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Sexual Imagery in Coriolanus

RALPH BERRY

An undercurrent of sexual images helps to establish the issues of Coriolanus. Coriolanus' military victories are presented as reflexes to his relationship with Volumnia, who regards her son as a kind of sexual surrogate. He images victory as a sexual triumph; and the related images of acting imply that war provides him with an identity. Coriolanus's tragedy is that he cannot forge a new identity without destroying his mother. Coriolanus and Aufidius see each other not only as rivals but as models for emulation, and there are hints of a quasi-homosexual relationship between them. The final charge, "boy", is in the deepest sense a sexual insult. The best internal view of the play is provided by the servants' dialogue in Act IV, which suggests that sex and aggression are profoundly linked.

Of sexual interest, in the conventional sense, there is virtually nothing in Coriolanus. But an undercurrent of sexual images adds to our "secret impressions," in Morgann's phrase, of the theme of the play and the character of Coriolanus. They provide an insistent suggestion that the concerns of the play are sexual, defined in the broadest sense; or that the mainsprings of the activities depicted are not without sexual implications. The subject-matter of Coriolanus is politics and war; but the sexual images imply that a major focus of interest lies elsewhere. The interrelation of war and sex is the underlying theme of the play.

We can conveniently begin, as does Shakespeare, with Coriolanus's relations with his mother. The first pronouncement that we have on Coriolanus's motivation is the First Citizen's, "I say unto you, what he hath done Famouslie, he did it to that end: though soft conscienc'd men can be content to say it was for his Countrrey, he did it to please his Mother, and to be partly proud..." (I.i.38-41).\(^1\) The statement that Coriolanus is dominated by his mother is amply confirmed later; and it indicates that the main actions of Coriolanus's public career, his military victories, have to be regarded as reflexes of the primary human

\(^1\)Quotations are from the New Variorum Edition of Coriolanus, ed. H. H. Furness, Jr., (Philadelphia), 1928.
relationship. If we turn to Volumnia, we find that she regards Coriolanus’s person and fame is a sort of sexual surrogate: “If my Sonne were my Husband, I should freelier rejoice in that absence wherein he wonne Honor, then in the embracements of his Bed, where he would shew most love. . .” (I. iii.4-7). Her pleasure is in her son’s victories; but she is implacably opposed to his pleasure being taken anywhere else, and she adds significantly: “had I a dozen sons each in my love alike, and none lesse deere than thine, and my good Martius, I had rather had eleven dye Nobly for their Countrey, then one voluptuously surfet out of Action” (I.iii.24-27). “Voluptuously” identifies a form of independence that Volumnia has no intention of permitting her son.

The idea of war as a quasi-sexual activity is expanded in the battle scenes that follow. Coriolanus urges his troops to re-form and counter-attack with “If you’l stand fast, wee’l beate them to their Wives. . .” (I.iv.59). This is a reminder (made more explicit by Cominius in a later scene, (IV.vi-105-107) of the reward anciently grasped by victorious troops. (It is worth noting that Henry V did not make use of this particular war-cry, but Richard III did.) The matter becomes overt when the victorious Coriolanus greets Cominius:

Oh! let me clip ye
In Armes as soun, as when I woo’d in heart;
As merry, as when our Nuptiall day was done,
And Tapers burnt to Bedward.

(I.vi.38-41)

The consummation of the triumphant battle stirs the recollection of another consummation: the sexual and martial activities are profoundly linked in Coriolanus’s mind. And the symbolic values of fighting are, surely, openly revealed when Coriolanus cries delightedly to his troops, “make you a sword of me?” (I.vi.95) To regard the sword-symbol as phallic here is rather a necessity than an arabesque of criticism. I do not know what the line means as a literal statement. But Coriolanus seems to have an awareness of the emblematic potency of “sword.” I suggest that the line can only have a symbolic meaning, that war which Coriolanus came to as an adolescent made him a man, and supplied him with a sense of sexual maturity, the lack
of which he is to allude to in the crucial outburst of III.ii.136-149. But this is to run ahead of the developing insights into Coriolanus's mind that Shakespeare affords. To establish the import of the sexual images for Coriolanus, we have to consider the images of acting. Focused on Coriolanus, a number of references to acting stud the key scenes of the play. They imply a problem of identity, a man uneasily aware of the possible gap between "acting" (or seeming) and "being." Indeed, the hint of an inner uncertainty is dropped in the opening scene, as Coriolanus says of Aufidius:

And were I anything but what I am,  
I would wish me only he.  

(I.i.252-253)

—a wish interestingly paralleled by Aufidius, his "semblable, son frère":

I would I were a Roman, for I cannot,  
Being a Volce, be that I am.  

(I.x.6-7)

War provides ready-made models for emulation; usually from one's own side, but often from the enemy (cf., for example, the reputations of Rommel, Marlborough, Lee among their adversaries). It is this that seems to explain Coriolanus's attachment to the reputation of Aufidius—an attachment, nevertheless, expressed via the revealing "And were I anything but what I am." And then we find, as has frequently been noted, metaphors of acting used by and of Coriolanus. Cominius's panegyric asserts,

When he might act the Woman in the Scene  
He prov'd best man i'th'field...  

(II.ii.108-109)

Here, as elsewhere in the play and in Shakespeare the essential ambiguity of the verb "to act" is fully exploited. Coriolanus, to be sure, is at this stage of his career perfectly capable of distinguishing between "acting" and "being": "It is a part that I shall blush in acting..." (II.ii.164). But the inner uncertainty of Coriolanus has in fact been unconsciously acknowledged by
Cominius: he “rewards his deeds/ With doing them, and is content/ To spend the time, to end it” (II.ii.141-143). It is true: war provides Coriolanus with a means of identification. It gives him a personal model, and a pursuit; and it is sanctioned by his mother. It simplifies life. Indeed, Coriolanus has no hate for the Volsces—he rather likes them; they are necessary sparring partners. His hate is reserved for the Roman plebeians, who raise problems that cannot be solved in the simplifying war-situation. Is there a significance in the fact that he cannot even remember plebeian names? He can only recollect Brutus and Sicinius of the five tribunes (I.i.231-232) and forgets the name of his humble Volscean host altogether. “By Jupiter forgot” (I.ix.108).

In the first part of the play, Coriolanus moves successfully through his world. His quarrel with the plebeians is at least temporarily concluded by the coming of war. And war finds Coriolanus in his element. So long as the war-situation exists, Coriolanus can resolve the issues of war, sex, identity. But the people’s rejection of Coriolanus brings all the latent problems into the open. His pride, nurtured by his mother, has precipitated the crisis; and now mother withdraws her support.

Coriolanus. I muse my Mother
Do’s not approve me further, who was wont
To call them Wollen Vassailes, things created
To buy and sell with Groats, to shew bare heads
In Congregations, to yawne, be still, and wonder
When one but of my ordinance stood up
To speake of Peace, or Warre.

(III.ii.10-16)

Mother, of course, has got the point: the point is power, and pride comes after it, not before. And so, in response to Coriolanus’s anguished

Would you have me
False to my Nature? Rather say, I play
The man I am.

(III.ii.17-19)

Volumnia answers
Oh sir, sir, sir,
I would have had you put your power well on
Before you had worn it out. . . .
(III.ii.20-22)

and then, the stab that only she can deliver:

You might have beene enough the man you are,
With striving lesse to be so. . . .
(III.ii.24-25)

It is a part of the deadly insult that Aufidius finds at the last, "boy"; we receive an ineffaceable impression of strenuous immaturity, of a youngster trying too hard to prove his manhood.

If Coriolanus, however, suggests an underlying uncertainty—as how could he otherwise, given his mother—Volumnia is perfectly defined. For her, sex is a factor of power; and the sexual note underlies her elegant explanation of the shifts a power-figure must submit to. Coriolanus must speak

with such words
That are but roated in your Tongue;
Though but Bastards, and Syllables
Of no allowance. . . .
(III.ii.71-74)

The idea of words as unacknowledged bastards reinforces our impression of the frame of Volumnia's mind. She reaches majestically for a formula that apparently includes, but in fact excludes, the other sexually related figures in his life:

I would dissemble with my Nature, where
My Fortunes and my Friends at stake, requir'd
I should do so in Honor. I am in this
Your Wife, your Sonne. . . .
(III.ii.79-82)

She will speak for Coriolanus's partner and posterity. Power, with her, is the dominant of personal and sexual relations; and the word is on her lips with her clinching injunction to her son, "As thou hast power and person." (III.ii.105)

For her son, the maternal order constitutes a breach with
what he had conceived to be his nature. Had he been the man of certainty and solidity he appears to the world, he could well have accepted Volumnia's perfectly reasonable advice:

    performe a part
    Thou hast not done before.

(III.ii. 134-135)

No discredit, clearly, attaches to the actors who act, for good reasons, what they are not. But Coriolanus's reply makes plain the grounds of his deep repulsion from this part:

    Well, I must doo't:
    Away my disposition, and possesse me
    Some Harlots spirit: My throat of Warre be turn'd
    Which quier'd with my Drumme into a Pipe,
    Small as an Eunuch, or the Virgin voyce
    That Babies lull a-sleepe: The smiles of Knaves
    Tent in my cheekes, and Schoole-boyes Teares take up
    The Glasses of my sight. . . .
    I will not doo't,
    Least I surcease to honor mine owne truth,
    And by my Bodies action, teach my Minde
    A most inherent Basenesse.

(III.ii. 136-143, 146-149)

Why should Coriolanus fear that his body's action will corrupt his mind? The answer, surely, lies in the preceding imagery: the images of impotence, virginity, and weeping schoolboys. The wounds of adolescence have never, for Coriolanus, healed.

Wyndham Lewis is, I believe, right in asserting that "the child-parent situation is the mechanism of the piece. . . ."2 The triangular pattern of dominant mother, dominated son, and the quiet and (at least apparently) submissive wife is a convincing one. Even without Plutarch's statement that Martius "at her [Volumnia's] desire took a wife also, by whom he had two young children, and yet never left his mother's house therefore," we would note that Vergilia is just the wife that Volumnia would approve of: not an obvious competitor. (That Ver-

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gilia represents a set of values powerfully attractive to Coriolanus is very delicately and plausibly argued by Miss Ellis-Fermor.) It emerges, from Act III Scene two especially, that Coriolanus's character is partly undeveloped, and that its manifestations are very considerably the product of early drilling; the impossible pride, the contempt for social inferiors, the lack of contact with the realities of social interaction. But the grown man cannot respond to the order, "about turn"; and Volumnia, in asserting both the fact of dominance and the issuing of orders felt to be unnatural, jars open the unhealed wounds. It follows from this that we can hardly see his character as "monolithic" or compare him with the "oak." I prefer to take the shrewd estimate of the soldier, appraising Aufidius against Coriolanus: "The worthy fellow is our General. He's the Rock, The Oake not to be winde-shaken" (V.iii.110-111). The accented word is "our"; the appraisal, just. Whatever Aufidius's capacities as a military athlete, he has the character to dispose of his rival.

And so Coriolanus is driven into a situation where he cannot act the part of popular leader successfully, because nothing in his upbringing has prepared him for it. Yet his mother compels him to humble himself before the Roman mob. It is the first of the two great hammer blows, both delivered by his mother, that destroy him. His first reaction to the disaster of banishment is deceptively controlled, the words perhaps revealing a shakiness that the voice does not: "I shall be lov'd when I am lack'd" (IV.i.20). Love from the Roman crowd? The Coriolanus of the first three Acts would never have used that word in that context. There is a suggestion here that he needed the support and affection of Rome far more than he had dreamed. The matter is given another curiously sexual twist, when a commentator, Nicanor, observes: "I have heard it saide, the fittest time to corrupt a mans Wife, is when shee's falne out with her Husband" (IV.iii.31-33). This is yet another of the recurring hints that we are to evaluate the events in Coriolanus's career in a mode that is not politics, and not the simple psychology of pride and incapacity to feign. The alternative relationship then

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looms: a conjunction with Aufidius, together with a counter-
revenge upon Rome. The Aufidius-relationship is subtly deline-
ated. Perhaps the main element has already been indicated by
Coriolanus, in his Act I encounter with Aufidius: "Let the first
Budger dye the others Slave..." (I.viii.7). Dominance is what
both seek. And, in conformity to a well-known principle of
animal and human psychology, submission gains an instant
access of good-will. Both Coriolanus and Aufidius welcome the
alliance. Coriolanus, as his soliloquy makes clear, rationalizes
the matter as a chance of politics:

Oh World, thy slippery turnes! Friends now fast sworn,
Whose double bosomes seemes to weare one heart,
Whose Houres, whose Meale and Exercise
Are still together: who Twin (as'twere) in Love,
Unseparable, shall within this houre,
On a dissention of a Doit, breake out
To bitterest Enmity: So fellest Foes,
Whose Passions, and whose Plots have broke their sleep
To take the one the other, by some chance,
Some tricke not worth an Egge, shall grow deere friends
And inter-ioyne their yssues.

(IV.iv.18-28)

The point here is not so much the intense evocation of friend-
ship, and the conclusion that foes too could be in that position;
it is the shrugging-off of responsibility, the inner myopia, the
attribution of the situation to bad luck, "some tricke not worth
an Egge." It serves, at all events, to compose Coriolanus’s mind
for the submission. Aufidius, predictably, is delighted:

Oh Martius, Martius;
Each word that thou hast spoke, hath weeded from my
heart
A roote of Ancient Envy....
\[\text{Let me twine}\]
My armes about that body....
\[\text{Know thou first,}\]
I lov’d the Maid I married; never man
Sigh’d truer breath. But that I see thee heere
Thou Noble thing, more dances my rapt heart,
Then when I first my wedded Mistris saw
Bestride my Threshold.

The greeting mirrors that of his aristocratic alter ego (cf. Coriolanus' welcome of Cominius in I.vi.38-41). In the light of the other images, this message cannot be dismissed as mere hyperbole—a mode, in any case, foreign to this play. Both Aufidius and Coriolanus react to victory with a metaphor of heterosexual triumph. We can certainly regard this as a further manifestation of the sex-war link in this play. But there is another possibility that requires mention at this point. It is here that Shakespeare suggests, though he does not state, the possibility of a homosexual attachment between Aufidius and Coriolanus. It is left undefined, hovering between the possibilities of an attraction specific to these two, and of a general outcome of personalities reared in the aristocratic code and devoted to the symbolic activity of war. The matter is heavily underscored in the following scene—we should always pay particular attention to gossip from the servants' quarter when Shakespeare provides it: Third Servant. “Our Generall himselfe makes a Mistris of him, Sanctifies himselfe with's hand, and turns up the white o'th'eye to his Discourse” (IV.v.202-204). This is a broad enough hint. And Shakespeare moves a little later to a general appraisal of the nature of war and peace, putting the most acute observations of the play into the mouths of these same servants'-hall philosophers.

First Servant. Let me have Warre say I, it exceeds peace as farre as day do’s night: It’s sprightly walking, audible, and full of Vent. Peace, is a very Apoplexy, Lethargie, mull’d, deafe, sleepe, insensible, a getter of more bastard children, then warres a destroyer of men.

Second Servant. 'Tis so, and as warres in some sort may be saide to be a Ravisher, so it cannot be denied, but peace is a great maker of Cuckolds.

First Servant. I and it makes men hate one another.

Third Servant. Reason, because they then lesse neede one another: The Warres for my money.

(IV.v. 227-237)
We need no other text to serve for an explication of Coriolanus. There it is: sex is seen as an alternative to war; war is seen as a sexual displacement-activity, a communal therapy and a communal bond. It is, on the whole, rather more depressing than anything in King Lear. And there is nothing in the following scenes to contradict it: Cominius, indeed, spells out the immediate application of these propositions to the dumbfounded radicals:

You have holp to ravish your owne daughters, &
To melt the Citty Leades upon your pates,
To see your Wives dishonour’d to your Noses.
(IV.vi. 105-107)

It closes up the hint thrown out by Coriolanus in I.iv.59. In the aftermath of victory, war yields rapidly to sex.

But the final Act is reserved primarily for the private tragedy of Coriolanus. The sexually-potent situation in which he is enmeshed, allied to his search for identity, crushes him. Names, significantly, become now more important than ever:

Menenius. Coriolanus
He would not answer too: Forbad all Names,
He was a kinde of Nothing, Titleless,
Till he had forg’d himselfe a name a’th’fire
of burning Rome.
(V.i.15-19)

He is, as Maurice Charney remarks, “peculiarly oppressed by the reality of words”; “Coriolanus” is a profoundly significant title, to be renounced now that he will find a new identity and title in the destruction of Rome. But to destroy Rome he must destroy his mother too. This he tries to affirm:

Wife, Mother, Child, I know not. My affaires
Are Servanted to others. . . .
(V.ii.83-84)

But the great confrontation-scene breaks him down.

I melt, and am not
Of stronger earth then others: my Mother bowes,
In supplication Nod: and my yong Boy
Hath an Aspect of intercession, which
Great Nature cries, Deny not. Let the Volsces
Plough Rome, and harrow Italy, Ile never
Be such a Gosling to obey instinct; but stand
As if a man were Author of himself, & knew no other

(V.iii.32-40)

The gap between instinct and role opens wide; Coriolanus, deeply reduced to the admission—significantly different from the earlier ones (III,2, 18-19, 136-137)—not that he cannot play the part, but \textit{he does not know it}:

Like a dull Actor now, I have forgot my part,
And I am out, even to a dull Disgrace.

(V.iii.45-46)

Volumnia takes over. Her annihilating rhetoric crushes Coriolanus's will to pursue the path he had chosen. Her success has been described as "the victory of love"\textsuperscript{7}; it seems to me, rather, a simple capitulation, the victory of the stronger over the weaker. For Coriolanus it is defeat absolute; his only chance—of finding identity, never happiness—lay in the decisive pursuit of \textit{his} course, the attainment of \textit{his} role. And his final words to his mother speak not of love, but of fear:

Oh my Mother, Mother: Oh!
You have wonne a happy Victory to Rome.
But for your Sonne, beleeeve it: Oh beleeeve it,
Most dangerously you have with him prevail'd,
If not most mortall to him.

(V.iii.198-202)

Coriolanus cannot defeat Volumnia, "treade... on thy Mothers wombe." (V.3, 134-135) It is in this that lies the irony of Volumnia's own "This Fellow had a Volscean to his Mother"

(V.iii.190)—a line of infinite reverberations. And the identification of Rome with Volumnia is made complete in the aftermath: she is indeed "our Patronnesse, the life of Rome" (V.v.3).

Act Five, Scene three contains the climax to the destruction of Coriolanus, but the play is wound up as a matter arising from his relationship with Aufidius. It has already been made clear that Aufidius has fallen out of love with Coriolanus, so soon as he discovered that he was not the dominant partner in the relationship:

Aufidius. He beares himselfe more proudlier,
Even to my person, then I thought he would
When first I did embrace him.

(IV.vii.10-12)

This is the only direct motive given for Aufidius's policy, and it reinforces the idea—strongly represented in the words of Volumnia and Coriolanus—that the basic human motivation is the urge to power.

If, however, we wish to pursue the suggestion of a homosexual attachment between Aufidius and Coriolanus, we find nothing so overtly stated as the power-theme. There are hints, but these are of more use to the producer of the play than the analyst. It is certainly possible to extend the homosexual interpretation through such hints as Aufidius gives, when he ambiguously refers in the final scene to Coriolanus's "Seducing so my Friends" (V.vi.37-38) and asserts that he "Gave him way/ In all his owne desires" (V.vi.37-38). It is even possible to read an additional latent insult in Aufidius's final "boy": that is, the word bears the implication not only of "servant," but of "pathic," the passive sexual partner of the dominant Aufidius. Support for this conjecture is available from Troilus and Cressida, where Thersites has this observation to make of Patroclus's function:

Thersites. Prythee be silent boy, I profit not by thy talke, thou art thought to be Achilles male Varlot.

Patroclus. Male Varlot you Rogue? What's that?
Thersites. Why his masculine Whore.

*(Troilus and Cressida, V.i.15-18)*

Thersites's collocation of "boy" and "male Varlot" is interesting as a possible gloss on Coriolanus's infuriated reaction to "boy":

and his owne Notion,
Who weares my stripes imprest upon him, that
Must beare my beating to his Grave, shall ioyne
To thrust the Lye unto him.

*(V.vi.129-132)*

If we read "into," the reply to the covert charge is even clearer: Coriolanus asserts that he, not Aufidius, was the dominant partner in the relationship. The lines can be interpreted in two ways by those who accept the homosexual drift: Coriolanus is rebutting a general slander on his sexual proclivities; or he is asserting that notwithstanding Aufidius's claims, he used Aufidius as his pathic.

However, I believe all this to be a trail artfully laid by Shakespeare as a man of the theater—that is, one concerned with leaving the actors as much licence in performance as possible. He is suggesting the ambiguities of a relationship, not making a definitive statement. There is no need to go beyond the main essence of the Aufidius-Coriolanus relationship as it is specifically presented; that is, a power-struggle based on personal rivalry. (The relationship, it is worth adding, is curiously similar to Hotspur-Douglas in *Henry IV, Part One*. The same pattern emerges there, of the male aristocrats' mutual-admiration alliance, based on the submission of Douglas, and extended into the rather obvious irrelevance of Lady Percy in Hotspur's life. Clearly, Shakespeare's interest in the characteristics of the Hotspur-type did not cease at Shrewsbury. Achilles continues it; and *Coriolanus* is an extended investigation into the species.) The final scene of *Coriolanus* reads perfectly well as a cold-blooded destruction by Aufidius of his rival's pretensions, a course indi-

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9 An opportunity fully taken in, for example, Sir Tyrone Guthrie's production of *Coriolanus* at the Nottingham Playhouse, 1963.
cated as early as I.x. 17-18. Aufidus, knowing his man, seeks first to deprive Coriolanus of his name, and thus of his identity:

I, Martius, Caius Martius: Do'st thou thinke 
Ilé grace thee with that Robbery, thy stolne name 
Coriolanus in Corioles?

(V.vi.108-109)

He then supplies his own interpretation of the actions of Coriolanus:

Aufidius. But at his Nurses teares
He whin'd and roar'd away your Victory,
That Pages blush'd at him, and men of heart
Look'd wondering each at others.

Coriolanus. Hear'st thou Mars?

Aufidius. Name not the God, thou boy of Teares.(V.vi.117-12
(V.vi.117-122)

The title not only of Coriolanus, but of Mars, once given him by Aufidius (IV.v.124) is now stripped from him, and he is rated as a mother’s boy, a Venus-dominated Cupid unfit to stand in the ranks of men. It is, in the deepest sense, a sexual insult, since it cuts at his manhood. “Coriolanus” was not only a name, but an identity; and the alternative, which was “Romanus,” had been forbidden by his mother. The point about Aufidius’s charge is that it is perfectly true. And Coriolanus’s last maddened words are an affirmation of what he did, undirected by his mother, “alone.”

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Conclusion

The sexual images, references, and hints in this play seem to have several functions. First, they provide a plain (and to my mind unequivocal) statement that war is a quasi-sexual activity, or that sex and aggression are profoundly linked. I regard the servants’ dialogue in IV.v as a virtually “unfiltered” statement of a theme that the imagery has repeatedly suggested. Next, they throw light on the characters of several of the dramatis personae, and especially supply an important part of the puzzle
of Coriolanus's mind. The imagery suggests that for him too war is a manifestation of sex, and that both together must be considered as related to his problem of identity. Coriolanus, indeed, is one of Shakespeare's best titles. Thus the sexual imagery is linked with the repeated actor's images, all of them centered on Coriolanus—or, by contrast, on Volumnia. Finally, the sexual images, in revealing the bent of Volumnia's disposition, suggest through her a further general statement on sex. For Volumnia sex is part of the mechanism of power; her boy exists to fulfill her needs. She is the one triumphant figure that survives the play, the savior of Rome. There is an astringent irony in the juxtaposition of the two final scenes—the feted mother, the butchered son. The honors that she had once preferred even to the "embracements of his Bed" are hers. "Welcome Ladies, welcome" (V.v.9). The ironic effect of this tiny scene would be infinitely greater if it were staged after the death of her son; but are Shakespeare's intentions any less clear for making her triumph the penultimate scene?

And finally: it is especially difficult, given the topic of this paper, to avoid vulgarizing Shakespeare by relating this play to hypotheses of psychological doctrine that are familiar to us, but not to Shakespeare. But the raw material, the case histories on which these hypotheses have been based cannot have changed significantly since Shakespeare's day. It seems best to put on record a conclusion, then, and stress that it is intended as an insight into, not a dogmatization of, the issues of Coriolanus. I suggest that in all major Shakespearean drama, he intends us to look where possible for causation: to look beyond Othello to Iago, beyond Iago to Iago's corrupter. Applied to Coriolanus, this means that we must look beyond the public issues to the private, and among the private issues look to Volumnia for the origins of the play's action. The main public issue is a mindless war; in no other play does Shakespeare spend such little time on the formal motivations of the war. In the histories he spends much time, if sceptically, on the claims that can be advanced for the justice of this or that war. But in Coriolanus, the Romans fight because they are attacked ("the Volscies are in Armes," I.i.242) and the Volscies fight because they fight (I.ii.); not even a token justification is written in. The play becomes then an extended analysis of Coriolanus's reaction to the
news—"I am glad on't" (I.i.243); and to establish this analysis, we must turn to the dominant formative influence in his life. From Volumnia, we derive a strong impression of the interlinked impulses of sex and power. Her son, "my good Martius," resorts to war as a means of compensating for sexual uncertainty. Both he and Aufidius find the key issue of war to be an imposition of their will upon their major rival. In all this, the images of heterosexual activity hold in general metaphoric status. (The main exceptions are the servants' dialogue, and Cominius's blunt picture of the aftermath of defeat.) They pose, therefore, a familiar question: is the metaphor a means of illuminating the central activity of the play, war and politics, or is the metaphor the true focus of Shakespeare's gaze? The question is unanswerable; and we can no more resolve the sex power-drive distinction today than could Shakespeare. We must, then, fall back upon the position that the play's main emphasis is upon the foreground, the unending struggle of human beings to dominate one another. If Freud, debatably, is a key to Hamlet, then the key to Coriolanus is as debatably Adler. And in this play Shakespeare's verdict on the mainsprings of human action is not, perhaps, very different from the one that Thomas Hobbes was to voice some forty years later:

So that in the first place, I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death.10

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10 Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, Chapter XI.