

The Transformation of Power: A Study of Coriolanus from  
Soldier to Statesman

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## The Transformation of Power: A Study of Coriolanus from Soldier to Statesman

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تحول السلطة: تحليل قصة تحول كورولانوس من عسكري إلى رجل دولة

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### Abstract

William Shakespeare's play Coriolanus explores the journey of power and the transformation of a skilled warrior into a statesman. This paper employs Machiavelli's framework of pragmatic statecraft to analyse Coriolanus's tragic failure as a political leader despite his unparalleled prowess as a Roman general. It analyses Coriolanus's political career, revealing how his military skills, while effective in warfare, do not translate into political success. The paper shows that Coriolanus's contempt for performative politics, refusal to adopt civic diplomacy, and failure to soften aristocratic pride with populist appeal turn plebeians against him and alienate patricians. His upholding of martial honour — fostered by his mother Volumnia's martial ideals — prevents him from rising to the top of Rome's fractious political hierarchy. In contrast, Brutus and Sicinius's tribunes exemplify Machiavellian cunning, using rhetoric and public opinion to consolidate their power unscrupulously. The play's meditation on leadership emphasises a tempting paradox: The skills that win on the battlefield, like discipline and unilateral decisiveness, are often the ones that will sink you politically, where compromise, performative empathy and strategic deception are necessities. The paper contributes to Shakespearean studies by reframing the tragedy as a critique of inflexible leadership in hierarchal societies, with implications for modern discourses on populism, authoritarianism, and the performative nature of power.

**Keywords:** Coriolanus, Shakespeare, Machiavellian leadership, political performativity, Power dynamics.

#### الخلاصة

تُناقش مسرحية وليام شكسبير "كورولانوس" رحلة السلطة وتحول المحارب الماهر إلى رجل دولة. تستخدم هذه الورقة البحثية إطار نيكولو مكيافيلي للدبلوماسية الواقعية لتحليل الفشل المأساوي لكورولانوس كرجل دولة رغم براعته الاستثنائية كقائد عسكري روماني. تدرس الورقة مسيرة كورولانوس السياسية، مُبيّنة كيف أن مهاراته العسكرية، رغم فعاليتها في ساحات القتال، فشلت في تحقيق النجاح السياسي. تُظهر الورقة أن ازدياد كورولانوس للسياسات الأدائية، ورفضه تبني الدبلوماسية المدنية، وفشله في تخفيف كبريائه الأرستقراطي ببداءات شعبية، أدت إلى تحويل العامة ضده ونأي النخبة عنه. تمنعه تمسكه بشرف الحربي الذي غرسته فيه أمه فولومانيا من الصعود في التسلسل الهرمي السياسي لروما. في المقابل، يجسد القائدان بروتوس وسيسينيوس المكر المكيافيلي، مستخدمين الرأي العام لتعزيز سلطتهما دون مبالاة أخلاقية. يؤكد تأمل المسرحية في القيادة على مفارقة لافتة: المهارات التي تمنح النصر في المعركة، كالانضباط واتخاذ القرارات الأحادية، غالبًا ما تُهلك سياسيًا، حيث يصبح الحل الوسط والتعاطف الأدائي والخداع الاستراتيجي ضروريين. تُسهم الورقة في الدراسات الشكسبيرية بإعادة صياغة المأساة كنقد للقيادة المتصلبة في المجتمعات الهرمية، مع إشارات لخطابات معاصرة حول الشعبية والسلطوية والأدائية السياسية للسلطة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** كورولانوس، شكسبير، السياسة، القيادة المكيافيلية، لسياسات الأدائية، ديناميكيات السلطة

#### 1. Introduction

William Shakespeare's play Coriolanus examines the path of power and the transformation of a proficient warrior into a political figure. The protagonist, Caius Martius Coriolanus, an esteemed Roman aristocrat, initially emerges as a formidable soldier; however, he finally hesitates in his quest for leadership because of his deficiencies in comprehending human nature and the multifaceted nature of political dynamics. This article analyses Coriolanus's political journey, revealing how his martial prowess, though effective on the battlefield, fails to manifest in political triumphs. This situation raises pivotal inquiries regarding leadership; possessing extraordinary capabilities in one realm does not inherently ensure efficacy in another. Thus, the appraisal of leadership must consider

a variety of skill sets; a military general, for instance, may not necessarily thrive as a political leader, although one might assume that such skills would be transferable.

The paper's methodology includes applying the Machiavellian theory of power and leadership, investigating Coriolanus's actions and decision-making in the arms and politics of Rome by isolating his war strategies and comparing these with his tools as a political leader. According to Machiavelli, leadership is a balance between virtue and pragmatism, sometimes involving the control of public opinion and the readiness to do whatever is necessary to keep power. This is because Coriolanus, the central character, is the opposite of a Machiavellian leader. He is proud to the extent that he does not care what the masses want and cannot or fail to practice the political techniques needed to keep power. This paper will use Machiavellian theory to explain Coriolanus' political career and show that his inability to learn from the practical aspects of governance led to his demise. The paper closely reads selected passages in Coriolanus to support its arguments about character development and themes in the play. Additionally, it deals with historical context by referring to Plutarch's Roman Lives and other historical works.

The Prince is one of the first political philosophy books in the field and is known for proposing a pragmatic method of ruling. As Machiavelli states, one of the qualities of successful leaders is that they are ready to show immorality when the time comes. Traditional ethical norms could be set aside for the sake of strategies for attaining and holding power, he contended (Viroli, 1998, p.4). A key feature of Machiavellian philosophy is the principle of the ends justifying the means and that a ruler should be loved and feared — but if the choice comes down to just one, fear is the more durable motivating force in maintaining order and control.

Machiavelli's emphasis on realism rings especially true during political turbulence and the battle between rival factions for supremacy. Qualities such as decisiveness, calculated risk-taking, and an awareness of the fickleness of public favour are integral for a Machiavellian leader (Kott, 2005, p, 587). These qualities serve as a baseline for assessing the leadership abilities of characters in political dramas, including Shakespeare's Coriolanus.

As Machiavelli states, three essential characteristics of political leaders are;

1. Adaptability (Necessità):

Leaders must abandon firm ideals to respond to changing circumstances. As Machiavelli writes, "The one who adapts his

policy to the times prospers, and likewise that the one whose policy clashes with the demands of the times does not” (Machiavelli, 1532/2003, p. 81).

2. Cultivation of Public Image:  
Power is performative. A leader must “seem merciful, faithful, humane, religious, and upright, and also to be so; but the mind should remain so balanced that were it needful not to be so, you should be able and know how to change to the contrary. (Machiavelli, 1532/2003, p. 66).

3. Pragmatic Ruthlessness:  
He states that leaders must imitate the “he ought of beasts to choose both the lion and the fox; with cunning deception—to maintain control (Machiavelli, 1532/2003, p. 56).

In Plutarch’s Roman Lives, Coriolanus is one of the leaders of the Roman Republic in ancient Rome. Legendary accounts of Coriolanus’s life depict him as the bearer of vengeance and enmity of the Volscians and their general, Tullius Aufidius. Tullius was Coriolanus’s military rival, and by tradition, his desire for retribution became intertwined with a thirst for vengeance against Rome. Coriolanus and Tullius formed a secret mutual alliance pact, marched on Rome, and besieged it (Miller, 2008, p.9).

Caius Martius is a Roman general respected for battle prowess but not charm, diplomacy, or toleration. He is given the agnomen Coriolanus in honour of his heroic leadership in the siege of the enemy city of Corioles. Returning to Rome, he receives deification status, is hailed as the nation's saviour, and is handed the consulship on a silver platter. Martius did not seek these honours or this power. The transformations undergone by Shakespeare’s titles characters are of crucial social and cultural concern, whether they involve the rising social fortunes of an unworthy scullion, the fall of an exalted knight pickled in the pride of past valour, or the soldier’s perilous metamorphosis into the political leader.

## 2. Coriolanus as a Soldier

Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532/2003) is a classic work that changed the world of political philosophy by indicating that leadership means pragmatism, flexibility, and the willingness to make ethical negotiations to get and keep power through using Machiavellian theory to analyse how Coriolanus is a failed political leader. Coriolanus is a great general who cannot bend to martial virtue or the public’s contempt, which makes him unable to learn how to govern, contrary to Machiavelli's

guidelines. Through the Machiavellian lens, this paper shows how Coriolanus' rejection of political realism results in his tragic demise.

Within military conflict, Coriolanus demonstrates exceptional wisdom and strategic insight, exhibiting calmness and strategic prowess in his decision-making. His formidable warrior skills position him as an undeniable champion on the battlefield, successfully leading his troops to victory against rebellious cities. Cominius recognises two contrasting aspects of Coriolanus: his intense focus and impulsive nature. This unwavering determination, while commendable, also poses risks; the Roman ideals embodied by Volumnia may falter when they produce a virtuous man who perceives Rome as unworthy of such virtue (Holland 2020, p.28). Given Coriolanus's extreme behaviour and rhetoric, one must question whether he genuinely embodies Roman values or diverges from them. The stark opposition between Cominius's cheers and Coriolanus's harsh treatment of his men illustrates and showcases the distinctiveness between his aggressive tactics and Cominius's efficient leadership. Although Cominius does not question Coriolanus's behaviour on the battlefield, he extends formal commendation to him in full view of the army and the Senate, calling the campaign at Corioles 'the top of noble sury,' thus setting the stage for Coriolanus's nomination for consul.

Coriolanus, the soldier, embodies Machiavellian virtù— courage, discipline, and decisive action. He is praised by Cominius for his "noble fury," (Shakespeare, 1608/2006, 1.9.5) as he is also received at Corioles. Machiavelli cautions that military "virtue" alone cannot preserve political power: "A prince must have no other object... but war" (Machiavelli, 1532/2003, p. 47). Coriolanus misinterprets this as meaning that his heroic actions on the battlefield afford him political authority without compromise.

In matters political, Cominius shows himself wiser than Coriolanus. However, his role in key scenes of the consulship is ambiguous: He seems to agree to the political moves that enable the noble class to remain in power. Cominius submits to the subordinate role of these lesser nobles, as Menenius astutely engineers Senate negotiations while rebuffing prevalent challenges. For Coriolanus, the noble death is better than the cowardly life, and he puts his country before his safety. His indifference to injuries taken in battle also highlights his fixation on martial glory. The only two people he truly cares about are his wife and mother. While other men seek glory for their feats of daring, he finds contentment in his mother's pride at hearing his name praised:



His mother, Volumnia, who conflates masculinity with martial honour, forges Coriolanus's political rigidity. She vaunts his wounds as "trophies" (2.1.119) and scoffs at humility as weakness: "I would have had you put your power well on/before you had worn it out" (3.2.16–17). Feminist scholars, including Cavanagh (2003), contend that Volumnia's "maternal tyranny" confines Coriolanus within the bounds of a hyperactive masculine identity, leaving him psychologically unprepared for the role of governor (p. 117). Richard Bauman (1992) stated that Volumnia is portrayed as a formidable character within the play's feminine narrative: "To a cruel war, I sent him from whence he returned his brows bound with oak." (Shakespeare, 1608/2006 p. 22). As a military mother, she prioritises her pride in her son's bravery over concerns for his safety, even if it means risking his life. She asserts, "If I had twelve sons, each as dear to me as yours and mine, my good Martius, I would prefer eleven brave sons who sacrifice their lives for their country than one indulged in excess" (Shakespeare, 1608/2006 p. 22).

### 2.1 Military Leadership Qualities

Early in the play, Coriolanus is depicted as an exemplary military commander with exceptional skill and temperament. On the battlefield, he first earns respect from Cominius and recognition from the Senate; his martial prowess is foundational to his stature as a statesman—at least in the eyes of those senators who initially support him. However, Shakespeare's portrayal of Coriolanus is not entirely romanticised; instead, it reveals how significant personal flaws often undermine his effectiveness on the battlefield (Miller, 2008, p. 9). Coriolanus's military success fits Machiavelli's amorous leaders who "devote themselves only to war" (Machiavelli, 1532/2003, p. 47). His valour at Corioles is the quintessence of virtù; he alone takes the city gates, garnering the name he was known and the Senate's praise (Shakespeare, 1608/2006, 1.9.1–10). Cominius praises him as Rome's "noblest soldier" (Shakespeare, 1608/2006, 1.9.15), and his men follow him unquestioningly.

When viewed dispassionately, it is easy to recognise how the effectiveness of Coriolanus on the battlefield possesses a "fearsome quality" forged from generations of warfare and sacrifice that are integral to the Roman ethos (Holland 2020, p.32). These early imperial exploits also suggest a deep engagement with martial ideals, leaving room for commentary on his prospective effectiveness as a soldier-leader. At the same time, armies clashed in new, virulent contests across Italy. Coriolanus is educated in battle, gradually revealing bloody growth and a resilient

drive. Whereas Cominius—who, of course, advances courageously and then retreats in the face of danger—Coriolanus plunges undeterred into battle against the odds. His unilateral decision rallies both Cominius and the uncertain Roman forces, whose loss is turned into a shocking triumph. After this victory at Corioles, Coriolanus gains not only Cominius's admiration but also that of his fellow soldiers, and eventually, this wins him immense respect from the Senate.

Machiavelli's concept of virtù — a mixture of courage, strategic skill, and decisive action — is illustrated fully by Coriolanus's martial career. Machiavelli devotes the entirety of *The Prince* to leaders who embody this virtù and claims, "a prince must have no other object... but war" (Machiavelli, 1532/2003, p. 47). Coriolanus's military feats — notably, his heroic siege of Corioles — reflect such an ideal. His daring leadership earns him the agnomen "Coriolanus" and the adulation of Rome's patrician class. Cominius praises him as "the rock, the oak not to be wind-shaken" (Shakespeare, 1608/2006, 5.3.110), referencing his resolute nature and physical ferocity in battle.

#### 4. Coriolanus as a Statesman

Power and politics are, therefore, questions about human nature. Some individuals, though, have political lives of broader interest. A specific noble life is a tremendous moral virtue, noble honour, or a particular base character of performance and logic or out of evil instinct and base performance, either natural or artificial, have attracted enormous interest during his lifetime. Coriolanus is an archetype representing greatness yet marked by tragic failure. Understanding how such states are possible among specific individuals throws elaborate insight into human nature and political life.

According to *Polis Revista* (2021), various thinkers have ardently argued against the negative portrait painted of men in history. Machiavelli, the Renaissance philosopher, was cognizant of the illogicality of human nature and its tendency to err. Subsequently, thinkers such as Hobbes, Rousseau, and Girard have sought to focus on the violent tendencies of humanity in the social sphere. However, continuing with the desire to construct just societies and ethical personalities bordering on Utopianism, liberalism characterises man's rationality as the source of moral virtue and the belief in the possibility of human perfectibility (p, 7). Machiavelli advises leaders to emulate the "lion and the fox"—combining strength with cunning (Machiavelli, 1532/2003, p. 56). Coriolanus, however, acts only as the lion. His inflexibility is evident when he rejects Menenius's plea to

feign contrition: “I will not do’t, / Lest I surcease to honour my truth” (Shakespeare, 1608/2006, 3.2.120-121). For Machiavelli, such rigidity is folly: “A prudent ruler cannot, and must not, honour his word” when it threatens his power (Machiavelli, 1532/2003, p. 54).

As a political leader, Coriolanus is dutiful, but his ordinariness proves fatal. He immerses himself in governing the Roman civil world, conducting the business of the Senate, and managing, as he sees it, the plight of allies across the Tiber (Miller, 2008, p.36). Coriolanus's persona grows more complex in the ominous shadow of his estranged mother's homeland, his decision-making more determined yet pitiable. : Roman custom requires that, when nominated for consul, he show his scars from the field of battle to the plebeians. He declines because it is a ritual that is “part / that I shall blush in acting” (Shakespeare, 1608/2006, 2.2.144–145). Such scorn for public spectacle is the death knell for Machiavelli: “The vulgar are always taken by appearances” (Machiavelli, 1532/2003, p. 66). Coriolanus's rejection of this performative act alienates the population and grants power to the tribunes

### 3.1. Leadership Style in Governance

Coriolanus is more strategically prudent at battle than he is at governance. He dares to believe he can succeed where his father could not. Still, his inability to adapt to new tactics, allies, enemies, and topographies overshadows his understanding of the political landscape (Miller, 2008, p.36). Despite being deeply derided as a soldier and disrespected as a consul, Coriolanus remains remarkably steadfast in his belief that virtue, steeliness, and inexplicability will endear him to the citizens. Men should come half or whole at their devotion, but this half-heartedness is “exactly” what allows Coriolanus to exert any agency at court. Coriolanus achieves victory over the Volscians and Aufidius with masterful strategy at battle while taking the Oath of Citizenship at Rome. Still, Tullus Aufidius's return to power results from Coriolanus's, at the same time, naiveté in the proverbial volatility of human affairs and failure to leave his firm footing (Bruce, 2000, p.98).

Coriolanus hides the splendour of power and corrupts nations by participating and protesting politicians and diplomats; after participating in the war against the Volscians, he denies the same power, the glory of winning, to “a renter after his neighbour's prosperity,” thus exposing him to mistrust, suspicion, and jealousy. However, compared to Aufidius's desperation after defeat and exile, Coriolanus's fury at the emulation of his ledger discrepancy reasons is moderate to keep his power tent. Coriolanus



dismisses the plebeians as a “common cry of curs” (Shakespeare, 1608/2006 3.3.120), incapable of the rhetorical skill to sway public opinion. In contrast, the tribunes Brutus and Sicinius manipulate the masses with calculated rhetoric, embodying Machiavelli’s foxlike tricks.

Nadine Fu (2022) claims that in light of recent unforeseen events that have disrupted established historical drama and altered the destinies of nations, Coriolanus's unique journey from soldier to statesman has regained significance(p, 147). Driven by an unwavering ambition to ascend to the ruling elite of Rome, this single-minded warrior has deviated from the traditional path typically taken by cities. Instead, he opts for a perilous trajectory marked by brute aggression, scorched earth tactics, violent regime change, and eventual exile in a foreign land.

His tragic journey raises an enduring question about whether Coriolanus’s particular journey may once again resonate with contemporary political developments in city-states. Such comparisons are particularly relevant given the return of the static political conditions that characterised the early days of Rome. The expansive forces that initially propelled Rome—military successes, economic prosperity, territorial expansion, and unchecked population growth—have diminished (Bruce, 2000, p.103). The accurately constructed institutions of passive governance, a newly formed elite aristocratic class, and a stagnant social order regressing into irreparable inequality and persistent civil discord remain. The perspective offered by Coriolanus’s journey allows for displacing the present horizon onto the furthest temporal dimension possible, providing a clear vision of the tragic outcomes that await if history is repeated. As is considered in contemporary political tensions marked by similar concerns between ambition and governance, Coriolanus’s play invites reflection on the cyclical nature of history and the lessons it imparts for current and future leaders.

#### 4. Challenges of Transition

The challenges of transition from soldiering to government characterise the tragedy of Coriolanus. There has been much scholarly debate about the significance of a type of power so frequently mentioned by Volumnia and Lavinia – in itself. Maternal nurturance and communication run counter to judgments based on procedural law or the sword's power, the potency of myriads of citizens, and legions of armies. Coriolanus’s mother, Volumnia, unwittingly accentuates his failure to adjust. She reminds him that he is forced to “perform a part” (Shakespeare, 1608/2006, 3.2.110), recognising the performative sociality of politics. However, Coriolanus

fails to reconcile this with himself; as Julianna Adelman (2018) states, his “hyper-masculine obsession with honour blinds him to the Machiavellian realities of governance” (p. 207).

The moment of becoming a politician summarises his inability to connect with those he leads while revealing profound disdain for perceived inferiors. Finally, Coriolanus's self-transformation from the military realm to politics signifies a malignancy born from disenchantment with earthly dignity—a purgation characterising his tragic arc. His failure to adapt to political realities results in isolation from Senate members and common citizens. Coriolanus is a masterfully constructed tragedy that depicts a world dominated by competing powers, which manipulate the lives of both states and citizens from behind the scenes. Coriolanus's unsuccessful transition from general to consul mirrors modern discussions of military men in politics. Some adapt their skills successfully, while others echo Coriolanus's rigidity. The play begins by contrasting the elite perspective of the tragic hero, Coriolanus, with that of the common people over whom he unexpectedly gains power. However, this transient power leads to his eventual loss of authority and lofty ambitions. Coriolanus, who struggles against paternal expectations and harbours a deep love for his city, attempts to transform a landscape marked by social chaos into an orderly society, but his success is only temporary. Ultimately, he faces a metaphorical second death.

He is superior as a warrior due to his nature, and he is contemptuous of any life other than on the field or of any occupation but that of battle. He lacks a comprehensive understanding of himself and others, which is why he is incapable of leading the populace or compromising. He lacks the temperament for a consul position and despises and distrusts the political role that his mother implored him to fulfil. (Smith 2020, p, 91) Although unfeigned, his mother, Volumnia, is formidable in the play's feminine thread. As the mother of a military man, she places high importance on her pride in her family's great soldier and her nationalism over his life sacrifice, even if it meant her son would not have survived.

Despite their role in his downfall, the common people emerge relatively unscathed. Coriolanus's tragedy recalls Machiavelli's admonition that leaders who disregard public opinion run the risk of insurrection (Machiavelli, 1532/2003, p. 19). His banishment — a direct consequence of his brazen contempt for the plebeians — is emblematic of the dangers of not keeping authority in check with populism. In opposition, the tribunes succeed through Machiavellian theatrics: Sicinius works for

the crowd up into a frenzy by labelling Coriolanus a “traitor” (Shakespeare 1608/2006 3.3.65), highlighting the persuasive influence rhetoric wields. In the end, Coriolanus’s tragic trajectory illustrates Machiavelli’s claim that virtù requires moral flexibility in a leader. As Julius Roe (2002) argues, “Shakespeare’s Coriolanus is a case study of the perils of ignoring The Prince” (p. 132).

As Shakespeare illustrates, Coriolanus's pride and inability to navigate the political landscape lead to his downfall. His disdain for the common people and rigid adherence to aristocratic values prevent him from understanding their needs and aspirations (Smith, 2020, p. 95). Moreover, Coriolanus's relationship with his mother, Volumnia, profoundly shapes his identity and ambitions. She instils in him a sense of honour and glory that ultimately becomes a double-edged sword, driving him toward greatness and tragedy. Caught in a repetitive cycle of power dynamics, Coriolanus finds that citizen trust becomes an uneasy foundation for increasingly Machiavellian intrigues. His thoughts drift toward revenge against those he perceives as false representations—his estranged wife and son—yet he realises that he cannot reclaim the unmatched glories of his past. Eventually, he is left with only a fractured identity, seeking redemption on the other side of his former self. Unlike Coriolanus, the tribunes Brutus and Sicinius exhibit Machiavellian cunning. Aware of the volubility of the common people, they play off the popular sentiment by branding Coriolanus a “traitor” (Shakespeare, 1608/2006, 3.3.65) and take advantage of famine to inflame smouldering appetites for revolt. This accompanies Machiavelli's tactical instruction to “keep the people well disposed” through controlled rhetoric (Machiavelli, 1532/2003, p. 19).

#### 4.1. Adapting to Civilian Politics

Coriolanus commands the Roman army through sheer strength as a soldier, establishing himself as a leader. However, he must rely on rhetoric in civilian life to win the populace's support and transition into a political role. Coriolanus must sway the senate's motion and gain the people's favour to succeed as a politician. Unfortunately, he is ill-equipped for this non-violent contest (Miller, 2008, p.60).

"I do beseech you, by all the battles wherein we have fought; by the blood we have shed together, by the vows ...O, me alone! Make you a sword of me? If these shows are not outward, which of you is four Volsces? None of you can bear against the great Aufidius A shield as hard as his" (Shakespeare, 2006, 1608/2006, 2.3 36).

While he excels in military battles, he finds himself wholly unprepared for the political battlefield. For Coriolanus to thrive in politics, he must overcome significant obstacles. He cannot apply the same tactics, training, and social standing that led to his military success in civilian life. Unlike the straightforward nature of warfare, political competition in Rome is characterised by complex manoeuvring and cunning strategies. A single calculated move can allow one politician to gain an advantage over another and claim victory. The exercise of political power often occurs behind the scenes, capable of exiling an unworthy politician who holds popular support—like Coriolanus during his banishment—and elevating others who may be entirely undeserving. However, Coriolanus lacks any reason to grasp these concepts. His focus as a soldier has been solely on drilling his troops and ensuring they remember "the Mesh," rendering him helpless in navigating the complexities of politics (Adelman, 2018, p.214).

According to Evelyn Frazer (2020), Coriolanus thrived in military confrontations with his sword at his side; he naively attempted to employ similar strategies in civilian life against opposing common people armed only with their voices. Coriolanus expects recognition for his valorous deeds—"which [he] did for [the people]"—and mistakenly views himself as an unquestionable candidate for consul (p. 45). In doing so, he lacks the insight to recognise that this boastful petition undermines his position. Coriolanus embodies a fundamental tension inherent in political drama, the conflict between individual ambition and state loyalty. This discord often arises from diverging interests between the individual and the state. Such conflicts are essential to any political tragedy since they frequently lead to struggles between personal aspirations and collective governance. Each political text is tied to its specific state context; thus, the individual-state divide can be understood as a distinct political and cultural formation.

As both a textual and political play, Coriolanus positions this historical relationship as a source of political tension. In other words, Coriolanus exists at the intersection of individual-state conflict and its particularisation within a specific political and cultural framework. The play presents various characters grappling with their identities amid state and social pressures at various junctures. However, since the representation of political tensions is already articulated within a broader struggle between patricians, aristocrats, and plebeians, commoners, this overarching conflict is primarily addressed before examining how these textual tensions influence individual-state relations (Orten, 2003, p.75-77).

Returning to the political sphere as a struggle for power must be understood within the broader context of humanity's pursuit of superior qualitative and quantitative resources deemed applicable to the broader human experience. In his role as a statesman, Coriolanus demonstrates a sense of duty, yet his ordinariness is his downfall. He engages deeply in the governance of Rome, managing Senate affairs and addressing, as he perceives it, the challenges faced by allies.

In this context, overshadowed by his estranged mother's homeland, Coriolanus's character becomes increasingly complex; his decision-making grows more resolute yet pitiable. While one might find it peculiar to focus on such mundane human affairs, Shakespeare often elevates ordinary themes like love, revenge, and familial conflict to extraordinary heights in comedy and tragedy. The problematic dynamics of democracy can only capture his attention within the everyday realm of politics. Upon his return to Rome, Coriolanus's approach to power is measured. He appears to contemplate what forms of control serve candidates' interests rather than striving to embody their ideals himself. This scene mirrors a Senate meeting following the chaotic Saint Crispin's Day tournament in Henry V, where Coriolanus would seem entirely at ease—even finding common ground with democratic elements. His calm demeanour intensifies dramatic tension; self-awareness in public life aids political elites. Acknowledging public deficiencies, aspirations, and ambitions allows smoother governance but remains profoundly lacking among those who govern a disorderly common people.

At its core, beneath Coriolanus's story lies that of Rome itself—a narrative chronicling its rise as it confronts rival martial states such as the Sabines and Volscians. The patricians of Rome are depicted similarly to those in Greek city-states; they consist of a martial class of soldiers and an aristocratic political class that engages in discourse within the Senate. This martial-aristocratic class claims direct lineage from Rome's founders and considers itself responsible for upholding the ideals of a just and virtuous republic. While Rome successfully defends against external threats from these founders, internal divisions pose significant risks to maintaining an ideal state.

Coriolanus demonstrates greater strategic prudence in battle than in governance. He harbours the ambitious belief that he can achieve what his father cannot. However, his inability to adapt to new tactics, allies, enemies, and landscapes overshadows his understanding of the political environment (Frazer, 2020, p.47). Despite being scorned as a soldier and



disrespected as a consul, Coriolanus remains steadfast in his conviction that his virtue, resilience, and enigmatic nature will endear him to the townspeople. He believes men should fully commit to their devotion; however, this half-heartedness enables him to exert any influence in court. While Coriolanus secures victory over the Volscians and Aufidius through masterful military strategy, he simultaneously takes the Oath of Citizenship in Rome. Nevertheless, Tullus Aufidius's resurgence is partly due to Coriolanus's naiveté regarding the unpredictable nature of human affairs and his reluctance to abandon his steadfast principles.

The tribunes are model Machiavellian pragmatists. They have turned the plebeians against Coriolanus, calling him a "traitor" (Shakespeare, 2006, 1608 3.3.65). For the larger context of their strategy, they foment unrest and seize on an absent grain supply, and they deploy rhetoric as the vehicle through which they will seize power. Their tactics align with Machiavelli's, who counsels "keeping the people well disposed of" through deliberate deception (Machiavelli, 1532/2003, p. 19).

Coriolanus conceals the allure of power while corrupting nations through his engagement with politicians and diplomats. After fighting against the Volscians, he denies the same power and glory of victory, which exposes him to mistrust, suspicion, and jealousy. In contrast to Aufidius's desperation following defeat and exile, Coriolanus's anger at the perceived emulation of his accomplishments is somewhat restrained; for the sake of maintaining his power base, he feels compelled to return to a state of exile—a metaphorical palace filled with wolves and ravens or "composed Pactolus," representing contempt (Murray 1972, p.524). Coriolanus's refusal of pragmatism is not just a personal flaw; it is a systemic critique of a kind of leadership in which the leader's honour is prioritised over the survival of the people. His tragic arc reinforces Machiavelli's claim that good governance requires moral flexibility, performative dexterity and openness to "act against mercy, against faith, against humanity, against religion" (Machiavelli, 1532/2003, p. 53). Nevertheless, in a world where political strength rests on spectacle and compromise, Coriolanus's stubbornness makes him obsolete — a cautionary tale for politicians who mistake principle for effectiveness.

Coriolanus summarises a central conflict in political discourse: pursuing one's goals and loyalty to the state. Looking into his life, he observes a dichotomy of interests between a person and his state. Such conflicts are necessary for any political story because they often result in battles of personal interests and border authority. The case of Coriolanus,

the elite commander turned bitter politician, illustrates the intricacies in the relationship between politics and civilian and military power.

5. Modern Implications: Leadership and Power in the 21st Century  
Shakespeare's Coriolanus is bound to its early 17th-century moment, but it can also be read as a prescient indictment of the failings of leadership that echo in the contemporary political landscape. The play's focus on dogmatic ideology, government by theatre, and the civil/military balance resonates with modern challenges of populism, authoritarianism, and media engagement in politics. That section explores these parallels, discussing how Coriolanus's flaws—and Machiavelli's remedies—apply to leaders in the 21st century.

It echoes in modern politics. The dangers of inflexible ideology are exemplified by figures such as Liz Truss (UK Prime Minister, 2022), whose inflexibility around austerity policies set off economic chaos. Conversely, figures like Nelson Mandela — who moved from militant activism to more pragmatic governance — represent Machiavellian adaptability. The Brexit referendum of 2016 shows the perils of elite disengagement. Pro-EU politicians like David Cameron downplayed public frustration with globalisation and wrote off populist complaints as “project fear” (Goodwin & Heath, 2016, p.327). Like Coriolanus, Cameron failed to tackle working-class fears — and his technocracy-laden rhetoric sparked resentment and political instability.

Volodymyr Zelensky's response to the 2022 Russian invasion is Machiavellianism in action. The former comedian became a wartime leader and harnessed media to show resolve, uttering the infamous words, “I need ammunition, not a ride” (Harding, 2022, n, p)—his ambidextrous ability to adapt and perform stands in fierce contrast with Coriolanus's inflexible nature. Unlike Coriolanus, Eisenhower transitioned from military general to president by embracing compromise and media perception, embodying Machiavellian adaptability. Putin's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has an inflexible, Coriolanus-like quality. His military-oriented nationalism and disregard for negotiations with NATO allies — despite worldwide condemnation — recalls Coriolanus's attack on Rome. Both leaders fuse national identity with martial pride, spurning pragmatic diplomacy.

With its continuing relevance for modern leadership, Coriolanus is a cautionary tale of the dangers of rigidity, elitism and hypermasculinity in a world that rewards flexibility. The play's tragedy is not that Coriolanus cannot lead but that he refuses to change. As 21st-century politics are mired

in populism, media fragmentation and global crisis, Machiavelli's lessons — reflected in leaders like Zelensky and Arden — offer timeless evidence that leaders will always need to be both lions and foxes. Those who hold on to Coriolanus's absolutism will be reduced to relics of a different world, while those who adapt will become the future.

## 6. Conclusion

The play Coriolanus narrates the story of a distinguished military leader who returns home after a successful campaign, expecting to be honoured with the consulship—a position of political authority. The conflict between Coriolanus and the politically knowledgeable common people throughout the play highlights the key power dynamics within the political landscape. The exchanges between Coriolanus and the tribunes Brutus and Sicinius illustrate how rhetoric is a political tool to empower, disempower, and manipulate various groups. Finally, Coriolanus cannot overcome the political forces in Rome, leading him to confront the consequences of his exile and failure. The contrasting language surrounding his triumphs and eventual decline sheds light on the differences between soldiers and politicians.

Deprived of military might and recognised status, Coriolanus finds himself unable to effect meaningful political change. Lacking an understanding of or connection with the people he interacts with verbally, he cannot effectively appeal to them. The tragic elements of Coriolanus's journey emerge as his hubris closes his eyes to the very status upon which he bases his attempts at persuasion. His patrician background prevents him from employing ordinary means of persuasion that rely on moral superiority or genuine concern. This inability is compounded by his disdain for the individuality and independence of the common people, whom he derogatorily labels as malleable bawds. The resulting societal divisions manifest in imagery and behaviour that reflect these tensions.

Coriolanus is a noble-born general who first refuses to engage in politics, wrestling with his pride and ambition in a complicated political world. Despite being an unparalleled fighter, Coriolanus has little ability to understand the subtleties of government and ultimately fails as a politician. Despite his exceptional skills as a warrior, Coriolanus's inability to adapt to the intricacies of governance leads to his downfall. His disdain for the common people exacerbates their contempt for him, culminating in demands for his exile. This moment is encapsulated in this man's incompetence to relate to those he considers inferior while simultaneously revealing the contents of his heart, for indeed, that shows the very depth of

his heart, which is very bitter contempt for their suffering. The tragedy of Coriolanus shows the roles played by individual zeal in altering political systems and armies and destroying everything and everyone around them. This creates a broader context of the story around the individual. Coriolanus describes how every little personal, political, or social threat easily provokes all-consuming ambition. Coriolanus deeply explains how difficult it is to function within the military and political contexts of power relations. This also portrays how individual motivation and societal expectations have affected contemporary political discourse.

As a soldier, Coriolanus is powerful, expressed throughout his military achievements, and is absolute and never confronted by anyone's corrosiveness. His willingness to abandon it and no longer serve as the instrument of Rome's power seems to be misunderstood by all. As a statesman, he is misunderstood, not at all seeing the Plots and lies intervening in the political sphere as the source that turns all Power Interests upside down. He is shattered by the response to his offer to end the famine and is further sullied by his inability to undo the Spoils and recover his lost Power. The voice of the people in Coriolanus is a significant theme that highlights the citizens' powerlessness against the ruling class, the influence of the tribunes, and the importance of collective action. The play's exploration of these themes resonates with contemporary political issues.

Coriolanus's defeat as a political leader lies in his refusal to be Machiavellian. His unwillingness to compromise, work with others, or put gaining power above personal pride shows that he is unfit for office. The tragedy of Shakespeare thus emerges as a parable for all time, a parable in which the relevance of Machiavelli is made a lesson in the intersections of power, pragmatism, and leadership.

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