – Jonson, Chapman, Marston, Beaumont, Fletcher – an assumption of manuscript exchange would be reasonable. To what extent Shakespeare was a part of this group we cannot know; yet Jonson also wrote for the King’s Men and knew Shakespeare, and negotiations to add Beaumont and Fletcher to their roster may have been already under way.

attempt to evade responsibility: ‘though we willingly consented to his banishment, yet it was against our will’ (4.6.148–9).<sup>1</sup>

Nothing decisively excludes composition in spring 1608 and first performance before late July at the Globe. But if the paradox was borrowed from Chapman, and not inserted later, it points to composition, or completion, in late 1608.<sup>2</sup> The Stationers’ Register entry for Armin’s *The Italian Tailor and his Boy* (6 February 1609) suggests that the company had at least rehearsed the play by then. Prefaces tend to be written last, and Armin presumably worked on his translation while the theatres were closed. Thus *Coriolanus* may have had its premiere in late 1608 at Blackfriars, though perhaps before only a few friends: in April 1609 the King’s Men were reimbursed an extra £40, beyond the payment for their performances during the 1608–9 Christmas holiday season, for ‘private practise in the time of infeccion’ to prepare their plays for court.<sup>3</sup> *Coriolanus*’s official opening is likely to have been at court, as one of the twelve unnamed plays performed by the King’s Men for the 1608–9 Christmas season.<sup>4</sup> Given plague restrictions, unless it was played illegally *Coriolanus* was first available to the general London public in late December 1609 or February 1610, in which case it would have been competing, briefly, with Jonson’s *Epicoene* put on by the regrouped Blackfriars boys (now the Children of Her Majesty’s Revels) at the Whitefriars Theatre.

### Chronology

Shakespeare knew the *Coriolanus* story, at least in rough outline, as early as *Titus Andronicus*, for Titus’s exiled son Lucius, having joined the enemy Goths to lead them against Rome, is said to threaten ‘in course of this revenge, to do / As much as ever Coriolanus did’ (4.4.66–7).<sup>5</sup> He could have known the basic narrative from general reading, or in the abbreviated version taken from Livy in William Painter’s *Palace*

<sup>1</sup> John A. Scott, ‘An unnoticed Homeric phrase in Shakespeare’, *Classical Philology* 33 (1938), 414. Parker suggests that Martius’s prayer for his son (5.3.70–5) might have been inspired by that of Hector for Astyanax in Book vi of the *Iliad*, though he notes there are no parallels in thought or phrasing (p. 4). If the prayer’s central image has a classical source, I expect it is Virgil, either directly or *via* Montaigne (see p. 15 below).

<sup>2</sup> It is possible that in translating the ‘Homeric phrase’ Chapman employed a common coinage and that no borrowing is involved (see 4.6.148–9 n.), but other evidence suggests late 1608. This is also Parker’s estimate, although he allows more weight than I to the possible reference to Myddelton’s irrigation project and so is willing to extend the date of composition to early 1609 (p. 7).

<sup>3</sup> Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, iv, 175. The ‘private practise’ might, of course, have taken place elsewhere. Still calling themselves the Children of Blackfriars, the offending boys themselves presented three plays at the Christmas revels. It is possible, given plague conditions, that the King’s Men had not rushed to take over their new theatre.

<sup>4</sup> I am unpersuaded by arguments that would push composition to 1609 and first performance to spring 1610, but see Barroll, *Politics, Plague, and Shakespeare’s Theater*, Appendix 5, and Annabel Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice*, 1989, pp. 138–46.

<sup>5</sup> The first recorded performance of *Titus* was in 1594, possibly in a revised version since Henslowe noted it as ‘ne’ (new); there is good reason to think it was composed and performed earlier and that it preceded *The Rape of Lucrece* (1593); see Eugene M. Waith (ed.), *Titus Andronicus*, 1984, pp. 4–11. Jonathan Bate, however, thinks *Lucrece* preceded *Titus* (Bate (ed.), *Titus Andronicus*, 1995, pp. 69–79).

*The Tragedy of Coriolanus*

[8]

of *Pleasure*, which he also employed for *The Rape of Lucrece* (1593).<sup>1</sup> Yet it is likely that he was already reading Plutarch and that he there found Coriolanus's march on Rome at the head of an enemy army to use as the basis for Lucius's threatened attack.<sup>2</sup> Several characters' names were taken from Plutarch's 'Life of Scipio Africanus',<sup>3</sup> in the comparison of Hannibal with Scipio, Shakespeare would have found that Scipio 'would not come against his contry with ensignes displaid, nether would be solicite straunge nations . . . to come with force, and their ayde, to destroy the citie . . . as Martius Coriolanus, Alcibiades, and divers others did'.<sup>4</sup> This mention would have been sufficient for the brief analogy in *Titus*, though it might have led him to further reading in *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes* where, in Plutarch's format of parallel Greek and Roman 'lives', Coriolanus and Alcibiades are paired.

Whether he read their stories this early or was sent to them at some point after *Julius Caesar* (1599), Shakespeare developed them further in two later plays, *Timon of Athens* and *Coriolanus*. Unfortunately, chronology at this point becomes uncertain. The dating of *Timon* is highly conjectural, the only consensus being that it is later than *Othello* (c. 1604). While *Timon*'s primary source is an anecdote in Plutarch's 'Life of Marcus Antonius', this fact does not help in pinning down a late date for *Timon* (that is, after *Antony*), since Shakespeare had consulted that life for *Julius Caesar* and material from it appears in *Macbeth*.<sup>5</sup> The Alcibiades material in *Timon* is largely unPlutarchan, patterned instead on the career of Coriolanus, but since he had used Coriolanus's story as early as *Titus*, this does not mean that *Coriolanus* preceded *Timon*. A plausible chronology would see *Julius Caesar* as the beginning of Shakespeare's substantial engagement with Plutarch, though he had at least dipped into the *Lives* for earlier plays.<sup>6</sup> Using the life of Antony for some details, especially *Julius Caesar* 4.1, he was struck with material for a very different kind of tragedy, *Antony and Cleopatra*. A good deal of other work intervened before he returned to Plutarch for that play, though when he did, the 'Life of Marcus Antonius' led him to consider a play on Timon and to use the Alcibiades and Coriolanus stories to eke out Timon's.<sup>7</sup> Characterisation in *Timon* is flat and schematic, and in formal terms it is as odd an experiment in tragedy, if indeed it can be called that, as *Troilus and*

<sup>1</sup> Both appear in the First Tome (1566; 2nd edn, including both books, 1575). In *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays*, 1977, Kenneth Muir suggests that Shakespeare first knew Coriolanus's story from Livy, read in grammar school (p. 238).

<sup>2</sup> Bullough thinks a few other details were transferred from Coriolanus's career in Plutarch to Titus's in Shakespeare's play (*Sources*, vi, 23–4).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Adger Law, 'The Roman background of *Titus Andronicus*', *SP* 40 (1943), 147. Rome showed ingratitude not only to Scipio but to his brother Lucius, one of the names borrowed for *Titus*.

<sup>4</sup> Bullough, *Sources*, vi, 78.

<sup>5</sup> Both *Textual Companion*, pp. 129–30, and Nicholas Brooke (ed.), *Macbeth*, 1990, pp. 63–4, date composition in 1606; Brooke, who favours the second half of 1606, allows the possibility that the usually assumed chronology, in which *Macbeth* precedes *Antony*, may be incorrect. See also A. R. Braunmuller (ed.), *Macbeth*, 1997, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> See p. 10 below. C. M. Eccles has also argued that Amyot's foreword, 'Englished' and included by North in his *Lives*, influenced Shakespeare in Sonnet 55 ('Shakespeare and Jacques Amyot: Sonnet LV and "Coriolanus"', *N&Q* 210 (March 1965), 100–2).

<sup>7</sup> Although Thomas Middleton may have collaborated on the script of *Timon*, I take the choice of subject matter to be Shakespeare's.



*Cressida*.<sup>1</sup> One feature of its publication history may lend some support for the theory that, if not ‘unfinished’, *Timon* had not received its final polish: in the printing of the First Folio it was a last-minute substitution for *Troilus and Cressida*, and Heminges and Condell may not originally have intended to include it.<sup>2</sup> The ‘Life of Coriolanus’ offered a richer social and political canvas and, though its hero is as unself-analytical as *Timon* or Alcibiades, it sketched a central character who could be made more psychologically compelling. Yet while it seems ‘logical’ that the simpler character would precede the more complex, with *Timon* therefore the earlier play, the critic’s resort to Occam’s razor may not come even close to capturing the workings of the creative imagination.

If we cannot be certain of the chronology of *Timon* and *Coriolanus*, we can be of the strong connections between the two plays in structure, both culminating in an exiled soldier’s march against his native city and a theatrical supplication scene; *via* the theme of ingratitude, both also reveal their kinship with *Lear*. And while in terms of its historical period *Coriolanus* drops back to pick up the early years of the Roman Republic initiated at the end of *The Rape of Lucrece*, many features link it to Shakespeare’s more recent work. Michael Neill notes that while *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* together chronicle the final collapse of the Republic and the institution of the Empire, with *Coriolanus* they can also be ‘read as a loose trilogy in which Shakespeare ponders certain great issues of classical historiography’: questions about alternative forms of government (republic or monarchy), distributions of power (aristocratic or democratic), and the role of the ‘great man’ in shaping history.<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Miles reads these three Roman tragedies as ‘a triptych on the theme of constancy’.<sup>4</sup> They also in varying ways explore the nature of Roman ‘virtue’ (*virtus*), the idealisation of martial valour and of the public life, and the troubling relationship between name and identity.

Plutarch’s story also offered Shakespeare another opportunity to explore the complexities of his own world by setting versions of it off against an earlier, apparently simpler, feudal or heroic one, a way of organising his material that had engaged him since the second tetralogy on English history in the late 1590s but took sharper outline in *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet*. That the contrast can be established on the battlefield itself is clear in *Troilus and Cressida*, where the world of honour confronts the market-place in the persons of Troilus and Hector, who romanticise war as chivalry, and Ulysses and Achilles, who do not. More commonly the heroics of war give place to the complexities

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Charney favours the term ‘dramatic fable’ and notes that the form necessitates rejecting opportunities for developing ‘psychological thickness’ of character (Charney (ed.), *Timon of Athens*, 1965, p. xxviii). Charney thinks *Timon* finished ‘in conception’ and believes it to be Shakespeare’s last tragedy; other critics speculate that ‘Shakespeare abandoned *Timon* to write *Coriolanus*’ (Bullough, *Sources*, v, 239).

<sup>2</sup> See Textual Analysis, p. 295 below. There is no evidence that *Timon* was ever publicly acted. Another sign of its awkward ‘fit’ is that, although printed with the Tragedies in 1623, its title page reads *The Life of Timon of Athens*, and the running title, unlike that of the other tragedies, is simply *Timon of Athens* on both recto and verso pages.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Neill (ed.), *Antony and Cleopatra*, 1994, p. 7. See also Paul A. Cantor, *Shakespeare’s Rome: Republic and Empire*, 1976, p. 16, and Robert S. Miola, *Shakespeare’s Rome*, 1983, p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Miles, *Shakespeare and the Constant Romans*, 1996, p. vii.

*The Tragedy of Coriolanus*

[10]

of peacetime politics.<sup>1</sup> *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, as well as *Coriolanus*, at least open in a world in which superlative warriors crucially matter, but where the bringer-home of victory might also pose the greatest danger. Macbeth, Antony and Coriolanus in different ways exemplify the soldier's failure to dominate the political arena. In a further connection, *Macbeth*, *Antony* and *Coriolanus* all examine their martial heroes' interaction with strong, ultimately destructive women. The problem lies deeper than the plays' particular women, however. For Macbeth and Coriolanus, and for Antony in his 'Roman mood', power and identity are understood in terms of a definition of masculinity that consciously excludes maternal values;<sup>2</sup> violence is self-validating, and through it they seek to author themselves, to become invulnerable and godlike. Each of these plays interrogates in its own way the hierarchic division between the sexes and the qualities assigned them, and they look forward to the late plays in suggesting a different definition of what 'manhood' means.

**Sources**

Shakespeare's primary source was 'The Life of Caius Martius Coriolanus' in *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes*, translated from Plutarch's Greek into French by Jacques Amyot and then from the French into English by Thomas North. Both Amyot and North added their own colouring,<sup>3</sup> but Shakespeare knew his Plutarch in North's version only and, of the available editions (1579, 1595, 1603), probably for this play he used the 1595 edition.<sup>4</sup> He follows his source narrative fairly closely, though he omits some details, alters others, and creates whole scenes that complicate Plutarch's central figure. The primary structural changes to Plutarch's narrative lie in the greatly expanded roles of Menenius, Volumnia, the tribunes and Aufidius, all of whom become not only actors in the drama but commentators on the protagonist. Plutarch's parallel-lives format paired Greek and Roman figures, and Shakespeare also borrowed from 'The Comparison of Alcibiades with Martius Coriolanus', primarily for the Officers' analysis of Coriolanus that opens Act 2, Scene 2.<sup>5</sup>

The evidence is less certain that he turned elsewhere in Plutarch for some local details, although it would not be surprising if he had. The course of Shakespeare's career shows a fairly wide perusal of this congenial historian, with certain use of the lives of Scipio Africanus (for *Titus Andronicus*),<sup>6</sup> Theseus (*A Midsummer Night's*

<sup>1</sup> The contemporary context in which these issues resonated is discussed below, pp. 33–40.

<sup>2</sup> For remarks on Macbeth's 'equation of masculinity with violence as a denial or defense against femininity', see Madeline Gohlke, "'I woo'd thee with my sword': Shakespeare's tragic paradigms", in *Representing Shakespeare*, ed. Murray M. Schwartz and Coppélia Kahn, 1980, pp. 176–7. See also Eugene M. Waith, 'Manhood and valor in two Shakespearean tragedies', *ELH* 17 (1950), 262–73, and D. W. Harding, 'Women's fantasy of manhood: a Shakespearean theme', *SQ* 20 (1969), 245–53.

<sup>3</sup> For a comparison of the translations with each other and with the original, see Hermann Heuer, 'From Plutarch to Shakespeare: a study of *Coriolanus*', *S.Sur.* 10 (1957), 50–8.

<sup>4</sup> Brockbank notes (p. 29) that 1595 'conduits' corresponds with the Folio's 'Conduits' (*Cor.* 2.3.228) and that only the 1595 edition contains the two spellings 'Latius'/'Lartius' which appear in the Folio text.

<sup>5</sup> See Commentary notes to 2.2.0 SD and 2.2.18. For ease of reference, quotations from North's Plutarch will be taken from Bullough, if available there, rather than from the 1595 edition.

<sup>6</sup> See p. 8 above, n. 3.