

A New Historicist Reading of Shakespeare's Aesthetic Autonomy and Republican Voice in *Coriolanus*

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Abstract

This paper re-evaluates William Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* through the lens of New Historicism to explore its nuanced engagement with early modern political ideologies. While earlier criticism has often aligned Shakespeare's Roman plays with royalist values and monarchical ideology, this study argues that *Coriolanus* subtly reflects republican tensions embedded within the political consciousness of Elizabethan and Jacobean England. Drawing upon the works of Stephen Greenblatt, Montrose, and Paul Cantor, the research situates the play within the broader context of Tudor absolutism, civic republicanism, and state censorship. By referring to classical sources such as Plutarch's *Lives* and Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* the paper foregrounds the plebeian voice and institutional experimentation in *Coriolanus* as expressions of resistance, revealing Shakespeare's ambivalence toward authoritarian governance. The article also accounts for intertextual political events such as the Essex Rebellion and the Gunpowder Plot, suggesting that *Coriolanus* may be read as a veiled critique of absolute power. Ultimately, this paper contributes to the re-reading of Shakespeare's political vision by emphasizing the play's republican undertones and its relevance to contemporary debates on governance, public voice, and political agency.

Keywords: Coriolanus, Republican Values, Aesthetic Autonomy, Shakespeare's Roman Plays

1. Introduction

When Raymond Williams argued "we cannot separate literature and art from other kinds of social practice, in such a way as to make them subject to quite special and distinct laws" (Williams, 1978), and new historicists refused to privilege 'literature' like literary critics did, there arose a radical necessity for contextualising literature. Though at the same time cultural materialists denounced the monological approach, which is "concerned with discovering a single political vision" (Dollimore & Sinfield, 1994, p. 4). By the end of twentieth century it was well understood that powerful people or groups shape cultural production but early modern or for that matter postmodern consciousness cannot be simplified that way. Alan Sinfield's model of 'dissident reading' helps break away from this subservient/containment limitation.

Over the years it has been acknowledged that it was erroneous to view literature as a passive reflection of history. It is a practice, which intervenes "in contemporary history in the very act of representing it" (Dollimore and Sinfield, 1994, p. 10), and though Shakespeare understood well that his art was dependent upon a social agreement "he did not simply submit to the norms of his age" (Greenblatt, 2010, p. 15).

While Antony and Cleopatra serves as a logical sequel to Julius Caesar, and the protagonists of both plays are heroes of their times in distinct ways, Shakespeare's choice of Coriolanus—a relatively lesser-known figure in the Roman tradition—raises several questions. Whereas figures like Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, and Cleopatra have frequently inspired literary works, Coriolanus has received comparatively little attention, with notable exceptions such as Machiavelli and Plutarch. The question, then, is: what inspired Shakespeare to write Coriolanus? As Geoffrey Bullough (1975) aptly asked:

What led Shakespeare to write this play on a comparatively minor and early figure in Roman history? By 1607 he had presented in *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* two studies of Rome at the end of the Republic. He may have wished to show something of Rome in its beginnings. . . . He had only to glance into Livy and Florus or Plutarch to realize that Rome was not built in a day and that the story of Coriolanus illustrated its early state. (p. 454)

Having said that, this does not begin with the assumption of Eliot's celebrated judgment on *Hamlet* as an aesthetic failure, and *Coriolanus* as Shakespeare's best tragedy (Harding, 2012). As we read more of Shakespeare's Roman plays we rather get hugely and increasingly impressed with his knowledge of Rome, particularly his knowledge of the politics of Rome. It is established that Shakespeare was very much interested in the Republican form of government, an idea which runs counter to the common opinion that Shakespeare under the monarchy of Queen Elizabeth and later King James *only* helped to propagate autocratic regime. On the contrary, "Shakespeare, over the course of his career, repeatedly grappled with the question of whether he or anyone else could or should possess what we would call aesthetic autonomy" (Greenblatt, 2010, p. 5).

Although several influential critics have argued that Shakespeare was largely pro-monarchy and that his drama was ‘always already co-opted by the state’ (Montrose, 1996), this essay seeks to suggest—and, if possible, establish—that he was also significantly interested in the republican alternative. While some contend that republicanism was not a serious political interest around 1600, it is worth noting that by 1649 England briefly became a republic under Oliver Cromwell. Although this republican experiment was neither particularly successful nor enduring, its emergence indicates that republican ideas were not entirely absent from the political imagination of the period. This does not suggest that Shakespeare was calling for the overthrow of the British monarchy, but it seems, as the paper will try to show below, that he hoped the nation to move in the direction of Republican ideals.

Further the article tries to establish that Shakespeare was not just a propagandist of the Tudor myth, as is fashionably established, but on the other hand, a conscious voice that attempted its bit of protest against autocracy through the dramatic medium. Although trying to locate Shakespeare in either subversion/containment or resistance/complicity paradigms is quite reductive, it is of critical importance to appreciate the fluidity of the relations between Elizabethan theatre (and/or Shakespearean drama) and the Elizabethan State. Moreover, it was not an ordinary rewriting on the part of Shakespeare when reworking the plots (Barton & Alexander, 2004) from Plutarch’s *Lives*, or Livy’s monumental history of Rome and the Roman people, titled *Ab Urbe Condita*, or ‘From the Founding of the City,’ but it was, besides the great tragedies, the creative reinterpretation of the republican ideals of the Roman world that made Shakespeare stand at par with the best literature the world ever produced. At the same time, as a caveat, it should be remembered that the distinction between tragedies and other kinds of plays was not known in Shakespeare’s times, and Roman plays were placed with Tragedies whereas History plays were often deemed to be Tragedies. *King Lear* was, thus, known as a history play (Hattaway, 2013).

Most of the history plays, as well as tragedies, are full of episodes of sedition, quite brave of Shakespeare as against his “ideological location” (Montrose, 1996). Whether it was the usurpation by Henry Bullingbrook of the throne of Richard II, or it is Macbeth’s act of regicide to become the king. To establish the argument that Shakespeare’s writing of the Roman plays is not just drama but also a literature of protest it has to be seen how the bard works his way, generally, through *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and specifically to *Coriolanus*, to show that Rome declined culturally and politically when it shifted from republican ideals in *Coriolanus* to monarchy in *Antony and Cleopatra*. The theoretical framework of this essay draws from Paul Cantor’s (2017) ideas of the ‘Republic and Empire’ and Stephen Greenblatt’s (2018) concept of the ‘Shakespearean freedom.’

2. Literature Review

Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* has increasingly attracted scholarly attention through the lens of New Historicism, particularly in relation to political power, aesthetic autonomy, and republican ideals. New Historicist critics, most notably Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose, and Alan Sinfield, challenge earlier interpretations of Shakespeare as a passive supporter of monarchical ideology. Instead, they argue that Shakespeare’s works, including *Coriolanus*, engage critically with the political discourses of Elizabethan and Jacobean England.

Stephen Greenblatt’s *Shakespeare’s Freedom* (2010) and *Tyrant* (2018) highlight Shakespeare’s ability to subtly critique authoritarianism by embedding dissent within historical narratives. Greenblatt interprets *Coriolanus* as an exploration of “aesthetic autonomy” and social resistance, where Shakespeare creates characters that embody complex tensions between state authority and personal virtue. Louis Montrose (1996) complements this view by emphasizing the state’s co-optation of drama, while Alan Sinfield’s model of “dissident reading” proposes that texts such as *Coriolanus* can be sites of ideological contestation.

Historical sources also play a key role in shaping scholarly views. Shakespeare’s adaptation of Plutarch’s *Lives* and Livy’s *Ab Urbe Condita* has been analyzed by Barton (1985) and Cantor (2017), both of whom argue that *Coriolanus* functions not merely as historical narrative but as a creative reimagining of republican values. Cantor’s *Shakespeare’s Rome* (2017) situates *Coriolanus* within a Roman trilogy alongside *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, suggesting a thematic progression from republicanism to imperialism and cultural decline.

Andrew Hadfield (2005) further asserts that republicanism is not peripheral but central to understanding Shakespeare’s political vision. He suggests that *Coriolanus* embodies the tensions between patrician elitism and plebeian agency, reflecting England’s own political anxieties. This is supported by Wudel (2002), who proposes that the play’s relevance extends beyond its historical setting and serves as a case study for republican governance and civic identity in contemporary classrooms.

Nevertheless, some critics challenge the republican reading. Kuzner (2007) contends that the play’s portrayal of legal and social boundaries undermines its supposed affirmation of popular sovereignty. On the other hand, Holloway (2007) interprets *Coriolanus* not as a tyrant but as a figure committed to virtue, albeit lacking the political flexibility necessary for leadership in a republic.

This divergence of views highlights the interpretative richness of *Coriolanus*. The play’s ambiguous treatment of public voice, ambition, and governance continues to invite debate. While not overtly political by modern standards, Shakespeare’s portrayal of the early Roman Republic allows for nuanced commentary on contemporary issues of authority, resistance, and civic engagement. In doing so, *Coriolanus* exemplifies the complex intersections of literature and history, art and politics, and remains a fertile site for scholarly inquiry.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology rooted in the theoretical principles of New Historicism, which emphasizes the inseparability of literary texts from their historical and cultural contexts. By engaging with the foundational work of Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose, and Alan Sinfield, this methodology interrogates the relationship between power, ideology, and literary production in

early modern England. The central premise of this approach is that literature—rather than being an autonomous, timeless artefact—actively participates in the production and negotiation of cultural and political meanings.

The primary method employed is close textual analysis of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, with special attention to rhetorical patterns, political symbolism, character dynamics, and intertextual echoes. The study situates *Coriolanus* within the broader corpus of Shakespeare's Roman plays, particularly *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, to establish a thematic continuum that explores the evolution from republican ideals to imperial centralization. The dramatic elements of the play—such as the plebeian revolts, the formation of the Tribune, and the tension between personal virtue and public accountability—are examined through a historicist lens to unearth their political and ideological significance.

A key component of the methodology is intertextual comparison with classical sources, especially Plutarch's *Lives* and Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita*, which serve as both narrative foundations and ideological counterpoints. These sources are not treated merely as historical references but as politically charged texts that Shakespeare creatively adapts to reflect and critique the sociopolitical landscape of Elizabethan and Jacobean England. This comparative method reveals how Shakespeare strategically modifies classical narratives to comment on the tension between autocratic rule and republican sentiment.

Moreover, the study incorporates secondary scholarly interpretations—notably from Paul Cantor, Andrew Hadfield, and Carson Holloway—to contextualize the republican themes and philosophical underpinnings of Shakespeare's portrayal of Rome. These critics provide a framework for examining how republicanism, virtue ethics, and public discourse operate within the dramatic structure of the play. In addition, this article draws upon cultural and political history—such as the Essex Rebellion, Tudor absolutism, and Stuart succession crises—to align the play's thematic concerns with contemporary anxieties about governance, authority, and civic agency. By doing so, the research does not isolate *Coriolanus* as a literary artefact but reads it as a dynamic cultural intervention in the ideological debates of its time.

Ultimately, this interdisciplinary methodology—combining literary criticism, political theory, historiography, and classical reception studies—enables a nuanced reading of *Coriolanus* as both a work of dramatic art and a political text negotiating power, identity, and autonomy in early modern England.

4. *Coriolanus* and the Political Context

Nuttall's (2007) question "How Roman are the Roman plays of Shakespeare?" was given a befitting reply by Smith who defended Shakespeare while quoting Pope, saying "In *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar*, not only the Spirit but Manners, of the *Romans* are exactly drawn; and still a nicer distinction is shown, between the manners of the *Romans* in the time of the former and of the latter" (D. Nichol Smith in Nuttall, 2007), distinguishing early Romans from later Romans.

Although *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra* were written around 1607-08 and *Julius Caesar* in around 1599-1600 these plays form a sort of trilogy and if we order them historically, as per their settings, and not when they were written, *Coriolanus* would come first, suggesting the movement of the form of the government from being a Republic to an Empire. The Republican regime lasted roughly from about 500 BC to 50 BC and then began the Empire under Octavius Caesar, which later fell in the 5th century AD. These were very different eras and our image of Rome is complicated because of these different impressions. When we think of Rome we think of orgies and decadence, and we think of corrupt emperors. But at the same time if we look back at *Coriolanus*' times stretching to the times of Julius Caesar we find that Shakespeare was particularly interested in the impact of the kind of regime on Roman life either under a Republican form of government, as in *Coriolanus*, or in an imperial form of government as in *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Shakespeare's tragedies implicitly questioned inherited monarchy as the best or 'natural' form of government. Though the word 'republic' never appears in any Shakespearean text the *OED*'s earliest citation of the word dates only from 1603. But at the same time we can appreciate that *Julius Caesar* (1599) extols the virtues of republicanism, suggesting that converting Rome into an empire might bring tyranny. Amid uncertainties in *Julius Caesar* Brutus's decision to kill Caesar is the only "drastic step" that would "save the republic" and his clear message to his fellow citizens in the act of murder is "Stoop, Romans, stoop" (Greenblatt, 2018, p. 95). It was perhaps this sentiment that resulted in the expulsion of Tarquinius Superbus out of Rome by Junius Brutus, ancestor of the Brutus in *Julius Caesar*. The word 'commonwealth' in Shakespeare's works, therefore, signal secular values, but as far as tragedies are concerned, the word appears only in the Roman plays.

4.1 *Shakespeare and Elizabethan Times*

Many writers of Shakespeare's generation like Robert Greene, Thomas Lodge, Christopher Marlowe, Henry Chettle, etc., who came to London, produced prolifically. Compared to Shakespeare's thirty-seven Chettle wrote around fifty plays but it is well known that Chettle as well as Greene died in poverty. Shakespeare understood the competition and produced drama that had topical significance or political overtones, which lent help in appealing to a wider audience. We cannot say in certain terms how exactly were political issues represented in Elizabethan and Jacobean plays. Theatre, to some, was a critical institution, which the government feared would lead to sedition, uprising, etc., whereas to some it was just an escape with entertainment, and more of a safety valve for built up sentiments and emotions, instead of a political platform. Perhaps the theatre played both the roles, and whatever is the truth about censorship in those times political opinions somehow entered in Shakespearean play either unintentionally or by design.

Shakespeare also understood that the prevailing idea of Elizabethan governance laid emphasis on the necessity of order, through perfect

obedience, imposed by the monarch. The stress of the monarchy was chiefly on stability through stark, ruthless, and amoral statesmanship (Tayer, 2014). Elizabethan rule, moreover, nurtured the 'Tudor Myth,' which propagated the idea of the divine right of the Tudor bloodline by joining the houses of Lancaster and York and tracing the ancestral origin to Brutus, grandson of Aeneas, a prince from Troy (Collinson, 2000). Elizabeth successfully maintained the aura of majesty through these means. In such times it was very difficult for anyone to even slightly say or write against the order of the day.

Although Shakespeare's Catholic upbringing didn't convince him of Tudors' right to rule (Honingmann, 1998), monarchy held a manifestation of the timeless spiritual body of the kingdom (Hattaway, 2013). Yet, as we proceed and see, Shakespeare's plays suggest to a considerable extent, which Greenblatt (2010) too affirms, that "Shakespeare as a writer is the embodiment of human freedom" (p. 1). And since all autocratic governments resort to propaganda, Shakespeare had to be wise to survive. Moreover, it suited the Tudors to describe the immediate past as a national catastrophe so as to make their people think better of the present, and to make them think negatively about resistance to the reformed regime which would inevitably bring new broil. In order to press this argument, they looked to ancient Rome. Although theatrical performances as well as publication of tragedies were often seen as "potentially seditious interventions in the political life of the nation" (Dutton, 2022) quite ironically even history "plays inevitably, if unconsciously, weakened the structure of authority" (Kastan, 1986).

Yet Shakespeare's appropriations of uncomfortable events for the monarchy suggest a few things. William Hackett's rebellion in 1591 that can be seen in Jack Cade's in *Henry VI*, issues of political unrest reflected in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Prospero's exile, Lear's encounter with the bedlam beggar, are just few examples that broke the conventional plot settings. Lear's behaviour tells of the disputes over king's extravagance, and issues over purveyance and patents. The uprising in *Coriolanus* too can be alluded to the 1606 proroguing of Parliament.

Leeds Barroll (1998) correctly pointed out that it was the prose pamphlet by John Hayward and not Shakespeare's play performed for Essex, that would have made Elizabeth compare herself to Richard II, which shows that "Hayward case exemplifies Elizabethan methods of "public surveillance," exposing the dangers that faced writers such as Shakespeare who produced historical fiction in an atmosphere of "despotism"" (Lemon, 2001). Thomas Starkey who wrote for oligarchical republicanism was of the view that "to secure the well-being, dignity, and liberty of men ...was to hold free elections, the means that had fashioned the greatness of the ancient Roman republic" (Greenblatt, 2010). Greenblatt asserts that Shakespeare "understood this argument very well, yet he kept a critical, ironic distance from it" but did he really keep that ironic distance, is a question that is to be debated. Greenblatt says that the elections in the Roman Republic were "deeply flawed" but I still feel that Greenblatt tries to assess republican values as they should be, and there is nothing wrong in it, but at the same time it is to be seen that this was almost four centuries before Christ, and even an iota of resistance by those who had some "ethical motivation" (p. 78) was worth it.

4.2 New Historicist Examination of *Coriolanus* and other Roman Plays

The Roman Republic is said to have begun in 509 BC (Cornell, 1995). Events that take place in *Coriolanus* are from around 494 BC, when the Tribunes were granted to the people. This Republic lasted an estimated 450 years if we reckon Julius Caesar's assassination, in 44 BC, as the beginning of the empire (Cantor, 2017). What Cantor (2017, 2019) calls the Empire has its peculiar features, not of a republic, but more like a monarchy, and this too lasted for roughly 450 years till the usually accepted time of the fall of Roman Empire in the mid or the end of the 5th century AD.

Shakespeare's Roman plays, including Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra, and *Coriolanus*, offer a window into the cultural and political anxieties of early modern England. Through a New Historicist lens, these plays can be seen as reflecting and refracting the concerns of Shakespeare's own time, particularly regarding power, authority, and national identity. These plays demonstrate Shakespeare's fascination with the complexities of imperial power and the tensions between individual ambition and collective governance. These themes resonated with the English audience, who were grappling with the legacy of the Tudor dynasty and the emerging Stuart monarchy. The plays' exploration of Roman politics and society allowed Shakespeare to comment on the nature of authority, the role of the monarch, and the relationship between the state and its citizens.

Rome loomed large in the background in so many ways, culturally and linguistically, and the grandeur of Roman ruins could be seen all over. But above all it was Rome's political achievement, which was unprecedented. This huge empire that the Roman Republic had put together and had maintained seemed extraordinary. There were clear efforts to imitate it. The strange institution of Holy Roman Empire, which was kind of a loose confederation of German states under the head of an elected Emperor made it almost inconceivable that one country had put together an empire of this size. Only by 1607 the first British colony was found and most of the aspirations for a British empire could be alluded to the Roman antiquity, especially to the Roman Republic which can be said to have created the Roman Empire and turned the Mediterranean into a Roman lake. Rome was therefore at the centre of political discourse in the Renaissance. And Shakespeare was among those who wondered why Rome was so important politically and militarily. Just a rough sense of the Roman history helps us appreciate the gradual process that inspired a great play such as *Coriolanus*.

This republic, the setting of *Coriolanus*, was ruled by an Oligarchy, a group of noble families running the government. These families owned land, were wealthy, and they were noble in the sense that the heads of these families were noble warriors or prominent people. At the centre was senate, largely peopled by this nobility. A Marxist way of looking at this arrangement is to say that Rome was ruled by rich people but another way of looking at it is that it was a Plutocracy, at least that's the way the Plebeians in *Coriolanus* viewed it. So, the

members of the senate were not elected people and offices were inherited. At any given moment there were two Consuls chosen or nominated by the Patricians. Coriolanus tries to become one but fails. The idea that there would be two consuls also suggests that Romans didn't like the one-man rule, the result of which they had seen in Tarquin the Proud whose son raped Lucrece. These Consuls could veto each other, served as magistrates one by one each month, and they had to step down after a year passed. They were basically generals who performed civic functions but their main role was military. At any given moment there were a lot of people who had been Consuls previously.

It is of interest to realise that Shakespeare must have read Plutarch and had a good competence in Latin to have read Livy and Tacitus. The latter was successful in exposing corruption in Rome post Julius Caesar. Shakespeare must have also known Senecan tragedies (Perry, 2021) and could sympathise with the idea that rebellion would be right, although it would be early to label Shakespeare as 'monarchomachist'². But before Shakespeare came to prominence, the second half of the 15th century was a time of aristocratic division. In his historical novel *Anne of Geierstein* published in 1829 Sir Walter Scott coined the term the 'Wars of the Roses' as a description for those contentions between the houses of York and Lancaster and he did so under the influence of a famous scene in Shakespeare's *Henry VI Part 1* where representatives of the rival households pluck red and white roses in the garden of the temple Church in the City of London. The notion that Henry Richmond's victory at the Battle of Bosworth, his defeat of Richard the third, and his marriage to Elizabeth of York had reconciled the two houses, united the nation, and established a new dynasty, was essential to the self-fashioning narrative of the Tudor monarchs. We owe, therefore, to Sir Walter Scott's reading of a scene that Shakespeare invented.

In Julius Caesar's 'Life' Plutarch noted that Cicero anticipated grave danger in Caesar's meteoric rise. For the Elizabethans Cicero was the embodiment of the Roman Republic. Under his consulship the conspiracy of Cataline, a conspiracy that was dramatized in a play by Ben Jonson, was suppressed. Cicero's great speech against Catiline was thought of as the great defence of the Republic. In fact, Cicero blamed Mark Antony for offering the kingdom to Caius Caesar, which made him the dictator perpetuo thereby destroying justice by the substitution of kingly powers. In a famous oration Cicero said:

Was it for this that Lucius Tarquinius was driven out; that Spurius Cassius, and Spurius Maelius, and Marcus Manlius were slain; that many years afterwards a king might be established at Rome by Marcus Antonius, though the bare idea was impiety? (Cicero, 1852)

Despite the fact that Shakespeare understood Cicero's importance, the character Cicero speaks only four lines in *Julius Caesar*, but that does not, in any sense, suggest that Shakespeare compromised with republican values. Shakespeare never spoke for a particular faction and perhaps that was why he preserved his safety whereas so many of his fellow dramatists found themselves having their places closed down or indeed finding themselves imprisoned, which this article rather foregrounds as the bard's strategy to work for republican values in ways possible in his times. While Ben Jonson asserted that his plays had an important regulative function, Shakespeare rather suggested that his "art had no use-value whatever. It functioned only to give pleasure, ...it existed as the audience's dream-work," and this could be one of the ways in which he inculcated "a lifelong habit of staying out of prison" (Greenblatt, 2010, p. 121).

Wudel (2002) who took up 'Shakespeare's Coriolanus in the Political Science Classroom' justified his selection by saying, "To put it in the briefest compass: the more prominent themes of *Coriolanus*—the nature of ancient politics, political expertise, regimes, and the interplay of honor and ambition—make it well suited to the exploration of politics in general" (p. 217). Moreover if we look at Wudel's (2002) points that he tries to point out to for looking objectively as to what kind of issues marked the Rome in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, we can see how close these issues are to some of the most relevant questions even in modern republics. He asked his students to make a list of the problems in Rome that needed to be solved. Typically, it read like this:

- cure disputes between the plebeians and the patricians;
- develop experts in both foreign and domestic policy;
- make the city a whole;
- organize for peaceful change and transition;
- provide for all;^[1] include the politically ambitious;
- control the military;
- give a true political role to women;
- formalize the structure of government. (Wudel, 2002, p. 220)

We realise how Shakespeare's plebeians and Wudel's comparative study of Hamilton, Madison, and Jay's (2016) majority faction, can explain "the root for many political ills, most notably a threat to liberty" and if left unchecked it may lead to a "new kind of despotism that does not violently oppress human beings but which provides for them while limiting their rights" (Wudel, 2002, p. 221). This does not in any way suggest that the regime in Coriolanus is as democratic as we have in modern days, but it may suggest that Shakespeare's efforts to recreate Roman antiquity does well for republican values.

4.3 Locating Coriolanus in Elizabethan Times

Though monarchical power derived from God, as the royalty claimed, "early modern Englishmen were more used to thinking in terms of duties than of rights" while other Elizabethans believed that a monarch had an absolute right (Sharpe, 2000). Popular maxims³ such as

‘The king can do no wrong’ and ‘What the king wills, that the law wills’ have been in record since 1530s. On the other hand in the official record of Queen Elizabeth’s coronation we find that the popular propaganda was that civil war and bloodshed had ceased due to the unification of the two houses Lancaster and York (Hunt, 2008). There was, also, an unintended result of this sort of Tudor propaganda, which rather invoked the Roman ideals of strife that brought dynasties to power. This can be read as the reason Shakespeare’s plays mark the Ciceronian idea of the heinous outcomes of civil war. It is possibly for this reason that *Julius Caesar* and *Titus Andronicus* are shown to be full of civil strife, also a connecting theme in *Richard II* and *Henry IV*.

Due to the coexistence of imperial ambitions and latent sentiments for the republican ideal in such a time it is quite complicated to understand the Elizabethan audience’s view of the Roman world. Whenever people thought of an empire what came to their minds was the Roman Empire. Despite the fact that now when we think of most influential literature in antiquity we think of Homer, Greek literature was not that well known in Elizabethan England, and it was a recent development in those times if compared to an already known Roman world.

Coriolanus, often seen in the context of Machiavelli’s *Discourses on Livy*, suggests that early Rome persists on virtues like the valorisation of battlefield heroics, where subtler needs pervade in an environment titling towards political sophistication. This may also mean that Shakespeare was sympathetic of popular political representation, and that “there is nothing in the play to challenge that famous interpretation of the tribunate which [. . .] Machiavelli made a premise of Renaissance political theory” (Patterson, 1989).

Shakespeare’s interest in ‘Machiavellian’ ideas almost made him misrepresent Plutarchian narratives of Roman heroes by omitting what Plutarch demonstrates in his version of *Coriolanus*’ life where *Coriolanus*, when expelled from Rome, finds Volscians unwilling for war. Shakespeare also omits how *Coriolanus* incites plebeians against the patricians. As compared to Plutarch’s version where he finds in *Coriolanus* “craft and deceit,” Shakespeare offers *Coriolanus* as noble and without any dishonest convictions helping him suit his theatrical (and political) purposes.

Shakespeare posits *Coriolanus*, the man of military action never concerned with the inglorious arts of peace, as a returning soldier quite similar to the Earl of Essex. The Earl of Essex famously having conquered the Irish, though not actually fully succeeded in conquering the Irish, returned to London and before long launched an attempted coup d’état against Queen Elizabeth. Comparing him to *Coriolanus*, as represented by Plutarch, Shakespeare forwarded another story of a great military general returning to the city in *Julius Caesar*, the opening play for the new globe theatre, which Shakespeare dramatizes in 1599 exactly when the Earl of Essex was in Ireland.

People vote for *Coriolanus*, when he contests the election for consulship, but soon they are persuaded by the tribunes to withdraw their votes suggesting that *Coriolanus* should be executed, thrown from the top of the high rock because he despises the people and would behave like a tyrant.

“The price” of the consulship is, as *Coriolanus* learns, was “to ask it kindly” (I. iii.75). The plebeians “see to it that not even the noblest Roman can disregard the needs of the body completely. The patrician who makes no allowance for the eros of the plebeians is banished from the city” (Cantor, 2017, p. 71).

Shakespeare, while writing for the Elizabethan audience, very well knew that Romans were self-indulgent in thinking of themselves as great warriors, an idea that found favour in his times. Also, Romans were not known to be concerned with sophisticated pursuits like philosophy etc. But that would not preclude inner conflicts within his best characters. A beautiful example of this is found in Greenblatt’s (2018) words when he rephrases the thoughts of Brutus in *Julius Caesar*:

In how much danger is the Roman republic, which I love and will defend with my life? What does Cassius want from me? How likely is it that Caesar—who has just thrice refused a proffered crown—will develop into a tyrant? What is the best way to prevent a disaster? How should my close, long-term personal friendship with Caesar factor into whatever decision I reach? Would it make more sense simply to watch and wait? (p. 93)

Despite being the “only play in Shakespeare’s whole career that features a systematic, principled attempt to stop tyranny before it starts” (Greenblatt, 2018), *Julius Caesar* still falls behind in representing republican values. Shakespeare makes the audience realise that “Brutus’s desire to keep his motives free from any taint of self-interest or violence is a mere fantasy” (Greenblatt, 2018). On the other hand Caesar, unlike *Coriolanus*, defeats all his rivals and closes the door of Republican values to Romans forever. It is in realising the reason that destroys republican values in *Julius Caesar* that we understand how it works in *Coriolanus*, a political system that turns out to be “a classic example of a system of check and balances” (Cantor, 2017, p. 70). In one of the reviews of Patterson’s (1989) *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice*, Kamps (1990) notes:

Armed with a new interpretation of the social significance of the Midlands Rising ...and a keen sense of the struggle over royal prerogative and constitutional guarantees between James I and parliament, Patterson reads *Coriolanus* as a text deeply concerned with the viability of the people’s power. (p. 1088)

Coriolanus, “arguably Shakespeare’s most political play” furnished for the Elizabethan audience, and even for the modern audience, a “drama that sheds most light on the promise and perils of republican politics” (Dobski, 2024, p. 119).

5. Shakespeare’s Aesthetic Autonomy and *Coriolanus*

Greenblatt (2010) wrote that “there is evidence that autonomy as a concept interested Shakespeare, even if the word itself remained

unfamiliar to him.” Greenblatt proceeds on to explain how Shakespeare reflected this in three different ways in “a dream of physical autonomy,” “social autonomy,” and “a dream of mental autonomy.” For Greenblatt these three dreams “are conjoined on at least one occasion, in Shakespeare’s depiction of *Coriolanus*” (p. 106)

In the tragedies, *Hamlet*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Julius Caesar*, besides *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare demonstrates that political authority comes from various forms of election instead of direct inheritance or coups d’état. Hamlet’s Denmark, for instance, sports a hybrid constitution, a sort of elected monarchy, which is quite focal to the political as well as moral issues of the play. Claudius, who commits regicide is also an adulterer but is shown to be a good king as a peacemaker, deflecting invasion from Norway. The electors of Denmark are shown to be ignorant of his crimes but at the same time, it is hinted (Tkacz, 1992), that they did well to choose him instead of his nephew, perhaps due to Hamlet Jr.’s melancholic disposition.

Perhaps for such reasons as above Jonathan Bate (1997) and Stephen Greenblatt (2010) tried to rescue Shakespeare from the prevalent political appropriation of his plays, which framed him in the image that he supported conservative British politics of Elizabethan times.

Is it, therefore, possible to assert that Shakespeare’s tragic vision in his Roman plays could be the possible consequence of the political defects of his age chiefly manifest in the lack of democracy? Shakespeare’s scepticism “seemed to extend to the popular voice, so ironically treated in *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*” (Greenblatt, 2010, p. 84).

5.1 *Coriolanus* and Republicanism

“Was Shakespeare a republican?” is the question with which Hadfield (2005) begins the introduction of his book *Shakespeare and Republicanism*. His next statement is “Does it matter whether he was?” Matters or not it is his contention that “republicanism is not simply one of many subjects we might wish to use to contextualise Shakespeare’s work. Rather, it is one of the key problems that defined his working career” (p. 1). As against the popular picture of Shakespeare the propagandist for the Tudor myth, Shakespeare can also be located in Shakespeare’s subtly created sentiments against the established order. Although “None of Shakespeare’s plays, not even *Macbeth*, unequivocally endorses the view that every act of usurpation is automatically evil, and none condemns as necessarily unethical the use of violence to topple the established order” (Greenblatt, 2010, p. 76), he adds “Unlike the most conservative voices in his time, Shakespeare did not position himself squarely against the bloody unthroning even of anointed monarchs,” though the execution of Charles I in 1649 had nothing to do with the kind of literature he produced despite his belief that “Violence... was one of the principal mechanisms of regime change” (ibid.)

Most discussions of the political aspects of *Coriolanus* assume that there are only three forms of government possible in Shakespeare’s historical Rome- Aristocracy, Democracy, and Monarchy, and that most criticism on Shakespeare prospered in making him the soft target for perpetrating autocracy. *Coriolanus* presents, on the other hand, the fourth form of government, a sort of mixed regime, which blends aristocracy with democracy (Cantor, 2017).

Coriolanus takes place essentially at the founding of the Roman Republic where earlier Rome had been ruled by foreign Kings and Etruscan dynasty. After the Tarquins were kicked out by the people, Rome was largely ruled by senators and consuls who came from the patrician class, while lacking any popular representation. The play is shown to open with the plebeians in revolt against their oppression by the patricians. Plebeians, up in arms, threaten violence and realising the dangers the city’s government decides to create the office of the tribunes. With this begin both the Roman Republic as well as *Coriolanus*. While *Coriolanus* deals with the founding of the Republic *Julius Caesar* deals with its end, conspicuously effected in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Although in the opening scene in *Coriolanus* Menenius is shown defending the Patricians by equating rebellion against the Roman state with rebellion against Roman Gods (I.i.67). In relating rebellion to impiety, there is a clear suggestion that the patricians take care of the interests of the plebeians. Coriolanus’ statement, “Let them not lick/The sweet which is their poison” [III.i.198-99] cannot be comprehended in republican values if we look at the political order through our modern ways of understanding the Roman politics where “valor is the chiefest virtue” [II.ii.84], and “the best way of life is that of the public-spirited warrior” (Cantor, 2017, p. 69).

In creating the Tribune it seems the patricians are rather concerned with what the leaders in rebellion aspire for instead of the needs and demands of the plebeians, an idea that resonates with some of the ways in which democracies in modern world work at times. Shakespeare’s development of the roles, which deviates from Plutarch⁴, shows a more well-defined and well-developed role of the tribunes in *Coriolanus*. Shakespeare’s portrayal of inequality of wealth between the patricians and the plebeians, despite its existence in the form of privilege of the former, suggests his critical stand of contempt for the poor. This finds its extension of the portrayal of patricians pushing the plebeians to the margin so that they find it extremely hard to pay attention to any state matters, refraining from any political ambitions.

This proceeds with the co-existence of spirited men and appetitive men, the former among the plebeians and the latter among the patricians, at times where “the appetitive men within the patrician class work to restrain the immoderate pride of some of their party” and the “spiritedness of the tribunes acts in the service of the eros of their fellow plebeians” (Cantor, 2017, p. 70).

While autocracy and tyranny breeds in such an atmosphere we see that “in depicting the aspiring tyrant’s strategy, Shakespeare carefully noted among the landed classes of his time the strong current of contempt for the masses and for democracy as a viable political possibility” (Greenblatt, 2018, p. 23).

Democracy, of course not in its modern sense, which started deteriorating from *Coriolanus*, lingers in *Julius Caesar* when Brutus is

shown to be bothered with people cheering Caesar and he says “What means this shouting?” and he adds “I do fear the people/Choose Caesar for their king” (1.2.79–80).

There have been some important and considerable voices that oppose the reading of *Coriolanus* for republicanism. For instance Kuzner (2007) says that though, *Coriolanus* “represents the birth of Roman republicanism as the birth of a state,” it “uses law to place individuals outside the law” albeit for “securing personal borders” (p. 174). Kuzner approaches the play not politically well enough and looks at the play from the modern sense of a republic. For a playwright embedded in a system out and out autocratic it was more than enough for Shakespeare to champion the republican elements instead of looking at *Coriolanus*’ undoing in Jean-Luc Nancy, Agamben, Bersani, and Judith Butler’s perspective (Kuzner, 2007).

Reading *Coriolanus* for republican values has its supporters too in Carson Holloway (2007), the same year as Kuzner published his reservations, who says that “*Coriolanus* falls short of Aristotle’s standard” and that “reflection on his defects reveals that genuine magnanimity requires prudence and a philosophic detachment from the city’s moral convictions that Shakespeare’s hero lacks” (p. 353). However, Holloway also maintains that “the play lends support not to the view that *Coriolanus* is moved by love of honor, but rather, like Aristotle’s *megalopsuchos*, by a principled commitment to virtue,” proceeding in parallel with the caveat that “Shakespeare offers no indication that he intends *Coriolanus* as an exploration of magnanimity” (ibid.). At this point it is of value to remind of the Roman body politic that it lacks a “kingly crowned head” (1.1.110), and that *Coriolanus* is banished from Rome by the plebeians choice.

Even if we read *Coriolanus* in the Political Science room and we notice that “students see a striking contrast between Shakespeare’s Roman republic and the United States today” (Wudel, 2002, p. 218), we cannot afford to forget that the political life of Rome “takes place within the horizon bounded by its regime,” which rather “suggests to them that they, too, live within the confines of a regime and, more importantly, that they need to think about the kind of politics and corresponding distresses to which it gives rise” (Wudel, 2002, p. 219).

5.2 Different Romans: From *Coriolanus* to *Mark Antony*

To understand how the Roman world that Shakespeare recreated taught, broadly, two different lessons to two different classes, the only classes of the Elizabethan times, we need to look at the subtle ways in which Shakespeare used the stories of Roman antiquity to fashion forth plays, which at the first glance appeared contradictory but on careful consideration rather complementary, and which showed how the nobility and the Monarch would learn from the patricians of the Roman world the scorn for ordinary life and how the ordinary masses learnt from the plebeians the idea of self-preservation. Shakespeare’s use of the Roman world in these plays written for Elizabethan times is an extension of his art, which influenced the way early modern literature was shaped. Of all his political corpus Roman plays turned out to be the most outstanding perhaps due to, among many reasons, “the rising popularity of theater and theatricality,” and “the rise of English republicanism and its ideals of participatory government and personal liberty” (Kuzner, p. 176) despite the fact that “studies that interrogate Shakespeare’s role in the construction of early modern national identity typically focus on his history plays” (Carroll, p. 13).

Thus, if *Coriolanus* stood as a symbol of absolutism, while the plebeians’ grievances are heard and the Roman hero is banished, there is also the essentialist concept of the individual, focused on *Coriolanus*’ assertion of individual subjectivity. On the other hand it also suggests the playwright’s conception of the unyielding Roman warrior against the strain of external forces.

The image of a battle-hardened Roman soldier was not built in a day. Even if we don’t believe in the divine origin of the Romans, as in their myths, we know that Rome was more of a refugee settlement, which explains their toughened lives. By the time Tarquin the Proud was expelled from the city it was clear that one thing that the Romans did not like was kingship, something offered to Julius Caesar, but known well to him how bad it was an idea. Monarchy for the Romans was not just a bad idea but it was, to them, a sort of foreign regime. Romans’ understanding of the state too was quite different from ours. It is therefore important to bear in mind why being a Roman in the times of *Coriolanus* and being a Roman in the world of *Antony* is so different. On a close reading of *Antony and Cleopatra* we see that the emphasis of the play is neither on the individual or the family but on the ways showing how a whole nation slides into civil war and tyranny.

Whether in histories or in Roman tragedies, Shakespeare creates a narrative of a nation shaped by legends, conflicts, wars and nationalist sentiments. This symbolic world structured the way England perceived itself, perhaps as better than the rest of the world. In this effort Shakespeare makes efforts to differentiate between citizens and subjects. What he admired about the Republic was that it produced citizens, and what disturbed him about the Empire was that it produced subjects. Although this kind of Republic that Shakespeare seems to celebrate is not akin to democracy in any modern sense but the point is that the Romans had a say in governance. In effect the tribunes would veto anything the Senate passed, and could get the most prominent military leader of Rome be banished from Rome. In the broader movement of these plays from citizens to subjects Shakespeare shows in *Coriolanus* a remarkable understanding of the classical Republican regime, a combination of monarchic aristocratic and democratic elements.

In contradiction to the celebration of Republican ideas in *Coriolanus*, *Antony and Cleopatra* shows that the rigidity of political hierarchy redirects men from public to private lives, and “Once the world of politics loses its glory, the world of eros can take on a new glamor” (Cantor, 2017, p. 45). If *Coriolanus* begins with concerns for immediate needs in a rebelling Rome *Antony and Cleopatra* opens in luxury. Antony seeks pleasure to “sharpen” his jaded “appetite” (II.i.25), and his country is decadent whereas *Coriolanus*’ Rome lacks sophistication but it is in an uncorrupted state. He is austere, a man made strong out of disciplined life and martial virtues.

The decline of Republic into Empire and therefore the change from love for martial values among Romans to love for eros is well played

in *Julius Caesar*, which ends with the conviction that the race of noble Romans is on the verge of extinction:

Titinius: The sun of Rome is set. Our day is gone,
Oods, dews, and dangers come; our deeds are done!

[V .iii.63-64]

Shakespeare's tragedies, *Othello*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*, often emphasise, therefore, the great ability of warrior princes to rule successfully as kings of peace. In *Coriolanus*, however, the focus is on the loss of political authority by the tragic hero.

So hated, and so banished. But he has a merit^[SEP]
To choke it in the utt'rance. So our virtues^[SEP]
Lie in th'interpretation of the time^[SEP]
And power, unto itself most commendable^[SEP]
Hath not a tomb so evident as a chair^[SEP]
T'extol what it hath done^[SEP]
One fire drives out one fire, one nail one nail^[SEP]
Rights by rights falter, strengths by strengths do fail.
(IV.6.48-55)

Aufidius, in the above statement, does not mean that Coriolanus is vicious but blames him for failing to transform his achievements in the battlefield to victory in the senate, "not moving^[SEP] From th'casque to th'cushion" (IV. 6. 42-43), akin to Goddard's claim that Coriolanus "lacks unconsciousness of his virtue" (In Bloom, 2009, p. 36).

Coriolanus is not only stoic but also has contempt for ordinary life. For him "Contempt of life (and, by implication, of all one's most demanding personal relationships) must be supplemented by a proper egoism;" and "though a man be banished from his beloved country, yet he can always reflect that over his own mind he is undisputed king" (Nuttall, 2007). On the other hand, Nichole E. Miller's (2009) discussion of personal sacrifice and limited reciprocity also discusses the threat of the professional soldier through the Machiavellian prism, as well as the sacrificial aspects of concessionary politics described by Machiavelli in his *Discourses*. Examining the status of the gods in *Coriolanus*, then, one realizes that the play does not portray a state in the modern sense, but rather a city in the ancient sense, a polis.

The tribunes, with their emphasis on representing the voices and interests of the citizens, underscore the importance of accountability and responsiveness in leadership. In contrast, Coriolanus' disdain for the people's influence and his reluctance to engage with their concerns reflect a fundamental disregard for the principles of representation. "With every minute you do change a mind, And call him noble that was now your hate, Him vile that was your garland." (Act 1, Scene 1). Coriolanus criticizes the people's fickleness and lack of stable opinions. "What would you have, you curs, That like nor peace nor war? the one affrights you, The other makes you proud." (Act 1, Scene 1) Coriolanus' contempt for the people's supposed cowardice and lack of resolve. "He that will give good words to thee will flatter Beneath abhorring." (Act 2, Scene 2) Coriolanus' dismissive attitude toward the people's voices. "Their tribunes are a vulgar tongue; they speak Of him that made them." (Act 3, Scene 1)

6. Conclusion

Coriolanus' character embodies the dangers of unchecked power and the corrosive effects of pride and ambition, while the tribunes' role highlights the importance of representation and accountability. This juxtaposes a delicate balance between individual ambition and collective well-being, an important theme in 20th and 21st centuries. Locating *Coriolanus* in its historicity not only highlights the fragility of republican systems but also underscores the importance of checks on power and the role of civic engagement. A New Historicist approach is therefore able to move some serious debates on fundamental questions about the nature of governance, power distribution, and the ideal relationship between rulers and the ruled.

One of the most striking aspects of *Coriolanus* is its exploration of the complexities of civic participation. The article has been able to demonstrate how questions about the role of citizens in governance, highlighting the tensions between apathy and engagement, obedience and dissent, became more and more relevant as Rome moved from a 'Republic' to an 'Empire.' Shakespeare's portrayal of the Roman people, with their shifting allegiances and mercurial nature, underscores the challenges of representing the will of the people. The character of Coriolanus, with his aristocratic bearing and disdain for the common people, along with Julius Caesar and Antony.

The play's nuanced portrayal of Coriolanus' struggle with his own identity and the polity underscores Shakespeare's mastery in navigating the intricacies of human emotion and societal dynamics. Ultimately, *Coriolanus* stands as a testament to Shakespeare's enduring artistic vision, one that continues to captivate audiences with its profound insights into the human condition, reaffirming the playwright's autonomy as an artist and his timeless relevance.

Shakespeare's aesthetic autonomy in *Coriolanus* is exemplified through the play's sophisticated examination of power dynamics, identity

formation, and the human condition. The play's continued resonance with contemporary audiences attests to Shakespeare's enduring artistic vision, his autonomy as an artist and his ability to craft works that remain timeless and universally relevant.

6.1 Limitations

The political element can be seen everywhere in Shakespeare, whether we read *Macbeth* or *Hamlet* where the concern is kingship, or *The Tempest* that dwells on power, or *Cymbeline* that concerns with war, and international relations, and peace generally. The whole of Shakespearean corpus is full of rulers, questions of authority and obedience, laws, and contracts. And if we go by recent definitions of the political, which includes any act that has a social dimension, the range widens.

This article therefore tries to limit itself to what is political in a narrower sense: the traditional ordering and enforcing, and the gaining or losing of (public) power in the state. This leads to a 'fair' concentration on those Shakespearean plays that are most directly concerned with this traditional sense of the political instead of that which deals with emotional, moral and private issues. Because of this reason the article studies the Roman plays in general and *Coriolanus* in specific and does not deal with *Titus Andronicus*, a great Roman tragedy, which rather deals, Act II onwards, more with the private than the political.

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Notes

1. The Royal Shakespeare Company says “*Coriolanus* was probably written around 1607-8 and was first published in the First Folio in 1623. There is no record of the play being performed during Shakespeare's lifetime.” See <https://www.rsc.org.uk/coriolanus>
2. A word coined by William Barclay in 1600, which designated any writer who believed in the right to resist. Though it is not implied that the writer would deny the validity of monarchy.
3. On 21 March 1610 in a speech to parliament King James laid out an ‘axiom of divinity:’ “That as to dispute what God may do is blasphemy . . . so is it sedition in subjects to dispute what a king may do in the height of his power. But just kings will ever be willing to declare what they will do if they will not incur the curse of God. I will not be content that my power be disputed upon, but I shall ever be willing to make the reason appear of all my doings and rule my actions according to my laws.” See Richard J. (2012).
4. The revolt in Plutarch’s version is precipitated with the support of the Senate. Even the scarcity of grains does not pop up until Coriolanus fights the Volsces.