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“That Brave Egotist”, Martius
The anxious and ideological masculinity of *Coriolanus*

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Abstract

This thesis explores the societal implementation of masculinity in relation to William Shakespeare's play *Coriolanus* and its 2011 film adaptation directed by Ralph Fiennes. Through both texts, we see a society where masculinity holds a deep-rooted ideological position that rules and dictates the comings and goings of the worlds. The thesis unpacks this ideology, exploring how it is considered masculine to hold the hegemonic position and how it is similarly considered masculine to conform to the currently celebrated expression of masculinity. Through this, the thesis explores the arbitrariness of masculinity and its underlying anxiousness. Chapters explore the play in a historical context and, through close inspection of Fiennes' film, show the current relevance of debates around masculinity.

Simone de Beauvoir famously declares, "One is not born, but becomes a woman". Likewise, the thesis shows that one is not born masculine but becomes masculine. Masculinity is a coherent system of appearances, speeches, and behaviours that people perform in order to be conferred with the coveted title and position of hegemon. Since people have different capabilities of achieving complete coherence and proximity to the mythological perfected form of masculinity, society becomes structured and ordered based on people's ability to conform with masculinity. Those who can conform receive socioeconomic benefits based upon their position, and those who can't become subordinated with a precarious socioeconomic position. Similarly, because of the apparent arbitrariness of this system, there is an underlying anxiousness to it. Some people, especially in the socially dominant positions, have an overwhelming fear of losing their positions founded upon their arbitrary dominance.

Despite its antiquity, being about 400 years old, the play maintains distinctly applicable to our world today. The thesis explores how, through the ongoing developments in our current world towards a more equitable society, the play has held an obvious clutch on

people's psyches. Whether it was in 1608 when the play was written, during New Zealand's first production of the play in 1929, in 2011 during the release of Fiennes' film, or today in (2024) when this thesis was submitted, the play remains inexplicably relevant and interesting to any foreseeable audience.

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This thesis would not have existed without the kindness, support, and love of so many people (far too many to mention). Thank you to my family and friends for standing by me during this monumental moment in my life.

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Preface

Reflecting on the past 18 months, and I'm sure it mostly goes without saying, this thesis has occupied an overwhelmingly significant portion of my life. It came into existence (in a form that would be recognisable today) in late April 2023, when, in an email, my would-be supervisor Mark Houlahan recommended “two deeply serious and complex Shakespeare plays” with many themes that he thought I would like. These plays were *Troilus and Cressida* and *Coriolanus*. Quite obviously, at least one of these plays caught my attention enough that I decided it would be my sole directive for at least the next 500-plus days of my life. Over this time, I have developed a complex love-hate relationship with Shakespeare's play and Fiennes' film.

Following my immediate exposure to both “*Coriolanus*”, I remember falling in love with the play for a reason that I couldn't quite explain but hating the film for what felt like turning my beloved play into a gun-crazed modern military action film. Once the excitement of starting a new project had worn off and the reality of the task before me set in, however, I began to feel a little bit of lethargy towards the play – perhaps due to overexposing myself to it by intensely agonising over the most minute details in every single edition of the play I could get my hands on – and finding solace in the film for providing a modern recontextualization which was novel enough to revitalise my interest in the play and carry me through the moments of tedium. Despite this, I have finally come full circle, truly loving both the play and film for their various layers of complexity and perhaps because I believe it is truly Shakespeare's greatest masterpiece.

Although it has been responsible for countless sleepless nights, the sending of teary emails and messages to people, and multiple threats of giving up and abandoning this project, the play (and my broader thesis as a whole) has become a great source of routine and stability for me throughout the past year and a bit. My copy of Peter Holland's third Arden – which I

have lovingly edited the cover of with a taped piece of paper so it reads as ‘——anus’ – with its peeling cover, dog-eared pages, highlighted passages, penned notes, and enough tape and sticky notes to be an environmental hazard for years to come, has been a mainstay in my handbag since purchasing it in May 2023. I have had so many pints of beer and demitasses of espresso over it, and I will genuinely miss the moments when I could escape into its tattered pages. It has become quite a comforting and therapeutic symbol for me in the moments of great change that have coincided with this thesis. I have lived in three different houses, worked two different jobs, and have had two birthdays. I had also come out and begun my transition within the last year and a half. As such, I have found great solace and therapy in working through this project.

As complex as my relationship is with *Coriolanus* and my thesis, I certainly have an even more complicated relationship with masculinity as a result of my 20-something year-long grappling with masculinity and my newfound gender identity. Just like some of the people whose work I have engaged with while researching for this thesis (such as Raewyn Connell, Abigail Thorn and Judith Butler) I am trans*. Specifically, I am a transgender woman. And like many trans* people, for various complex reasons (and some I still don't quite feel I can confidently comprehend or articulate), I reached the point in my life where I essentially wanted to remove myself and distance myself from the masculine sphere I was born and raised to inhabit. With this thesis incidentally covering gender and coinciding with this pivotal moment of my life, I have been allotted the opportunity to explore my relationship with masculinity.

In my mind, the best explanation and understanding of masculinity comes from Connell's book *Masculinities*. Here, she explores how hegemonic masculinity, the socially dominant form of masculinity, legitimises and justifies men's cultural superiority over women. She also explores how, within her gender order theory, this idea of the hegemony of

masculinity (hegemonic masculinity) is responsible for the subordination of other men and the stigmatisation of things such as homosexuality, disability and economic instability. All in all, Connell's work helped me understand and explain my relationship with masculinity. Why, for example, had people throughout my childhood constantly called me "gay" or other derogatory things to delegitimise my existence? Why did I feel ashamed that I was never good at rugby or football, and why was it such a big deal? Why did I feel like I had to constantly pretend to be tough and stoic when I didn't want to be? Through Connell's work many of my questions were answered, and the "game" of masculinity began to whittle away from being this tangible thing I constantly wrestled with to an obscure cultural lie people tell themselves. It was at this point my thesis was conceived as it exists now. I wanted to explore and understand this big thing that I found so antagonising to my existence. I wanted to gain reassurance that "this thing masculinity" wasn't just a figment of my (or Connell's) imagination.

I turned to a play that, not a month before, I never knew existed. A play that, in my first reading, when I read Martius' lines, 'What's the matter, you dissentious rogues, | That, rubbing the poor itch of your opinion, | Make yourselves scabs?' (1.1.159-161) I felt a sense of justification in the face of this purely – as I had come to know it through Connell – masculine character. This thesis results from all this reading, thinking, and writing to seek justification, and I hope it is as insightful to you, the reader, as it has been to me.

My thesis follows a simple structure. In the first chapter, I recount the first performance of *Coriolanus* in New Zealand in 1929 and how, through quoting various newspaper articles that reviewed these performances, this early 17th-century play was praised by 20th-century New Zealanders for its relevance. I then explore how these reviewers treated the play in relation to the "manly sentiment." This specific phrase kick-starts my thesis. Following this introduction, I define and outline some critical frameworks that

underpin my discussion on *Coriolanus*. I specifically focus on ideology, the anxiousness of masculinity, the conferral of gender, and various aspects of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

In the second chapter, I focus on Shakespeare's play in relation to two different characteristics of masculinity. The first characteristic explores how the play's portrayal of masculinity constructs a framework of gender competition resulting in the subordination of people outside the masculine vogue. The second examines how the play's masculine society constructs an atmosphere of alienation, which allows for the perpetuation and continuation of gender inequality.

In the third chapter, I look at Fiennes' film and explore how adapting the play's setting revitalises its applicability to modern audiences. Specifically, I explore the significance of knives in the film, how certain characters become more relevant, and how the film restructures Martius, Volumnia, Virgilia, and Young Martius' relationship. Through these and various other adaptorial decisions, I explore the effects this has on the film's portrayal of masculinity.

Chapter 1 | Masculinity in *Coriolanus*: Masculine Anxiety and Gender Performativity

Following their 1928 tour of Australia, the Allan Wilkie Shakespearean Company arrived in Wellington the year after to hold a four-week season in the Grand Opera House before touring the country. During this season, New Zealand saw its first-ever performance of *Coriolanus* on 2 February 1929.¹ Although the production failed to receive a ‘generous attendance of the public, who [were] not showing nearly the interest in the Wilkie season that the quality of the plays and the manner of their presentation would lead one to expect’,² it garnered praise for Ada Lorna Forbes’ strong performance as Volumnia, and how she ‘made this warlike old woman a figure swayed by the deepest passions and put honour and arms high above domestic love and duty’.³ The reviewer recounted how she gave ‘an emotional performance of outstanding merit’, specifically giving mention to how

Miss Forbes, with vivid expression and a perfect command over the language of Shakespeare, showed her contempt for her daughter’s sadness when her husband leaves for the wars, and in a very vital way exhibited pride and delight when she learns that her son once more returned crowned with oak, and bearing on his person the honourable wounds of conflict. How she gloated at the prospect of further war and additional honour for her son, whilst the wife wept; how she begged Marcius to speak mildly to the people for his election as Consul, and with what moving vehemence did she sue for Rome in the final act.⁴

¹ ‘Allan Wilkie Season: “Romeo and Juliet”’, *Dominion*, 2 February 1929, <<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/DOM19290202.2.12>> [accessed 30 October 2023].

² ‘Allan Wilkie Season: “Coriolanus”: First Performance in New Zealand’, *Dominion*, 4 February 1929, <<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/DOM19290204.2.37>> [accessed 30 October 2023].

³ ‘Allan Wilkie Season: “Coriolanus”: First Performance in New Zealand’.

⁴ ‘Allan Wilkie Season: “Coriolanus”: First Performance in New Zealand’.

When the play was later performed in Auckland's His Majesty's Theatre on 7 March 1929, reviewers repeated the strong reception of Forbes' *Volumnia*. A writer for the *Auckland Star* claimed that

Miss Lorna Forbes gave a memorable performance as the forceful *Volumnia*[,] mother of *Coriolanus*[.] The Roman matron would no doubt have been a rather trying sort of person to live with unless you happened to be always up to Jack Dempsey or Tom Heeneey form. If the Roman mothers were so full of fight it is no wonder the Roman sons were such world-weeping fighters.⁵

Within these productions, the titular character, Caius Martius (Wilkie), was seemingly upstaged by his mother, receiving very little mention in the Wellington newspapers. One possible reason for this could be that Wilkie's performance was relatively weaker compared to Forbes'. A review of the Auckland performance praised Wilkie for being 'a great actor, capable of putting his whole strength and soul into his work', while questioning whether 'his delivery of Shakespere's [*sic*] noble lines [met] the preconceived notions of every spectator',⁶ implying that perhaps the audience didn't see all that Wilkie was capable of that evening. Nonetheless, following the Wellington production, one reviewer did provide some insight into the portrayal of Martius, noting that Wilkie acted 'on blunt, rugged, soldierly lines, declaiming the many speeches in a spirited manner, though not always with the most varied range of tone and expression'.⁷ However, apart from this brief mention, most of his performance went unchronicled until the reviews of the Auckland production were printed.

⁵ 'The Military Mind: "Coriolanus": First Staging in Auckland', *Auckland Star*, 8 March 1929,

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/AS19290308.2.140>> [accessed 30 October 2023].

⁶ 'Drama of Revolt: Staging of "Coriolanus": War and Assassination', *New Zealand Herald*, 8 March 1929,

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH19290308.2.155>> [accessed 30 October 2023].

⁷ 'Allan Wilkie Season: "Coriolanus": First Performance in New Zealand'.

The *Auckland Sun*, in their review of the Auckland production, provided a deeper insight for Wilkie's performance, explaining that

Mr. Wilkie's Coriolanus was a triumph of careful judgement and restraint. He portrayed rather a duller, slower fellow than the character and the circumstances indicate, but the suggestion of imperious obstinacy, combined with a measure of manly sentiment, was always there.⁸

Additionally, in another review of the production, the *New Zealand Herald* recounted how

Mr. Wilkie stormed at the mob and flung scorpion jibes in the faces of the people. He cut such an overpowering figure that even one's most treasured democratic ideals withered away in admiration for so immense a man. After all, tyrants persist in holding the imagination like no humanitarian.⁹

What I find interesting about both of these responses to the character of Martius is how ingrained their receptions are with masculinity. By describing Martius as '[t]his unrelenting aristocrat, possessed by a deep-seated contempt for the mob [...] imbued with the qualities of high statesmanship',¹⁰ and explaining that Wilkie was 'finely brave as Coriolanus' filling the character 'to the pleasure of the most [ardent] Shakespeare student' (Although admitting how 'at times it was rather difficult to catch the end of [Wilkie's] sentences'),¹¹ the reviewers instil their cultural assumptions about masculinity onto the play. The most prominent of these being how masculinity and inequality are enshrined together.

⁸ 'Brave Egotist "Coriolanus" Appears: Mr. Wilkie-Miss Forbes', *Sun (Auckland)*, 8 March 1929, <<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/SUNAK19290308.2.146.7>> [accessed 30 October 2023].

⁹ 'Drama of Revolt: Staging of "Coriolanus": War and Assassination'.

¹⁰ 'Drama of Revolt: Staging of "Coriolanus": War and Assassination'.

¹¹ 'The Military Mind: "Coriolanus": First Staging in Auckland'.

This idea that masculinity perpetuates inequality is shown through the *Auckland Sun*'s review of the Auckland play. Here they confidently declare that

Shakespeare was no Socialist. *Coriolanus* is the strongest proof of this. Though no valid reason is given, the Roman commoners are abused and scorned. They are portrayed as a stupid rabble led by knaves. True enough, that brave egotist, Coriolanus represents the other extreme, but despite his many and unworthy failings he is always the hero.¹²

While I quite broadly disagree with the claim that Martius remains the hero throughout the play, I do find the reviewers attribution of conservative beliefs onto Shakespeare's work intriguing. Perhaps the reviewer saw Martius' ability to wither "one's most treasured democratic ideals" (referencing the *New Zealand Herald*) as evidence to inform this belief – positioning the play antithetically to socialism and drawing attention to the conflict between the world of *Coriolanus* and a system of beliefs which are concerned with social and economic equality. Operating within the belief that socialism, as defined by Simon Blackburn, is a 'general concern for people's equal rights to various benefits (health, education), and of a concern to limit the inequalities of wealth and power produced by the unrestricted operations of market forces'.¹³ Here the *Auckland Sun*, building upon reviewers' previous references to Martius' "imperious obstinacy" or to his "manly sentiment", places societal equality at odds with masculinity. Presupposing that there it is an obvious belief that masculinity, by definition, requires the social and economic domination of others through the elevation of the self. This understanding of masculinity seems intrinsically intertwined with R. W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, which is described as 'the configuration of

¹² 'Brave Egotist "Coriolanus" Appears: Mr. Wilkie-Miss Forbes'.

¹³ Simon Blackburn, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, 3rd edn (Oxford University Press, 2016), Oxford Reference <<https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz>> [accessed 24 January 2024], s.v. Socialism.

gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women'.¹⁴ As such, we can see that *Coriolanus* has, whether intentionally or not, been treated as an entrance point for exploring the historical construction of patriarchy and for scrutinising the ideology of masculinity.

The Continual Relevance of 'Coriolanus' and the "Masculine Crisis"

In order to allow the reviewers to view the text in such away, they saw and interpreted *Coriolanus* as a commentary on contemporary events that were culturally prominent to them. For instance, the reviewer for the *Auckland Star* interpreted the play as an allegory for New Zealand's administration over Samoa from 1914 until 1962, linking the 'bumbling response' of Robert Logan's leadership during the 1918 influenza pandemic and Martius' 'sergeant-major mind',¹⁵ and viewing the play as a commentary on the general failures of military men in 'popular government [and how] they lack [t]he temperament to be able to see the [v]iewpoint of the vulgar herd'.¹⁶ Clearly, despite *Coriolanus* being written some 300 years before they had experienced it, the reviewer understood it through the lens of their contemporary events and cultural knowledge. In the words of Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes, they '[urgently recognised] the permanence of the present's role in all our dealings with the past'.¹⁷ Where historicists aim to understand a text through its historical context, presentists understand a text through the 'various temporal and geographical conditions in

¹⁴ R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Polity Press, 2003), p. 77.

¹⁵ 'New Zealand in Samoa: Page 2 – Background', *New Zealand History*, <<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/politics/samoa/background>> [accessed 1 November 2023]; 'The Military Mind: "Coriolanus": First Staging in Auckland'.

¹⁶ 'The Military Mind: "Coriolanus": First Staging in Auckland'.

¹⁷ *Presentist Shakespeare*, ed. by Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes (Routledge, 2007), p. 3.

which consumption of [it] occurs'.¹⁸ Bringing awareness to these “temporal and geographical conditions” is necessary for analysing a text because it allows literary works to ‘tell us what has been elided or suspended in conventional or accepted historical accounts’.¹⁹ This opens up the possibility for various feminist, queer, postcolonial, and, specifically in the context of this thesis, masculinist interpretations of historical texts. It also allows us to look beyond the heteronormative, Eurocentric and patriarchal voices which overwhelm discourse and investigate the marginalised voices which regularly go unrecorded and unrecognised. Of course, the strengths of presentism and historicism are their abilities to coexist and build upon each other. When reading and analysing a Shakespearean text (or any text for that matter) it is vital to understand the historical position the author is writing in. This helps unshroud the mystery behind a character’s speech and allows modern readers to engage with, what are commonly thought to be, unintelligible texts. Due to the progression of time and the development of language, so much of Shakespeare’s language – his wit, metaphor, and bawdy – is locked behind antiquated definitions, references and cultural meaning, making his text partially inaccessible to modern readers. Historicist sources (such as David and Ben Crystals’ *Shakespeare’s Words*) can assist modern readers in decoding texts, providing a much-needed springboard and starting point for a presentist reader who wants to explore Shakespeare’s work in the modern day. At a certain level, before we can understand the applicability of a continually relevant extratemporal text, we must do our due diligence to understand what Shakespeare was *actually* saying.

Obviously, Shakespeare’s work has had a continual relevance and impact on the people who have experienced it. Whether it was in the 17th century when the play was

¹⁸ Evelyn Gajowski, ‘Beyond Historicism: Presentism, Subjectivity, Politics’, *Literary Compass*, 7.8 (August 2010), pp. 674-691 (p. 675), doi:10.1111/j.1741-4113.2010.00728.x

¹⁹ Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 6th edn (Routledge, 2023), p. 178.

written; in 1929 during these performances in New Zealand; in 2011 following Fiennes' film adaptation; or today, *Coriolanus* has had a diverse and persistent history within culture. It has survived broad transposition into various diverse settings and contexts. The *Auckland Star* reviewer, acknowledging this, commented on how 'There is no doubt [*Coriolanus*] is a good play, holding the audience in a grip that showed what a master in expressing the human emotions Shakespeare remains, even after the lapse of several centuries'.²⁰ Certainly, following Slavoj Žižek's criterion that 'the way to test a great work of art is to ask how it survives decontextualization, transposition into a new context',²¹ clearly the play is a "great work of art". Žižek, building upon this ability for great texts to survive adaptation, declares that 'one good definition of a classic is that it functions like the eyes of God in an Orthodox icon: no matter where you stand in the room, they seem to be looking at you'.²² Stating that great works of art bridge the temporal gap to the reader and meet them where they are, providing some valuable insight on their world, culture and location. This is why I chose to have *Coriolanus* as the foundation for my thesis. Despite its obscurity compared to Shakespeare's other plays – admittedly I had never heard of the play before Mark Houlahan introduced me to it – *Coriolanus* has continually existed in the underbellies of our culture; even to a first-time reader, there is something overly familiar about the play. Furthermore, because the play has had such a diverse history of "decontextualization and transposition", it has already begun to be viewed through a masculinist lens – thanks to the reviewers of New Zealand's first performances and other critics.

Much like how *Coriolanus* has been overwhelmingly present in societies across time, there, similarly, has been the prevailing notion of a "masculine crisis" across a substantial

²⁰ 'The Military Mind: "Coriolanus": First Staging in Auckland'.

²¹ Slavoj Žižek, 'Occupation blues', *New Statesman*, 12 December 2011

<<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,sso&db=a9h&AN=69603597&authType=sso&custid=s4804380&site=ehost-live&custid=s4804380>> [28 October 2024].

²² Žižek, 'Occupation blues'.

amount of history. It seems that people are constantly worrying about men – anxiously wondering what is “wrong” with men or if they are “manly” enough. In Henry James’ 1886 *The Bostonians*, Basil Ransom explains how the future generation of men are failing at “manhood”.

The whole generation is womanised; the masculine tone is passing out of the world; it's a feminine, a nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age, an age of hollow phrases and false delicacy and exaggerated solitudes and coddled sensibilities, which, if we don't soon look out, will usher in the reign of mediocrity, of the feeblest and flattest and the most pretentious that has ever been.²³

Many years later, in a 1958 edition of *Esquire*, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. published an essay titled ‘The Crisis of American Masculinity’ which begins with the question ‘What has happened to the American male?’²⁴

For a long time, he seemed utterly confident in his manhood, sure of his masculine role in society, easy and definite in his sense of sexual identity. The frontiersman of James Fenimore Cooper, for example, never had any concern about his masculinity; they were men, and it did not occur to them to think twice about it. [...] Today men are more and more conscious of maleness not as a fact but as a problem. The way by which American men affirm their masculinity are uncertain and obscure. There are multiple signs, indeed, that something has gone badly wrong with the American male’s conception of himself.²⁵

²³ Henry James, *The Bostonians* (The Floating Press, 2009), p. 545.

²⁴ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., ‘The Crisis of American Masculinity’, *Esquire*, November 1958, p. 63, cited by Brad Congdon, *Leading with the Chin: Writing American Masculinity in ‘Esquire’, 1960-1989* (University of Toronto Press, 2018), pp. 16.

²⁵ Congdon, pp. 16-17.

In more recent years, Christine Emba begins her 2023 opinion piece for *The Washington Post* by critically chronicling the failures of young men who are, supposedly, becoming “weird”.

I started noticing it a few years ago. Men, especially young men, were getting *weird*. It might have been the “incels” who first caught my attention, spewing self-pitying venom online, sometimes venturing out to attack the women they believed had done them wrong. It might have been the complaints from the women around me. “Men are in their flop era,” one lamented, sick of trying to date in a pool that seemed shallower than it should be. It might have been the new ways companies were trying to reach men. “The average hoodie made these days is weak, *flimsy* ...” growled a YouTube ad for a “tactical hoodie.” “You’re not a child. You’re a man. So stop wearing so many layers to go outside.”²⁶

For whatever reason, these writers, and countless others, have identified something “wrong” with men. Throughout history, it seems that men have failed to act in a way that they “ought” to. This is the pretence of this thesis. What are the supposed ways a man ought to act? Where ought a man be in society? I hope to explore *Coriolanus* with these questions in mind.

Gender Performativity, Lacanian Psychoanalysis, and Conferralism.

One perspective on these questions can be found in Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*. Here, they explain that gender is performative. That it is a coherent system of

acts, gestures, enactments, generally constructed, [which] are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications*

²⁶ Christine Emba, ‘Men are lost. Here’s a map out of the wilderness’, *The Washington Post*, 10 July 2023 <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/07/10/christine-emba-masculinity-new-model/>> [accessed 24 January 2023].

manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.²⁷

(original emphasis)

Under this view, gender is not necessarily *done* but *possessed*. This is to say that gender isn't merely a performance or a role we inhabit like actors on a stage presenting to an audience rather, Butler argues that by taking on a gender; by adopting a series of speeches, actions, or gestures, we become or transform into that gender. They explain that

[t]o say that gender is performative is a little different because for something to be performative means that it produces a series of effects. We act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman.²⁸

This understanding of gender emphasises the artificiality of gender expression and brings to the forefront its semiotic nature. By viewing gender through Lacan's post-structuralism and his concepts of the psychic orders, Butler creates a worldview where masculinity, and more broadly gender, have significant linguistic meaning. Being understood as a performative (i.e., an action, speech, or appearance which brings about an effective change in reality) which conveys specific meaning. This means that by participating and acting as a particular gender, you become or are transformed into that gender. Butler's theory of gender heavily builds upon Lacan's psychoanalysis and his psychic orders. Through Lacan's theories, we arrive at the simple conclusion that reality (i.e., our perception of the world around us and the meanings we project onto it) is constructed through our tendency to view the world through images and symbols, and then project deep symbolic meaning onto them. Following this, reality is made up of the psychic Imaginary order and the Symbolic order.

²⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 2006), p. 185.

²⁸ Big Think, 'Berkeley professor explains gender theory | Judith Butler', YouTube, 23 June 2023
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UD9IOIUR4k>> [accessed 30 September 2024].

According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, the first of these orders – the Imaginary – originates in the pre-oedipal mirror phase of childhood development. Here in this phase, through play and exposure to their reflection, children begin to misrecognise their reflection as if it was linked to their true self. Because of the dependence children have (being less developed than other off-spring throughout the animal kingdom), they feel fragmented and anxious – that they are simply a complex mess of problems, dependencies, and needs. Despite this, through their reflection, they begin to see themselves as a unified whole. As a result of this newly recognised “spectral image”, the child begins to construct a fraught identity of acts, speech, and appearances to live in proximity with their idealised mirror-other. At this point, the child enters the “gender exchange”; they learn to take up a persona and identity external to the one they “truly” internally identify with. The Imaginary order, as explained by Žižek using a game of chess as an analogy, is

the way in which different pieces are shaped and characterized by their names (king, queen, knight), and it is easy to envision a game with the same rules, but with a different imaginary, in which this figure would be called “messenger” or “runner” or whatever.²⁹

That is to say, the Imaginary is the order of alienation and obfuscation, it is a concept which explains why the ‘process of the mind or psychical apparatus [becomes] susceptible to the seductions of the image[s]’;³⁰ or why can we only interact with the world through the obfuscations of images or symbols, and not through “real” or “pure” reality.

In the second order – the Symbolic – due to the alienation experienced as a result of the Imaginary, Lacan theorises that a child begins to construct an unconsciousness where the

²⁹ Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (Norton, 2007), p. 8.

³⁰ Ian Buchanan, *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, 2nd edn (Oxford University Press, 2018), Oxford Reference <<https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz>> [accessed 12 December 2023], s.v. imaginary (*imaginaire*).

images, symbols and obfuscations of the Imaginary, gain learnt symbolic meaning.

Continuing Žižek's chess analogy, the Symbolic order is made up of '[t]he rules one has to follow in order to play [...] from the purely formal symbolic standpoint, "knight" is defined only by the moves this figure can make'.³¹ While the knight takes on its appearance (i.e., a horse) and name (i.e., "knight") in the Imaginary order, it isn't until we look through the Symbolic lens that those images take on symbolic meaning (i.e., a piece that moves two squares vertically and one square horizontally, or two horizontally and one vertically).

Through this we can see how gender is almost constructed like an arbitrary linguistic system, where certain actions gain symbolic gendered meaning. In a sense, we get the idea that gender isn't necessarily self-appointed, chosen internally by a person, but given, externally conferred onto them. One theoretical framework of this idea is provided by Ásta. She shows, using the example of a baseball game, how social categories (such as gender) are conferred onto things, people or places.

On a conferralist account of the property of being a strike, there is no fact of the matter as to whether the pitch is a strike or not independently of the judgment of the umpire, but rather it is his judgment about the trajectory of the ball that confers the property of being a strike on the pitch. There is, of course, a physical fact about the trajectory of the ball, but that physical fact does not determine the baseball fact. The umpire's judgment confers the baseball property of being a strike on the pitch and in so doing creates the new baseball fact that the pitch is a strike.³²

Ásta explains how the umpire behind home plate watches the trajectory of the ball and confers the property "ball" or "strike" onto it, deciding whether or not the pitch travelled

³¹ Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, p. 8.

³² Ásta, *Categories We Live By: The Construction of Sex, Gender, Race, and Other Social Categories* (Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 9.

through the imaginary strike zone. Although the pitch might not have *actually* travelled through the volume above home plate located between the batter's knees and the midpoint of their torso, and other umpires, players and fans might disagree whether the pitch was a "strike" or not, it is solely the home plate umpire's performative utterance which confers the social property "ball/strike" onto the pitch.

Since the umpire's response to the pitch's trajectory determines whether it is a ball or strike, Ásta would argue that social properties are response-dependent. For example, 'the pitch is a strike [if and only if] the ball's trajectory induces response R in umpire U in context C', where R is the response U has to the ball's placement within the strike zone.³³ Or in terms of gender, 'a person P is of a certain gender G in context C [if and only if] P induces response R in subjects in C',³⁴ meaning that (in the context of *Coriolanus*) Martius is masculine if and only if he causes people to have a "masculine-response" to him.

This idea that gender is response-dependent is shown through *Coriolanus*' treatment of certain characters who fail to meet the standards of masculinity due to factors such as their age, socioeconomic position, or behaviours. For example, during Valeria's visit to Virgilia and Volumnia in the first act, Young Martius (the son of Virgilia and Martius) becomes the topic of conversation. Volumnia describes how Young Martius would 'rather see the swords and hear a drum than look upon his schoolmaster' (1. 3. 57-58).³⁵ Valeria joins in praising Young Martius' masculinity by recounting how she witnessed the child playing with a butterfly.

O' my word, the father's son! [...] 'Has such a confirmed countenance. I saw him run after a gilded butterfly, and when he caught it, he let it go again, and after it again, and

³³ Ásta, p. 12.

³⁴ Ásta, p. 26.

³⁵ Unless stated otherwise, this and all subsequent references and line numbers for *Coriolanus* are taken from: William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, ed. by Peter Holland (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).

over and over he comes, and up again, caught it again. Or whether his fall enraged him, or how 'twas. He did so set his teeth and tear it. O, I warrant, how he mammocked it. (1. 3. 59-67)

To this horrible attack, Volumnia proudly responds 'One on's father's moods', to which Valeria quickly agrees 'Indeed, la, 'tis a noble child' (1. 3. 69). Virgilia, however, detesting this outburst from Young Martius and criticising Valeria's endorsement of brutish violence rebuts that Young Martius acted like 'A crack, madam' (1. 3. 70.) This utterance by Virgilia reveals how masculinity is considered a system of behaviours and how this system is conferred onto people; effectuating and redefining what behaviours are expected and what are unacceptable.

The keyword of Virgilia's phrase, "crack", is defined as a 'young rascal [or a] little rogue'.³⁶ Of course, this usage builds upon the more modern definitions that immediately come to mind, that being 'A sudden sharp noise as of something breaking or bursting' (*OED*, I.i.1.a) and 'A fissure or opening formed by the cracking, breaking, or bursting of a hard substance' (*OED*, II.7.a). This implies that Young Martius is seemingly damaged or broken because of his behaviour and suggests that he is unable to fulfil some function. That he has 'ceased to function as intended; not working; dysfunctional' (*OED*, II.16). Certainly, if this is the case, there has to be some sort of *purpose* or *function* that Young Martius must achieve if by having specific behaviours damages his ability to fulfil said function.

³⁶ David Crystal and Ben Crystal, *Shakespeare's Words: A Glossary and Language Companion* (Penguin Books, 2002), s.v. crack.

The Anxiousness of Masculinity

Because there isn't necessarily anything concrete which preordains patriarchal dominance over society, gender – or specifically the link between the performative signifier (action, appearance, speech, ect.) and the signified gender – is arbitrary. Following this, masculinity and the supporting systems which continue to perpetuate masculine socioeconomic dominance are anxious. As explained by Mark Breitenberg,

Anxiety and masculinity: the terms must be wed if only for the obvious reason that any social system whose premise is the unequal distribution of power and authority always and only sustains itself in constant defence of the privileges of some of its members and by the constraint of others [...]. From this premise, it follows that those individuals whose identities are formed by the assumption of their own privilege must also have incorporated varying degrees of anxiety about the preservation or potential loss of that privilege.³⁷

In a sense, masculinity has been exposed; we can no longer think of it in terms of a system that posits that *this* specific group holds unquestionable superiority. This unmasking of masculinity has revealed its anxiousness.

As defined by Jacques Lacan, '*l'angoisse c'est la sensation du désir de l'Autre*' ("anxiety is the sensation of the desire of the Other").³⁸ Anxiety, under Lacan, is the uncertainty felt when we do not know who we are in the eyes of the Other ('*Je ne sais pas ce que je suis comme objet pour l'Autre*' – "I don't know what I am as an object for the Other").³⁹ Lacan uses the example of animal masks to explain this:

³⁷ Mark Breitenberg, *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 3.

³⁸ Jacques Lacan, *L'Identification: Séminaire 1961-1962* (Association Freudienne Internationale, [n.d.]), p. 225, <https://nosubject.com/images/6/67/Seminaire_09.pdf> [accessed 12 December 2023]. (French)

³⁹ Lacan, *L'Identification*, p. 225.

I pictured myself faced with another animal, a real one this time, taken to be gigantic for the sake of the story, a praying mantis. Since I didn't know which mask I was wearing, you can easily imagine that I had some reason not to feel reassured in the event that, by chance, this mask might have been just what it took to lead my partner into some error as to my identity. The whole thing was well underscored by the fact that, as I confessed, I couldn't see my own image in the enigmatic mirror of the insect's ocular globe.⁴⁰

Given the well-known sexual cannibalism of female mantises, anxiety is the feeling of expectant dread faced when you do not know if the mask you wear is that of a male mantis or a female one. I know that if I am wearing the mask of a male mantis, I inevitably will be eaten. So, I experience anxiety because the other (in this case, the female mantis) has certain expectations and desires for me, whether that is to eat me or do whatever female mantises do together. In terms of masculinity and a supposed competitive gender order, there is this notion that everyone wants to be dominant and at the hegemonic position in society. As such, people have a desire to be dominant. However, in terms of anxiety, there is a sensation of the desire of the Other. This is to say, people desire to be the other's object of desire. To return to gender, it isn't masculine to want to be dominant (because that proves to yourself that you are not); instead, it is masculine to want the other to want to be dominant. In a sense, wanting them to want to be like you.

According to Lacan,

anxiety is bound to the fact that I don't know which object *a* I am for the desire of the Other, but at the end of the day this is only valid at the scopic level. It's at this level

⁴⁰ Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan – Book X*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by A. R. Price (Polity Press, 2024), pp. 5-6.

that I can give you the exemplary fable in which the Other would be radically an Other, the praying mantis with its voracious desire, to which I am linked by no common factor whatsoever.⁴¹

Anxiety arises when this sensation of desire, these projections of wanting, go unresolved. It is the feeling that someone wants something or expects something from you when you yourself don't know what it is they want. Breitenberg explains that

anxiety is self-referential without admitting it – something like a benign or less developed version of paranoia, which Paul Smith usefully defines [...] as the wish ‘to maintain its rights on a reality which it will yet not recognize as its own offspring or construction.’ Following Smith, *anxiety may be seen as the result of projecting one's own mental constructions onto the world or onto another person and then mistaking them as objectively true.*⁴² (emphasis is mine)

This projection is two-fold. It stems from projecting “constructions” of the self onto the self and “constructions” of the other onto the other. As such, since the patriarchal construction of masculinity is arbitrary and only gains meaning through the oppression of those outside the masculine vogue, masculinity is a negative system; it is constructed around what masculinity *isn't* and creates identity through refusal. Masculinity is anxious in the sense that “I do not know what I am in the eyes of the Other” (to reiterate Lacan), where the Other is the self-imposed monster of man's own creation.

One such example is found in Connell's description of the internalised inadequacy inherent in masculinity. She explains that

⁴¹ Lacan, *Anxiety*, p. 325.

⁴² Breitenberg, p. 4; Paul Smith, *Discerning the Subject* (University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 87.

To be an adult male is distinctly to occupy space, to have a physical presence in the world. Walking down the street, I square my shoulders and covertly measure myself against other men. Walking past a group of punk youths late at night, I wonder if I look formidable enough. At a demonstration I size up policemen and wonder if I am bigger and stronger than them if it comes to the crunch – a ludicrous consideration, given the actual techniques of mass action and crowd control, but an automatic reaction nevertheless.⁴³

Through these experiences, we can see that there is a distinct difference between merely *possessing* masculinity and *being* masculine. If masculinity was just a performance, the ritualistic “sizing up” – the visual scrutinization of others to determine where in the gender order you both lie – would only be an empty action. There would be no deeper implicit meaning to it. It would almost be an impulsive tick with no deeper significance apart from “doing” masculinity. However, because this action has ritualistic significance, highlighting the anxiousness and internalised inadequacy which is deeply rooted in the psyche of the “possessor” of masculinity. Connell’s experiences show that so much of the deep-rooted tenets of masculinity (as we discussed earlier in this chapter) perpetuate socioeconomic disparities between people and encourage them to seek hegemonic dominance over anything else. As such, masculine anxiety is required in *Coriolanus* for informing the conflicts of the play and continually exposing itself throughout the tragedy.

One such moment of importance is found during the opening exchange between Martius and the plebeians. During this scene, we can see that because Martius has fixed values of masculinity and a rigid construction of how men ought to act, speak, or look, he experiences anxiety as he projects his “mental constructions onto the world and then

⁴³ R. W. Connell, *Which Way is Up? Essays on Sex, Class and Culture* (Allen and Unwin, 1983), p. 19, cited in Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 57.

mistakes them as objectively true” (to reference Breitenberg). This anxiety mainly manifests through his harsh judgement of the plebeians and his ultimate exile from Rome and assassination at the hands of the Volsci. As an example, in this particular scene, Martius rhetorically asks the plebeians:

[...] What would you have, you curs,

That like nor peace nor war? The one affrights you,

The other makes you proud. He that trusts to you,

Where he should find you lions finds you hares,

Where foxes, geese you are [...]

Who deserves greatness

Deserves your hate, and your affections are

A sick man’s appetite, who desires most that

Which would increase his evil. (1. 1. 163-167; 171-174)

Martius’ belief system holds that to be considered masculine you must excel in war and combat, and further, be of high caste and birth. This is enforced by Martius calling the plebeians “curs”, which is defined as ‘a worthless, low-bred, or snappish dog’ or figuratively as ‘a surly, ill-bred, low, or cowardly fellow’.⁴⁴ Because, in Martius’ mind, the plebeians are ill-bred (or poor caste), it reinforces his belief that they do not matter. Martius claims that people ‘who deserves greatness deserves [the plebeians] hate’ (1. 1. 171-172) and that if

⁴⁴ Unless stated otherwise, this and all subsequent references for *OED* are taken from: *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford University Press, 2024), <<https://www.oed.com/>>.

someone were to seek their approval, it would be like a sick man craving what would increase his malady.

On the other hand, this notion is reinforced by Martius' belief that the plebeians are cowardly. Martius likens the plebeians to hares when presenting the idealised masculine trait of lion-like bravery (1. 1. 166). While there can be this symbolic meaning which defines lions as a symbol of strength, courage, and everything that Martius and the world around him expect of masculine people (with further reference to 2. 1. 11 'He's a lamb indeed that baas like a bear' and 5. 4. 27-28 'There is no more mercy in him than there is milk in a male tiger'), for the plebeians to be likened to hares, the complete antithesis to bears, lions and tigers ultimately positions them as flighty, cowardly fellows who are at odds to masculinity.

Hopefully, this short analysis acted as a brief introduction to masculine anxiety, specifically showcasing what "mental constructions" Martius holds. Of course, I will do more in-depth analysis throughout the upcoming chapters. What remains of immediate importance is how these beliefs about masculinity contribute to anxiety when we treat them as objectively true. By projecting these desires onto the world around us, we create a crisis of identity where we don't know what objects of desire we are for the Other. Throughout the play, Martius continually projects his mental constructions onto the world and characters around him; in a sense, his exile from Rome and eventual death at the hand of the Volsci arise because he continues to mistake his constructions as true.

Lacanian Anxiety, Desire and the Other

As previously mentioned, following Lacan's hypotheses on the psyche and how it interacts with reality, gender could be understood as originating from the Imaginary and Symbolic order. As aforementioned, a lot of the anxiousness of masculinity can be understood in reference to some "Other". Throughout his work, Lacan differentiates between

two distinct others. The first is the lower-case-o *other* (italicised “l’*autre*” in Lacan’s original French), which, to make it more easily discernible, I will begin referring to as “other-*a*”, and the second, the upper-case-O *Other* (non-italicised “l’*Autre*” in Lacan’s French) which for clarity will be “Other-A”.

The other-*a* originates in the Imaginary order and isn’t necessarily an “other”; instead, it is the reflection and projection of our anxieties and desires – our ego. Because of the projections of desire, where someone has the presumptive belief that they know what the person desires, which happens as a result of the anxiousness of masculinity, a person’s constructed persona is fraught with inadequacy. Since this presumptive projection is unresolvable because of the impossibility of truly knowing another person’s desires, people, through the projection of desire, create a fictitious “other” that acts as the opposition to themselves – the other-*a*. Within Lacan’s theory of childhood development, this process coincides with the pre-oedipal mirror phase in which a child begins the construction of their persona (from the Latin *persōna* “mask; character” and ancient Greek *prósōpon* “face; appearance; mask used in ancient theatre to denote a character or, more generally, a social role”; literally “fake person”), and steps into the Imaginary order. Because the Imaginary order encompasses the presentation and imagery of ourselves and the world around us, it can be explained as ‘[t]he mask, role, or character which society expects individuals to present’ and, ultimately, due to its coinciding stage of development, manifests as a commitment to the fictional Ideal-I.⁴⁵

Contrarily, the Other-A finds its origin in the Symbolic order. Compared to the Imaginary order, which sees the development of mental constructions, it is only when

⁴⁵ Buchanan, s.v. *persona*; Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 4th edn (Oxford University Press, 2015), Oxford Reference <<https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz>> [accessed 12 December 2023], s.v. *persona*.

someone enters the Symbolic order that they learn the fictitiousness of these constructions. As such, while a child bundles up their anxieties during the mirror phase and places them in the other-*a*, the Symbolic order reintroduces them. Or rather, it reveals that the anxieties had never actually left. Within childhood development, following the development of the Ideal-I and the entry into the Imaginary order, a child's sense of inadequacy returns as they realise that even with their newly constructed persona, they still lack something that makes them whole and complete. This "lack" takes the form of the Phallus, the psychological MacGuffin, representing a person's unobtainable desires. The Phallus is not the biological penis; rather, it is the signifier of lack – the *thing* that drives desire – and the signifier of sexual difference.

At its simplest, the conflict between lack and desire originates in the Oedipus complex during the phallic stage of development. Here, as previously mentioned, a child's anxieties re-emerge following the development of the Ideal-I and other-*a* following what the child perceives as competition with the Father (Lacan's mythical "name of the father"). Because the newly fabricated Ideal-I and other-*a* are the root of desire, a child attempts to become or possess the Phallus – the object of desire. Since their pre-mirror self is an inarticulate blob solely dependent on the Mother, the child takes their newly found ordered persona, which is unlocked through their reflection, and then subsequently projects it onto their provider. Due to the "sensation of desire for the other", which encompasses the projection and exchange of desires between people and the other-*a*, the child rejects inhabiting a subordinative position of having a desire for the Mother and as a result takes on the position of becoming the object of its desire. To do this, the child enters the Symbolic order, where things take on meaning and aim to become or possess the Phallus.

As a result of the Oedipus complex however, the child realises the impossibility of truly rectifying desire. The Father and the Other-A intervenes at the moment when the child is aiming to bind with the Mother, becoming free from desire and attaining *jouissance*, and

reveals to the child that there is some Symbolic *je ne sais quoi* that the Father possesses, which reveals to the child their overwhelming lack in the eyes of the Other-A. This castrates the child from the Phallus and destines them to a life of insatiable desire and anxiousness, entering them into the economy of sexual difference. Either siding with the Father, rejecting their castration and entering a state of “having” the Phallus, or siding with the Mother, accepting their castration and entering the state of “being” the Phallus and becoming the object of desire.⁴⁶

One way the Symbolic order and the Other-A contribute to gender is through the subconscious analysis of performatives and the subsequent decision of whether to confer or withhold the title coveted title of “masculine” onto a person. Building upon what is mention in the previous section, this subconscious analysis encompasses how a particular person responds to a performative in a certain context and results in either the bestowing of masculine agency (having the Phallus and being able to live a self-directed life perusing desire) or the refusal of (being the Phallus and being forced to live a dependent life of fulfilling other people’s desires). In one such moment during the play, Cominius recounts the conferral of masculinity onto Martius.

[...] At sixteen years,

When Tarquin made a head for Rome, [Martius] fought

Beyond the mark of others. Our then dictator,

Whom with all praises I point at, saw him fight

When with his Amazonian chin he drove

The bristled lips before him. [...]

⁴⁶ Butler, p. 59.

When he might act the woman in the scene
He proved best man i'th' field, and for his meed
Was brow-bound with the oak. His pupil age
Man-entered thus, he waxed like a sea
And in the brunt of seventeen battles since
He lurched all swords of the garland. (2. 2. 85-99)

In this speech before the Senate – the fathers of Rome – and the Other-A, Cominius celebrates Martius' masculinity. Describing how, at sixteen and without facial hair (the symbol of manhood) he proved himself worthy by besting bearded men who are assumedly greater than him. In doing this, Martius “waxed like a sea” (*OED*, v¹ I.5: ‘To increase in size, quantity, volume, intensity, etc.’) and has entered into a masculine position.

Despite having a chin like an Amazonian (the female warriors from Greek mythology) and expecting to “act the woman in the scene”, Martius' actions during this war were received as masculine. This shows that it isn't just the imagery of a performative (who is doing/saying/looking like; what was done/said/looked like; where and how it was done; or who saw/heard/looked at it) but rather it is the complex combination of these things which builds into its symbolic meaning. The Other-A receives the imagery of a performative and distorts it through the lenses of ideology, creating a complex system where masculinity and gender are *almost* entirely arbitrary.

Much like Simone de Beauvoir's famous declaration that ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’,⁴⁷ one is not born masculine but steps into a position where their performatives become accepted as such. They step into masculinity and, depending on their

⁴⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. by H. M. Parshley (Jonathan Cape, 1956), p. 273.

relationship with the people around them, their alignment with it will be accepted (conferred) or not (withheld). From what little we know about Martius' childhood in *Coriolanus*, we get this sense that he is continually pushed towards masculinity. Because there is no mention of a father figure in *Coriolanus*, Martius is placed almost as a product of parthenogenesis or miraculous birth. Because he has no Father, he is seemingly uncorrupted by castration and appears to both *have* and *be* the object of desire.

Martius is accused very early in the play of only doing what he has done 'to please his mother' (1. 1. 35-36), and this is partially true as Volumnia has control over Martius. She is the one who forces Martius to go and receive the plebeian's voices so that he may be tribune ('Pray be content. | Mother, I am going to the marketplace' [3. 2. 131-132]) and is the one who prevents the Volsci invasion of Rome ('O mother, mother! | What have you done?' [5. 3. 182-183]). In a sense, Martius is the sole object of Volumnia's desire, and Martius only wants what his mother wants.

One of the interesting moments of the play, which provides substantial insight into Martius' upbringing without the Father, is when Volumnia explains to Virgilia how she raised her son to only fight in war.

When he was but a tender bodied and the only son of my womb, when youth with comeliness plucked all gaze his way, when for a day of kings' entreaties a mother should not sell him an hour from her beholding, I, considering how honour would become such a person – that it was no better than picture-like to hang by th' wall, if renown made it not stir – was pleased to let him seek danger where he was like to find fame. To a cruel war I sent him, from whence he returned, his brow bound in oak. I tell thee, daughter, I sprang more in joy in first hearing he was a man-child than now in first seeing he had proved himself a man. (1. 3. 5-17)

Volumnia explains that even when Martius was a newborn baby and his handsomeness engrossed her attention, she still thought to send him off to fight in war to gain manhood and glory rather than have him sit to look at. She is very practical in her parenting. In her view, why have a son if he isn't going to contribute to the glory and name of the household? As such, Volumnia explains her belief using this analogy:

[H]ad I a dozen sons, each in my love alike, and none less dear than thine and my good and my good Martius, I had rather had eleven die nobly for their country than one voluptuously surfeit out of action. (1. 3. 22-25)

This moment shows the relationship between Martius and Volumnia and how Martius gained his idealised form of masculinity from his mother. We can also see similarities between their relationship and the relationship of Jocasta and Oedipus (from Greek mythology), where they are each the sole object of the other's desire.

All of this is to say that while sexual difference and the gender order find their roots in the Symbolic order, the development of the Imaginary order, the origins of anxiousness and the construction of persona are crucial for understanding the complexities of masculinity. As we see throughout *Coriolanus*, there is this continual ebb and flow of conferring masculinity and then withholding it. Whether this is because of a character's age, behaviour, citizenship or socioeconomic standing, a character's gendered position is never fixed. While childhood development is instrumental in constructing the psychological tendencies and attributes that instigate gender and other social constructions, it is essential to recognise that they have become endemic, larger than just one individual's psyche – they have become rooted in our communities and have become ideological.

In the following chapters, I will build upon the theoretical landscape laid throughout this chapter: the anxiousness of masculinity, the conferral of masculinity, and the desires of

masculinity, and then apply them to two specific settings of *Coriolanus*. The first, in chapter two, will explore the masculine ideologies constructed through Shakespeare's imagined ancient Roman society; the second, in chapter three, will be the ideologies of Ralph Fiennes' fictional Balkan state and its portrayal of masculinity. In both chapters, I hope to compare and contrast these settings and create an overall understanding of what masculinity means to *Coriolanus*.

Chapter 2 | ‘Away you fool! It more becomes a man’: The Gendered Social Structure of Rome and *Coriolanus*’ Masculine Ideology

My understanding of masculinity is strongly influenced by the ideas around ideology and how these “ideologies of masculinity” set rigorous mandates on “*What a Man’s Gotta Do*” (to reference the title of Anthony Easthope’s insightful book). In this chapter, building upon the previous’ discussion of *Coriolanus*’ masculinity and how it presents this idea of how masculinity seeps into our psyche and obscures our perspective on the world around us, I will examine the various ways masculine ideology specifically shapes the gendered social structures of *Coriolanus*.

One understanding of ideology which I find helpful can be found in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ *The German Ideology*. In this text, Marx and Engels argue that the collective obfuscations of ideology originate from and are instigated by the socially dominant class to reinforce asymmetric social structures and hierarchies.

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, consequently also controls the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are on the whole subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relations, the dominant material relations grasped as ideas; hence of the relations which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance. [...] For each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to present its interest as the common interest of all the members

of society, that is, expressed in ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and present them as the only rational, universally valid ones.¹

While I do find this fundamental framework interesting, I think that the ideologies projected onto society by the socially dominant bourgeoisie are still, in themselves, the collective obfuscations of that class. Unlike Marx and Engels, who argue that the alienation caused by ideology is directly ushered forth by the bourgeoisie as a way to perpetuate the entrapment of the proletariat class, I contrarily argue that the socially dominant class themselves are also, in a sense, alienated by their ideologies. That is to say, ideology does not originate from the ruling class but rather as a result of the Symbolic order, the “sensation of desire for the Other”, and the Other-A.

I find it helpful to think of alienation and the origins of ideology in terms of Lacan’s linguistic model of psychoanalysis. Lacan suggests that through the Oedipal castration (i.e., the projection of desire and our entry into the Symbolic order) we enter into a semiotic reality where our performatives gain significant gendered meaning. However, due to the subconsciousness of this meaning – where we may be able to explain *what* the meaning is but never *why* that meaning is – when we step into the Symbolic order we thus enter into the convoluted realm of “non-knowledge”. As a result, ideology does not merely create a false consciousness but rather forms a social reality where this commitment to non-knowledge obscures social reality, taking on a mythological position within society. In terms of gender, this means that masculinity takes on a role where it is treated as the normal gender. The gender of no gender. As explained by Easthope,

¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology - Includes: Theses on Feuerbach and the Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, [n. trans.] (Prometheus Books, 1998), pp. 67-68.

Masculinity tries to stay invisible by passing itself off as normal and universal. Words such as ‘man’ and ‘mankind’, used to signify the human species, treat masculinity as if it covered everyone. [...] If masculinity can present itself as normal it automatically makes the feminine seem deviant and different. [...] Masculinity has to be unmasked, separated from the role it wants to play by pretending to be *the human, the normal, the social*.² (original emphasis)

Compared to masculinity, femininity can seem easily definable and the characteristics easily classifiable. Certainly, masculinity is a negative belief system constructed around negation and by defining what is “not masculine”. As such, masculine identities are fabricated through the refusal of the feminine, by prohibiting certain performatives because they undermine a person’s masculinity rather than encouraging performatives that enforce it. Through this, femininity stands in stark contrast. Where it is quite clear “What a Woman’s Gotta Do” to be feminine, in contrast masculinity is convoluted, defining “What a Man’s Not Gotta Do”. This idea acts to further cement the anxiousness of masculinity.

Within *Coriolanus*’ (Ro)man society, masculinity remains hidden and the apparent norm by spotlighting the socioeconomic disparities between the patricians and plebeians. Just as, in my mind, Marx and Engels misrepresent ideology through their economic determinism – treating it as an issue of class and overlooking the psychoanalytical aspects of it – the play, by solely highlighting the social disparities of *Coriolanus*’ Rome, leaves gender inequalities unaddressed and unexamined. Therefore, I aim to explore the play’s social gender order and watch as “masculine power” trickles down from the dominant hegemonic positions at the mythological capstone of society, then on to the complicit contemporaries whose proximity to these dominants authorises their masculinity and, finally to ‘the great toe[s]’ (1. 1. 150) or

² Antony Easthope, *What a Man’s Gotta Do: The Masculine Myth in Popular Culture* (Routledge, 1990), pp. 1-2.

those ‘being one o’th’ lowest, basest, poorest’ (1. 1. 152) of society, whose subordination props up and protects the masculine elite.

Because this pyramidal organisation closely resembles *Coriolanus*’ socioeconomic structure, it is easy for the masculine ideology to remain hidden. Accordingly, instead of focusing on the play’s economic disparities, I will examine how the masculine ideology and the Other-A define the idealised form of masculinity, by focusing on the contrast between the encouraged dominant traits of masculinity and the discouraged subordinate traits of femininity/effeminacy. This will be done by performing various close readings of significant moments throughout the play and identifying the specific gendered signifiers, their signified gender, and then the implicit gender they signal.

Due to the ultimate structure of *Coriolanus*’ Rome and the intersection between its economic structure and masculinity, a continual sensation exists that differentiates between the patricians (masculinised) and the plebians (feminised). As we can see through the two characteristics of desired masculinity that will be explored in this chapter, there is a recurring indication of the instability inherent in the subordination of the plebians. To explain: even after Martius’ exile from Rome (which can be interpreted as the castration of his masculinity and feminisation within the social masculine order of Rome), because of his socioeconomic stability and renown in the patrician class, he truly never has to worry or fear for his safety or wellbeing. It is the plebians who, through their subordination at the hands of the patricians, are the base of the structural pyramid and are constantly the victims of masculinity. In my mind, if we take an economic determinist approach to the play, so much of the injustice faced by the plebians goes ignored. Therefore, this chapter will focus on the specific cultural lies of *Coriolanus* that enable the patricians to have social dominance over the plebians. To do this, I am going to strictly focus on various characteristics (or in the socially prescriptive way, where some other-A dictates that “it is masculine to do x, y, and z” we should say tenets or

doctrines) of masculinity, explore how they enforce the gender and socioeconomic disparities of the play, and importantly, how they answer the question “What’s a Man Gotta Do”.

Characteristic 1

It is masculine to try and improve your standing within the gender order

One of the characteristics of *Coriolanus*’ masculinity is the necessity of intragender competition (conflict within the masculine gender order). Much as the ritualistic sizing-up of Connell showcases the anxious necessity to justify your own position within a social space, there is a prevailing idea that through this ritual, you are momentarily establishing and feeling out the social hierarchy within the masculine order. For example, in Connell’s explanation of the sizing gaze, she feels an unjustifiable pressure to seem formidable to ‘a group of punk youths late at night’,³ exposing this pressure to not only validates her ability to co-occupy the space with the punks but to also be perceived by them as a masculine authority. This sizing gaze is very similar to the stare-down, which happens before a boxing match. Much like how this stare-down and weigh-in before the match theoretically signifies the “start” of the bout (transforming the months of preparation and training to fight against an undistinguishable foe into a moment where their opposition becomes concrete and tangible, creating a tense atmosphere of competitive animosity which boils towards the ringing of the bell), Connell’s sizing gaze similarly establishes an antagonist to the masculine performer. Rather than having an invisible opposite where a person’s insecurities and anxieties are cast into the void, as a result of Connell’s sizing-up, her opponent was not some invisible Other; it was the young punks who became the recipient of her masculine anxieties. In this sense, the sizing gaze

³ R. W. Connell, *Which Way is Up?*, p. 19, cited in Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 57.

momentarily establishes the continually fluctuating social hierarchy. Throughout the opening sequence of *Coriolanus*, we can see a similar event play out.

Because *Coriolanus* begins with such furious intensity, it enforces this sensation within the reader that the environment of the play is one rich with ideology. In his long note to the opening section of the play, Peter Holland explains that

[Philip Brockbank, in the second series Arden] suggests that the play is “unique... in opening with a scene of public violence” but it is, rather, a dangerous threat of a violence that is, in the event, not carried out. The “*weapons*” of the stage direction indicate domestic tolls (“*staves, clubs*”) rather than anything military[.] (LN 1.1.0.1)

From the very beginning of the play, as the reader or audience is thrown *in medias res*, they can surely see that the political situation of the play is complex and has been developing long before the play begins. As such, there is the implication that well before the genesis of *Coriolanus*' world, some key event kickstarted the action before us. One such motive is the precarious economic situation faced by the plebeians, which is fraught with instability. One citizen explains how the patricians,

Suffer [the plebeians] to famish, and their store-houses crammed with grain; make edicts for usury, to support usurers; repeal daily any wholesome act established against the rich, and provide more piercing statutes daily to chain up and restrain the poor. (1. 1. 75-79)

Despite this clear motive for rebellion, it is quite evident to the audience that, at some point, a group of plebeians met to discuss and outline the plans for their rebellion organised their demands and gathered equipment and supporters before instigating the ‘most wise rebellion’ (1. 1. 153). This is why it is all the more striking to me that the very first lines spoken in the play are akin to “Stop!” or calling a halt (‘Before we proceed any further, hear me speak.’ [1.

1. 1]). Indeed, during the various days leading up to the actual day of the coup d'état, there were many opportunities to thresh out the intricacy of the rebellion. Of course, this uprising would fail if the eclectic collection of farm equipment listed in the opening stage directions was not evidence enough.

The plebeians' dilemma is simple. Due to their subordinate economic position, they are in famine, being unable to afford the cost of corn or grain to eat ('Let us kill him and we'll have corn at our own price.' [1. 1. 9-10]; 'MARTIUS: [to Menenius] What's their seeking? MENENIUS: For corn at their own rates' [1. 1. 183-184]). It appears that the play's political system strongarms the plebeians into gendered subservience and economic dependency on the patricians. As explained by Laura Gowing, *Early Modern English* 'religious prescriptions identified husbands as workers and earners, wives as keepers and spenders'.⁴ Therefore, when the plebeians are placed in a situation where they cannot work to afford grain, it puts them in a situation akin to womanhood, which feminises the class within the gender order. At the same time, it elevates the patricians – who can afford grain – into “manhood” and confirms their socially dominant position.

These quotes show how *Coriolanus*' social system perpetuates wide-spread dependency throughout the Roman social order. The plebeians rely on the patricians' goodwill for land to farm and work, safety, and stability. The patricians conversely rely on the plebeians to prop themselves against. Having a subordinate dependency ensures the patricians' authority due to the uncertainty of the plebeians' lives without the influence of the patricians' political and economic resources. As such, because they are placed outside the bourgeois sphere of dominance, the plebeians cannot access the essential resources or opportunities needed to improve their social standing.

⁴ Laura Gowing, *Gender in Early Modern England*, 2nd edn (Routledge, 2022), p. 40.

Because of the conferral of gender and the subordinate position of the plebeians, they are conferred with the verdict of “subordinate”. They are placed within the feminised position of *Coriolanus*’ gender order. Beauvoir explains how ‘the ruling caste bases its argument [on another group] on the state of affairs it created itself’,⁵ illustrating that the beliefs of the dominant social class that are held about the subordinate class are based upon the systems and conditions that they have made for that class. Much like how ‘[t]he white American relegates the black to the rank of shoe-shine boy, and then concludes that blacks are only good for shining shoes’,⁶ the plebeians are designated as inferior. They are labelled as ‘th’ discontented members’ or as ‘the mutinous parts’ (1. 1. 106), all because of their disadvantages in the segregating Roman economy.

While I am wholly aware and sympathetic to the fact that ‘men live the dominant version of masculinity’, that ‘they are themselves trapped in structures that fix and limit masculine identity’, and that according to Easthope, ‘men do what they *have* to’ (original emphasis), at a certain point by taking up this position of dominance, even if it is unwanted, some people are still complicit in the subordination and suffering of those outside the masculine vogue.⁷ Similarly, while it could be argued that the plebeians are forced into passivity and subordination by the dominant social class and the Other-A and are not allotted the authority, ability or resources to take action and advance their social position, at a certain level the play’s construction of gender requires agency and people to engage in the ritual of masculine competition (i.e., Connell’s sizing-up) to ensure the perpetuation of its ideology. In a sense, by engaging in an ideology, you reinforce it and prove it true. Paradoxically, if you also choose not to engage in the ideology, you also accept your subordination and feminisation within the gender order. As such, the first characteristic of *Coriolanus*’

⁵ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (Vintage, 2011), [n.p].

⁶ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by Borde and Malovany-Chevallier, [n.p].

⁷ Easthope, p. 7.

masculinity is that people will engage in the masculine order by accepting competition and by continually trying to improve their social standing.

As we can see from the opening scene of the play, Martius criticises the plebeians for,
sit[ting] by th' fire and presume[ing] to know
What's done i'th' Capitol: who's like to rise,
Who thrives and who declines; side factions and give out
Conjectural marriages, making parties strong
And feebling such as stand not in their liking
Below their cobbled shoes. (1. 1. 186-191)

He accuses the plebeians of being passive and wanting to speculate, claiming they “sit by the fire” and speak with conjecture about “what’s done in the Capitol”. Certainly, for someone who happens to be in Martius’ privileged position, where he has access to and influence over the political structure of Rome (even being encouraged and not just being able/allowed to take the position of consul), it is easy to cast criticism on the plebeians for their apparent idleness and inability to act to better their circumstances. We also see the mention of one of Martius’ fundamental beliefs, which he has inherited from his mother. After the plebeians exit the scene, Martius tauntingly calls after them that

The Volsces have much corn. Takes these rats thither
To gnaw their garners. [*citizens steal away*];⁸ [*to the Citizens*] Worshipful mutineers,

⁸ Shakespeare, ‘The Tragedy of Coriolanus’, in *The Complete Oxford Shakespeare*, ed. by Stanley Wells and others, 3 vols (Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 1375-1415 (1. 1. 248-251).

I prefer the placement of the stage direction in this edition because it acts to further cement Martius’ antagonism towards the plebeians. With him – in this edition – sarcastically calling after the leaving plebeians to follow him.

Your valour puts well forth. Pray follow. (1. 1. 244-246)

Of course, as we have established near the end of the previous chapter, Volumnia raised Martius around the belief that the only masculine way to participate in the Roman economy was through war ('I, considering how honour would become such a person [...] was pleased to let him seek danger where he was like to find fame' [1. 3. 9-13]). He projects this belief onto the plebeians, claiming they should take up arms and fight against the Volsci if they want to improve their socioeconomic conditions. This continues to perpetuate the masculine ideology.

This characteristic of *Coriolanus*' masculinity is also presented through the way characters such as Martius continually fight to maintain their socially advantageous position. Because of the anxiousness of masculinity, to reiterate Breitenberg, explains that 'individuals whose identities are formed by the assumption of their own privilege must also have incorporated varying degrees of anxiety about the preservation or potential loss of that privilege'.⁹ Certainly, as we see in *Coriolanus*, through the recurring reference to Martius' choler (MENENIUS: What, what? His choler? | CORIOLANUS: Choler? Were I as patient as the midnight sleep | By Jove, 'twould be my mind.' [3. 1.85-87]; Sicinius: 'You should have ta'en th' advantage of his choler | And passes him unelected.' [2. 3.195-196]), we get the sense that the anxiousness of masculinity could contribute to Martius' giant outburst of emotion. Of course, by mentioning choler, the play takes a humoral perspective on emotions and passions (i.e., 'strong, controlling, or overpowering emotion' [OED]). Through this perspective, because the way a person behaved was seen as a representation their soul and health, there was a masculine pressure to be seen as balanced and refined. This idea (i.e., humoralism) stemmed from Hippocrates (generally considered the father of the field), who investigated the

⁹ Breitenberg, p. 3.

effects of the body's chemical balance on a person's temperament. The theory explained that there were four humours (chemical systems of the body) and that their relationship to each other governed the body's function.

The human body contains blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. These are the things that make up its constitution and cause its pains and health. Health is primarily that state in which these constituent substances are in the correct proportion to each other, both in strength and quantity, and are well mixed. Pain occurs when one of the substances presents either a deficiency or an excess, or is separated in the body and not mixed with the others. It is inevitable that when one of these is separated from the rest and stands by itself, not only the part from which it has come, but also that where it collects and is present in excess, should become diseased, and because it contains too much of the particular substance, cause pain and distress.¹⁰

Throughout 'The Nature of Man', Polybius (Hippocrates' pupil to whom the work is attributed to) explains the various aspects influencing a person's humour. Such aspects were their lifestyle, diet and exercise. In a seemingly miasmatic way, a person's environment and the weather around them could also influence their humours (each humour was associated with a season: Spring, hot and wet, was associated with blood; summer, hot and dry, with yellow bile; autumn, cold and dry, with black bile; and, winter, cold and wet, with phlegm).

Furthermore, as we can see from the above quotation, a person's temperament had a holistic relationship (being influenced and influencing the balance) with the humours: Blood and sanguine (being courageous and hopeful) were linked, as was yellow bile and choleric (being relentless and ambitious), phlegm and phlegmatic (being peaceful and patient); and, most

¹⁰ 'The Nature of Man', in *Hippocratic Writings*, ed. by G. E. R. Lloyd, trans. by J. Chadwick and W. N. Mann (Pelican Books, 1978), pp. 260-271 (p. 262).

notably for this tenet of masculinity, black bile and melancholy (being despondent and quiet) were linked.

Because the humours were linked to passions, it was the ability to temper these emotions that was seen as symbolic for humans (because they possessed a rational “intellective” soul). It signified the difference between animals, vegetables or minerals.¹¹ As Gail Kern Paster explained, chiefly souls were divided into a three-part hierarchy.

The lowest, the vegetative soul common to all plants and animals, was responsible for growth, nutrition, and generation; the highest, the intellective soul unique to human beings, governed intellect, will, and memory. In between came the sensitive soul, which controlled perceptual, motive, and appetitive faculties. [...] In this tripartite structure, the actions of the sensitive soul occupied a crucial middle ground between sense and reason—with sense defined as the purely external and material actions of the vegetable soul and reason as the purely internal and immaterial actions of the intellective soul. The passions of this soul, according to Thomas Wright, were “certaine internall acts or operations of the soule, bordering vpon [...] reason and sense, prosecuting some good thing, or flying some ill thing, causing therewithall some alteration in the body”. It is the last phrase in this formulation to which we need to attend. In the emotions, both human and animal beings had their earliest and most basic of survival skills, their fundamental orientations of aversion and desire, flight and attraction. Passions were the endowment of temperament—the temperaments of male and female animals no less than those of men and women.¹²

¹¹ Gail Kern Paster, ‘The body and its passions.’, *Shakespeare Studies*, 29 (2001), pp. 44-50 (p. 44), <<https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/body-passions/docview/222413644/se-2>>.

¹² Paster, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 136.

This dichotomy between the human “intellective” and the animal “vegetative” soul is vital for the distinction between the masculine and the feminine. In terms of *Coriolanus*, we can see a clear correlation between a person’s behaviour, their socially conferred gender, and what “intellective soul” people determine them to have. Because of the Abrahamic distinction between animal and human, with the theological belief that humans were granted a level of autonomy and authority over the former, there is this mandate that people need to maintain a level of control over and balance of their humours to avoid being dehumanised and gendered subordination. We also see through *Coriolanus* that there is a distinct spectrum of animals that are considered “good” to be likened to (which are used to support and confirm someone’s social position) and others that are “bad” to be likened to (which are used to attack and contest someone’s social position).

In the first scene of Act 2, there is an interesting discussion between the tribunes (Sicinius and Brutus) and the patrician Menenius (who has a very close relationship with Martius and his family). As a part of this interaction, the two parties take turns likening Martius to different animals, revealing the different attitudes these people have towards Martius. This moment acts to further aid in the exploration of how the expectations of masculinity are conferred onto people.

SICINIUS: Nature teaches beast to know their friends.

MENENIUS: Pray you, who does the wolf love?

SICINIUS: The lamb.

MENENIUS: Ay, to devour him, as the hungry plebians would the noble Martius.

BRUTUS: He’s a lamb indeed that baas like a bear.

MENENIUS: He’s a bear indeed that lives like a lamb. (2. 1. 6-12)

In Menenius' mind, Martius is like a lamb, invoking an Abrahamic connotation which likens Martius to '[t]he sacrificial animal in ancient near eastern religious rites, including the Hebrews', and adopted by the early Christians as the symbol of Christ in his sacrificial role'.¹³ In Menenius' sympathetic view, he likens Martius to a messianic sacrificial lamb, someone who, in the words of the fourth citizen in Act 2, scene 3, has done noble things for his country.

[Martius,] you have deserved nobly of your country, and you have not deserved nobely. [...] You have been a scourge to her enemies, you have been a rod to her friends; you have not indeed loved the common people. [...] You have received many wounds for your country. (2. 3. 86-105)

These selected lines perfectly explain Menenius' belief about "the lamb Martius". He has done noble deeds for Rome and its citizens, fighting in wars that improve the overall well-being of Rome. He is also someone who has been (in Menenius' mind) unfairly prosecuted by the plebeians for his actions and temperament ('MENENIUS: Consider this: he has been bred i'th' wars | Since 'a could draw a sword, and is ill-schooled | In bolted language. Meal and bran together | He throws without distinction.' [3. 1. 322-325]). This builds a picture that, like Jesus of Nazareth, the sacrificial Lamb of God (John 1. 29 and 1. 36), Martius has unreasonably been treated and is (or will become through his later exile from Rome) a martyr.

Contrarily, the tribunes disagree with the messianic comparison, stating that "If Martius is a lamb, then he certainly 'baas like a bear'". As shown early in the play, Martius is quite disdainful towards the plebeians. In the opening sequence, in response to Martius' hostile entrance into the scene, calling the plebeians 'dissentious rogues' (1. 1. 159), one of the citizens sarcastically exclaims: 'We have ever your good word' (1. 1. 161). Here,

¹³ James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, 2nd edn (Routledge, 2014), p. 191.

ingrained in the collective psyche of the plebeians, we can see the belief that Martius is abrasive and cruel to the plebeians. In the words of Brutus, he is someone with a bear-like temperament.

According to Edward Topsell, 17th-century English cleric famous for his bestiary *The History of Four-Footed Beast* (1607),

the attributes of this beast [bears] are many among Authors, both *Greek* and *Latin*; as *Aemonian* Bears, armed, filthy, deformed, cruel, dreadful, fierce, greedy, *Calydonian*, *Erymanthean*, bloody, heavy, night ranging, *Lybican*, menacing, *Numidian*, *Ossean*, head-long, ravening, rigid and terrible Bear; all which serve to set forth the nature hereof, as shall be afterward in particular discoursed.¹⁴ (original emphasis)

Topsell continues describing the temperament of bears, explaining that ‘Great is the fierceness of a Bear, as appeareth by holy Scripture, Hos. 13. *I will meet them as a Bear robbed of her whelps* (faith that Lord) *and will tear in pieces their forward heart*’ (original emphasis).¹⁵ Here, we get the sense that Martius, to be bear-like, is brutishly barbaric and cruel.

Comparing the “positive” animal comparison given by Menenius to the “negative” comparison made by the tribunes, we can see how the temperament and behaviour of a person can be used to either legitimise or delegitimise a person’s masculinity. From a psychoanalytical perspective, since the “primitive vegetive soul” could be viewed as the seat of the subconscious drives and desires, it can be understood that someone in Martius’ masculine position, who acts like a bear, undermines the full ‘reason and sense’ (referencing Thomas Wright) of his soul. In a sense, Martius undermines his dominant social position and

¹⁴ Edward Topsell, *The History of Four-Footed Beast, Serpents, and Insects* (London: Cotes, 1658), p. 28.

¹⁵ Topsell, p. 34.

jeopardises his commitment to the first characteristic of masculinity by failing to temper his emotions.

Although this characteristic encourages people to direct their passions and humours towards their social advancement, paradoxically, this needs to be done while remaining untemperamental and with an apparent balance in the humours. Quite obviously, for someone in Martius' social position to act unfitting of their higher intellectual soul, which differentiates themselves from lower forms of life, they can inadvertently subordinate and feminise themselves within the gender order. As we can see from the previous analysis of how the different symbolisms of animals relate to a person's behaviour and perceived temperament, one way they can act unfittingly in the masculine position is by showing an excess of the *apparently* "wrong" emotions.

For example, according to humoralism, an overabundance of black bile can lead to melancholy, which is a 'gloomy, mournful, or dejected' temperament when a person is 'inclined to sadness or gloominess [and] gloomily or mournfully introspective' (*OED*). Throughout *Coriolanus*, Martius often rejects melancholia, depression, or any other emotions that could be seen as undermining his masculine dominance. Since melancholy is ripe with feminine implications (i.e., passivity), in one of the only moments in the play where Martius' temperament wavers towards the melancholic, he is (depending on how the scene is interpreted and/or performed) either quick to reengage his masculine mechanisms, masking and projecting a confidently refined balance of temperament; quick to exit the scene, stealing away from eyes who might seek to identify weakness and try to undermine his masculinity; or for the same reason, the people around him who rely on his dominance as a means to justify their own are quick to pull Martius way.

In the scene of importance, following the Roman battle and victory in Corioles against the Volsci, Martius is rewarded with ‘The treasure in the field achieved and city, | We render you the tenth, to be ta’en forth, | Before the common distribution’ (1. 9. 33-35). For whatever reason, Martius declines his award, claiming that he ‘cannot make [his] heart consent to take | A bride to pay [his] sword’ (1. 9. 37-38) and that he would rather ‘stand upon [his] common part with those | That have beheld the doing’ (1. 9. 39-40). Despite this, he asks for the release of one of the prisoners taken by Rome.

I, that now refused most princely gifts,
Am bound to beg of my lord general. [...]
I sometimes lay here in Corioles,
At a poor man’s house; he used me kindly.
He cried to me; I saw him prisoner,
But then Aufidius was within my view
And wrath o’erwhelmed my pity. I request you
To give my poor host freedom. (1. 9. 78-86)

When Lartius and Cominius ask for the prisoner’s name, Martius cannot recall it, this suggests a melancholic PTSD form of brain fog and dissociation (especially as it is portrayed in Barry Avrich and Robert Lepage’s 2019 version of the play).¹⁶ Claiming ‘By Jupiter, forgot! | I am weary; yea, my memory is tired’ and asks, ‘Have we no wine here?’ (1. 9. 89-91), before Cominius steals him away to the tents.

¹⁶ *Coriolanus*, dir. by Barry Avrich and Robert Lepage (Canada, 2019).

This moment can be interpreted in three ways. Firstly, it could be interpreted that Martius is quick reengages his masculine mechanisms and aims to project confidence by loudly proclaiming, “Have we no wine here?” as a way to quickly lighten and distract the mood away from his moment of weakness and melancholy. Alternatively, it could be interpreted that Martius could have asked Cominius and Lartius, “Have we no wine here?” to escape the scene and paranoically escape from eyes that may sense weakness in him and want to exploit it. Both of these interpretations work on the belief that Martius is anxious in his masculinity. He feels a particular level of uncertainty in the masculine role that he has to perform. In this perspective of anxious masculinity, one that is Lacanian in the sense that “I don’t know what the other wants of me”, because, as mentioned in the previous chapter, masculinity is precarious and arbitrary, anxiety arrives because there is nothing of substance behind the façade of gender. In the wider context of the play, since Martius is so fixed in his presentation of masculinity, he is unable to adapt and portray the role of “man” in any other way. Therefore, for Martius, anxiety arises when what is meant by masculine changes and adapts to maintain the gender order successfully.

Similarly, because Martius is so dominant in his masculinity and relies heavily on the subordination of the plebeians, there is a particular fear about the masculine order of *Coriolanus* being exposed – leading to the sense that “the jig is up”. This is also where the final interpretation of this scene comes in. For Cominius to reply to Martius’ request of wine with ‘Go we to our tent’ (1. 9. 91), he is quick to pull Martius away from those that, again in line with the second interpretation, could seek and exploit the weakness in Martius. Because Cominius relies on Martius’ masculine dominance so he can authorise his own through his proximity to Martius, he could have anxiety about his masculinity being challenged.

Characteristic 2

It is masculine to promote conformity and subordination within gender order

The second characteristic of *Coriolanus*' masculine ideology that I will explore in this chapter is how the Other-A creates a system where the subordinate population accepts their feminisation by conforming with the masculine ideologies that go against their best interest to maintain the perpetuated socioeconomic disparities within the play's Roman society. Promoting widespread conformity allows the patrician class to create a political and social environment where the plebeians are alienated.

As defined by Allen Wood, alienation is 'a psychological or social evil, characterized by one or another type of harmful separation, disruption or fragmentation, which sunders things that belong together.'¹⁷ Importantly, people are alienated from politics (in the real world and *Coriolanus*), 'they feel separated from it and powerless in relation to it; this is alienation because in a democratic society you belong in the political process, and as a citizen it ought to belong to you.'¹⁸ This alienation leads to people inhabiting and accepting ideologies that go against their best interests (i.e., false consciousness). From the perspective of the privileged members of society, those whose aim is to maintain their dominant position within the societal order, by trying to conform with the requirements of the masculine ideology and encourage others to do the same, they can continue to extend their privilege.

Of course, while this understanding of alienation is rooted in a Marxist belief which states that ideologies are the dominant ideas of the ruling caste and are used to exploit the proletariat class, alienating them from the fruits of their labour, I do think it provides an interesting introductory point into this characteristic of masculinity. As previously explained,

¹⁷ Allen Wood, 'Alienation', in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, 2nd edn, ed. by Ted Honderich (Oxford University Press, 2005) doi: 10.1093/acref/9780199264797.001.0001.

¹⁸ Wood.

I differentiate my understanding of ideology from Marx and Engels. As such, when we talk about the alienating effect of ideology, rather than perceiving it as evidence for the subordination of the working classes, I interpret it as evidence of the impossibility of achieving *jouissance*.

Because of the impossibility of understanding the Real – the inaccessible underbellies of reality that exist beyond our comprehension and are clouded by the Imaginary and the Symbolic – we are continually alienated from our “true” desires, drives, and purposes. Everything we know is obfuscated by the confusions present in the Imaginary and the Symbolic order; consequently, everyone (not just the bourgeois elite) is alienated by ideology. To return to his chess analogy for the final time, Žižek explains that the Real ‘is the entire complex set of contingent circumstances that affect the course of the game: the intelligence of the players, the unpredictable intrusions that may disconcert one player or directly cut the game short.’¹⁹ That is to say, it is everything that exists outside the chessboard. In relation to how the Real relates to us, it encompasses everything outside of our comprehension – it is the realm of non-knowledge (i.e., not just knowledge we *don't* know we know, but knowledge we *cannot* know we know). In saying that, there is a difficulty in explaining and discussing the Real because it *is not necessarily anything at all*. Our reality (built upon the fabric of the Imaginary and Symbolic) renders the Real logically inaccessible.

In *Coriolanus*, one way people are alienated by ideology is through the ongoing need to conform to the masculine vogue to maintain their social position. Although this may seem counterintuitive, with masculinity stereotypically being the system of self-designated “alpha males” theatrically battling for hegemony, as a reminder, ideology “wants” to remain unexposed to maintain its “grasp” on the collective psyche. As such, “the Real” masculinity

¹⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (Norton, 2007), p. 9.

must go unexposed as a way to preserve itself. Because of the various psychoanalytical influences throughout Lacanian childhood development (specifically the mirror phase and the oedipal phase) that render the Real inaccessible and unavoidable, it is impossible not to interact with these ideological systems, such as gender. They are so ingrained in the fabric of reality (the collective psyche and the semiotically driven Imaginary and Symbolic orders that drive our linguistic interpretations of the world around us) and our subconscious that interacting with these systems is unavoidable.

Regarding the masculine system in *Coriolanus*, we continually see people conform to the dominant expressions of masculinity to maintain their social position. When the masculine vogue shifts, these people adapt their expressions of masculinity to fit the newly celebrated form. One of the significant instigating changes in the play's masculine system is the appointment of the tribunes ('MENENIUS: What is granted to them? MARTIUS: Five tribunes to defend their vulgar wisdoms' [1. 1. 209-210]), in a sense, initialising the legitimisation of the plebeian class through the recognition and extension of civil rights. Of course, because Martius is so rigid and fixed in his understanding of masculinity, he cannot accept this new development within the masculine order as he may perceive it as an attack on his masculine authority. As such, through his behaviour and rejection of the new masculinity of Shakespeare's Rome, Martius will eventually become subordinated and feminised within the masculine order.

To begin the analysis of this characteristic within *Coriolanus*, I want to return to this idea around the newfound legitimisation of the plebeians and explore the wide-sprung effects of this. Following the tribunes' appointment, several moments illustrate the growing authorisation of the plebeians within the gender order. For example, following Martius' appointment as Consul ('The senate, Coriolanus, are well pleased | To make thee consul' [2.

2. 130-131]), Menenius explains to Martius that ‘It then remains that you do speak to the people’ (2. 2. 133). Martius responds, pleading to the Senate to

Let [him] o’erleap that custom, for I cannot

Put on the gown, stand naked, and entreat them

For my wounds’ sake, to give their suffrage. Please you

That I may pass this doing. (2. 2. 135-138)

As a result of the recent extension of some civil liberties to the plebeians, which includes having representatives who act in their best interest during ceremonial and political proceedings, the process of engaging with the plebeians' voices has become more than a mere custom or formality; it is now a necessity. As such, in response to Martius’ request to avoid “the custom”, Sicinius and Menenius both express the importance of Martius going to speak to the plebeians.

SICINIUS: Sir, the people

Must have their voices, neither will they bate

One jot of ceremony.

MENENIUS: Put them not to ’t.

Pray you go fit you to the custom, and

Take to you, as your predecessors have,

Your honour with your form. (2. 2. 138-143)

One potential reason for Martius’ refusal could be the anxiousness of his masculinity, which leads him to feel insecure in situations that may signal his effeminacy and undermine his masculinity. For example, throughout the play, Martius continually attempts to take authority

over his body and its functions. For instance, because bleeding not only signals his mortality but also highlights the fact he has been cut, sliced or stabbed (an event that carries distinct feminine/homosexual undertones with its likeness to sexual penetration), Martius tries to take charge over his body's functions by either trying to downplay its significance or by trying to hide the scars he has received. Another way Martius' wounds could indicate effeminacy and subordination is through their symbolic link to menstruation. As explained by Paster, 'blood flowing from a wounded or dead body carries a potential narrative value that the hierarchies internal to humoral medicine make natural and available to gender coding.'²⁰ As such, under the patriarchal masculine ideology – which aims to avoid any links to femininity and womanhood – the act of involuntary bleeding could be treated as shameful as it undermines a person's authority over the body (differentiating themselves from woman) due to its link to menstruation which is heavily stigmatised within a patriarchal society.

During one of the battle sequences of the play, in a lull in the battle, we see various Roman soldiers looting the town of Corioles ('1 ROMAN: This will I carry to Rome. | 2 ROMAN: And I This. | 3 ROMAN: A murrain on't, I took this for silver.' [1. 5. 1-3]). Martius and Titus Lartius (a Roman military officer and patrician) enter the scene with Martius explaining that he will help the general Cominius fight 'the man of [his] soul's hate, Aufidius' (1. 5. 10). In response, Lartius exclaims that Martius is bleeding and surely that he has done his part in the war effort.

LARTIUS: Worthy sir, thou bleed'st.

Thy exercise hath been too violent

For a second course of fight.

²⁰ Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 92.

MARTIUS: Sir, praise me not.

My work hath yet not warmed me. Fare you well.

The blood I drop is rather physical

Than dangerous to me. [...]

LARTIUS: Now the fair goddess Fortune

Fall deep in love with thee and her great charms

Misguide thy opposers' swords, bold gentleman!

Prosperity be thy page. (1. 5. 14-23)

Here, Martius seemingly downplays the importance of his wounds, framing his bleeding as something he is actively deciding to do rather than something incidental or happening to him. Martius says, 'The blood I drop' rather than "The blood I bleed" or "The blood that flows from my wounds", which carries the connotations that this is something Martius is choosing or allowing to happen. Pester offers the perspective that

To have excess blood to shed [...] does not create gender difference; what does is the possibility of shedding it at will. The male subject can regard such bloodshed therapeutically, as purgative, and can thus define it as enhancing rather than endangering somatic integrity and bodily solubility.²¹

This portrayal reduces his bleeding to something trivial and medical, akin to bloodletting (the ancient practice of removing blood to regain the balance of the sanguine humour and cure or prevent disease) or to a modern blood test, where the amount of blood taken is so minuscule

²¹ Paster, *The Body Embarrassed*, p. 97.

that it is of little significance. Rather than treating his bleeding as an essential sign that signifies Martius' weakness or feminisation, Martius diminishes its importance.

Another way Martius trivialises his wounds is by downplaying "his work" (the fighting he has done). He exclaims: 'Sir, praise me not. | My work hath not yet warmed me' (1. 5. 16-17), akin to saying "Oh nah! I'm just getting started; I haven't even broken a sweat yet" (to give a stereotypical "Kiwi bloke" reframing) or "'tis but a scratch" (to quote Monty Python's *Black Knight*). Since Martius' wounds have genuine implications for his mortality and health, with not only 'Every gash [being] an enemy's grave' (2. 1.151-152) but also each wound potentially being his last, trivialising his bleeding and wounds allows Martius to maintain his masculine façade and reputation as an unkillable beast who dominates the battlefield. Despite Martius' attempts at downplaying the importance of his wounds, they still take on a mythological status within *Coriolanus*' Roman society. Volumnia, for example, continually boasts over Martius' body. Excitedly explaining to Menenius in one scene that Martius will have 'large cicatrices to show the people when he shall stand for his place [as consul]' (2. 1. 144-145).

VOLUMNIA: O, he is wounded, I thank the gods for 't! [...]

MENENIUS: [...] Where is he wounded?

VOLUMNIA: I'th' shoulder and i'th' left arm. There will be large cicatrices to show the people when he shall stand for his place. He received in the repulse of Tarquin seven hurts i'th' body.

MENENIUS: One i'th' neck and two i'th' thigh – there's nine that I know.

VOLUMNIA: He had, before this last expedition, twenty-five wounds upon him.

MENENIUS: Now it's twenty-seven (2. 1. 118-151)

Of course, due to the recent legitimisation of the plebeian class, Martius is required to display his wounds to the people of Shakespeare's Rome to prove his participation in fighting for Rome and, by extension too much his chagrin, his actions in promoting the well-being of the plebeians. This contradicts the previously explored bodily autonomy that Martius has built up throughout the play and, in his mind, undermines his masculinity.

Because of Martius' hesitation in displaying his wounds in public and his ongoing disdain for the plebeians, there is a level of conflict between Martius, the plebeians and the continually morphing masculine ideology. As previously mentioned, due to the incorporation of the plebeians into the political order and masculine order of *Coriolanus*, rather than merely being a "custom" ('Let me o'erleap that custom' [2. 2. 135]), Martius is required to display his wounds in the marketplace and, in the sarcastic words of Martius, say "I pray, sir"? [...] "Look, sir, my wounds! I got them in my country's service[']" (2. 3. 49-51).

Paradoxically, not only does the plebeians requirement to view Martius' body undermine Martius' masculinity and the way he has framed himself as the critical ruler of his body and its function, it also reinforces the conventional masculine order where the plebeians are subservient to the patricians. During this ceremonial event, Martius is required to '[p]ut on the gown [of humility], stand naked, and entreat [the plebeians]' (2. 2. 160). In turn, the plebeians are expected to speak to the legitimacy of Martius' noble actions in defending Rome, and in a sense, 'if he show[s] [them] his wounds and tell[s] [them] his deeds, [they] are to put [their] tongues into those wounds and speak for them.' (2. 3. 5-7). This ceremony clearly highlights that Martius has been penetrated in war (as previously stated). Still, on the other hand, it also elevates Martius' body as the mythological symbol that Volumnia sees it as. In a sense, for the plebeians to see Martius' wounds and voyeuristically gaze upon them, they are accepting that Martius has received wounds (in his words) while '[s]ome certain of your brethren roared and ran | From th' noise of our own drums' (2. 3. 52-53). This signifies

that Martius has worked in the masculine sphere of war while most plebeians (femininely) ran away from the battle. This is to say, by viewing Martius' wounds, the plebeians must accept their alienation and admit to themselves that Martius is "more" masculine than them and elevate him as superior within the masculine order.

Despite this very favourable outcome for Martius (one which, of course, comes at a price to his persona), Martius 'cannot | Put on the gown, stand naked and entreat them' (2. 2. 136-137). Throughout the play, Martius is very protective and anxious about his image and persona. In an earlier scene, Martius leaves the Senate forum while his actions in the battle of Corioles are discussed because '[he] had rather have one scratch my head i'th' sun | When the alarum were struck than idly sit | To hear my nothings monstered' (2. 2. 73-74). In the same scene, he explains that '[he] had rather have my wounds to heal again | Than hear say how I got them' (2. 2. 67-68). Even earlier in the play, immediately following the Battle of Corioles, Martius speaks to Cominius and before his fellow soldiers, explaining that '[he] ha[s] some wounds upon [him], and they smart | To hear themselves remembered' (1. 9. 28-29) to hurry along the post-war celebrations. Martius is continually coy about his wounds, so it is of little surprise that he would ultimately refuse to show his wounds to the plebeians. Perhaps it is because Martius loses a certain level of authority and autonomy when his body and wounds are cemented as a mythical symbol. In a sense, he becomes ingrained in the linguistics of Rome (becoming a cultural meme) – a process that I can imagine would feel quite dehumanising.

One perspective on this process of memeification and the loss of autonomy comes from the plebeians. One of the citizens explains that 'if [Martius] show[s] us his wounds and tells us his deeds, we are to put our tongues into those wounds and speak for them' (2. 3. 5-7). In a sense, when Martius shows his wounds to the plebeians, they are no longer a part of his body. They become a meme that represents Roman valour. Martius no longer has sole

custody over his body. Of course, these three lines are rich with homosexual imagery. According to the speaking citizen, the plebeians are forced to orally stimulate the symbol of their subordination (being forced to “lick” the wounds of Martius and testify on their behalf). I think that these lines act as a way to represent an upheaval of the play’s gender order. To be cis/heteronormative, the plebeians are required ‘to put [their] tongues *into* those wounds’, notably not *onto* or *around* as one might suspect they would around a masculinised penis in the feminised act of fellatio, but *into*, aligning with the more masculinised act of cunnilingus or the oral stimulation of the feminised vulva and, in a way, feminising Martius’ body and challenging his hegemonic position within society. Of course, with the plebeians wanting to ‘put [their] tongues into those wounds’ (2. 3. 7) and penetrate the ideological vulva of Martius’ feminisation (despite Martius’ trying to reframe the wounds and state otherwise), it would cause Martius to accept his vulnerability and femininity within the social order. Therefore, as explained by Starks-Estes, ‘Coriolanus’s refusal to show his wounds to the masses reveals a more deeply rooted fear of his passivity and the potential permeability of his body.’²²

As a result of Martius’ refusal to participate in the newly adjusted masculine order, which partially includes the plebeians as an authoritative class due to their recently appointed representation in the Senate, Martius is removed from the gender order. In a sense, this refusal castrates him, removing him from the point of masculine authority and feminising him, relegating him to the bottom of the gender order (even below the plebeians who he so greatly hated). Unlike the other patricians around him, who become less abrasive to the plebeians and more accepting (e.g., Menenius has ‘grown most kind | Of late.’ [4. 6. 11-12]), Martius is unable to accept the new changes in the social order. As a result, from what we can

²² Lisa S. Starks-Estes, ‘*Virtus*, Vulnerability, and Emblazoned Male Body in Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*’, in *Violent Masculinities: Male Aggression in Early Modern Texts and Culture*, ed. by Jennifer Feather and Catherine E. Thomas (Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), pp. 85-108 (p. 92).

gather from this and his later exile and assassination, we can see that it is essential for people within the masculine order to conform and adapt to the changes in the masculine vogue as a way to maintain their social dominant position in the gender order and society.

Conclusion: Evaluating Coriolanus' masculinity

Through this discussion of the masculinity of *Coriolanus*, we can see an overwhelming feeling that reveals the anxiousness of masculinity. Despite being a performative expression conferred onto people, its complex interaction with society's mythological and ideological systems continues to perpetuate its ongoing impact. Through the various close readings of moments of the play, we can see how the patricians' power continues to ensure the subordination and feminisation of the plebeians while maintaining a cycle of alienation that ensures the preservation of their social dominance.

The first characteristic of masculinity – which states that it is masculine to improve someone's standing in the gender order – illustrates how the ideology of masculinity compels people to engage in gender competition, which often comes at the detriment of those outside the masculine vogue. This characteristic is shown through Martius' continual hatred of the plebeians. The second characteristic of masculinity – which states the importance of conformity and alienation – illustrates how the ideology of masculinity can ensure its preservation within the collective psyche of the play's society. As we can see, Martius' inability to adapt to the newfound legitimisation of the plebeian class ultimately leads to his downfall, castration and feminisation within the “new Rome”.

Coriolanus' presentation of masculinity offers an intriguing perspective on masculinity and how it functions within a society that celebrates and enables its toxicity. It compels us to interrogate our society's harmful mythologies and ideologies.

Chapter 3 | A film calling itself *Coriolanus*: The Recontextualisation of Shakespeare's Masculinity for a Modern Audience

Just as the reviews that started this thesis praised 1929's production of *Coriolanus* for being extraordinarily contemporary and relevant, we can also see through the reviews of Ralph Fiennes' adaptation of *Coriolanus* (2011) that the story of the disgraced Roman war hero remains continually pertinent to societies across time. In Phillip French's review, he notes that the film was 'shot in Serbia and reek[s] of the recent wars in the former Yugoslavia'.¹ Continuing that

[T]he film is as up to date as today's news, and indeed it opens as if we'd just switched on the TV to watch the latest bulletin from a state torn by civil strife. [...] For Corioles you might read the Falklands, Afghanistan, Iraq or Chechnya, and the battle is shot by cinematographer Barry Ackroyd with the dusty, dangerous documentary-style realism he has brought to movies by Ken Loach and Paul Greengrass, and to Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker*.²

Similarly, Dana Stevens, writing for *Slate*, comments on the timelessness and urgency of *Coriolanus*' subject matter, claiming that they 'could be pullquotes from today's op-ed page'.³

Due to the seemingly on-going relevance of *Coriolanus*, this section will explore how the characteristics of the previous chapter – the interplay between the socioeconomic structure of Shakespeare's Rome and the power dynamics inherent in the play's masculine

¹ Phillip French, 'Coriolanus – review', *The Guardian*, 22 January 2012 <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2012/jan/22/coriolanus-film-review-ralph-fiennes>> [20 October 2024].

² French.

³ Dana Stevens, 'Coriolanus: Ralph Fiennes turns Shakespeare's tragedy into a timely, tightly-plotted action thriller.' *Slate*, 19 January 2012 <<https://slate.com/culture/2012/01/coriolanus-ralph-fiennes-turns-shakespeare-s-tragedy-into-a-timely-tightly-plotted-action-thriller.html>> [20 October 2024].

gender order – persist and are repurposed through the adaptation of the play for a modern audience with contemporary sensibilities. Given the conclusions reached in the past chapter that were critical of the play’s masculine ideology and how the socioeconomic structure of the play celebrates and enables a form of masculinity that is toxic, a modern reader might hear this and, considering the contemporary goals of a more equitable post-patriarchal society, feel a level of apprehension towards the text. These feelings are especially valid given the play’s ambivalence and apathy in criticising such an expression of masculinity.

Certainly, just as Shakespeare himself was likely educated on and indoctrinated into the ways of masculinity through historical figures such as Gnaeus Marcius or Gaius Julius, who acted as virtuosic exemplars of idealised behaviour and attributes for young boys, this play serves as a tool to educate audiences on “appropriate” and “correct” masculine behaviour. This is by no means to accuse Shakespeare of being a misogynistic masculinist, ideologically ordaining that masculinity must be oppressive and domineering towards the “socially weak”, nor that he is complacent, irresponsibly purporting and perpetuating oppressive stereotypes of masculinity that torment and subjugate the socially subordinate. On the contrary, like all his plays before it, in *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare does not cast judgment on his characters, their philosophies, or their actions. He presents them in their habitat and allows them to go about their lives, making questionable decisions with powerfully tragic consequences. As such, Shakespeare’s characters are a vessel for the audience to test their beliefs against. Within the world of *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare showcases the tragedy of characters being oppressively trapped by the ideological structures of masculinity. Of course, unlike the characters of the play, the audience ultimately get to choose whether they are going to celebrate the portrayal of “true masculinity” or, as we would with our current sensibilities, criticise and reject the patriarchal structures of the play. I think Ralph Fiennes explains this sensation well in a *New York Times* article. He says,

“For reasons I can’t explain I’m drawn to this emotionally rather stunted person who has total commitment to a particular value,” [...] “I find Shakespeare’s proposition of Coriolanus thrilling because it breaks so many rules. We are not asked to warm to him, but if you are taken on the ride, you find yourself on his side.”⁴

While I disagree with Fiennes’ opinion that “you find yourself on [Martius’] side,” I agree with the overall thesis that Shakespeare merely presents a character without asking you to warm to them. As such, a modern audience would most likely treat the play with respect and nuance. They will view the tragedy and purpose of *Coriolanus* as showing a character trapped by social structures and behaviours (specifically masculinity), being unable to escape or wrestle free from their grasps.

Through revitalisation and reemphasising the play’s relevance to a modern audience, Fiennes ensures a more nuanced interpretation of the presented masculinities than its staged counterpart. Screenwriter John Logan explains that this was seemingly natural since ‘there is something uniquely modern and cinematic about the play.’⁵ Like other adaptations that redeploy Shakespeare’s dialogue into a modern setting, such as Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo+Juliet* (1996) and Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet* (2000), Fiennes and Logan maintained Shakespeare’s language. This decision means that many moments throughout the film – despite being modern in context and setting – carry their original meaning from the play. As such, this new *Coriolanus* is still inextricably linked and inseparable from its Jacobean parent. Despite being modern in context and setting, certain moments throughout the film carry their original meaning from the play. This creates an intricate palimpsest where the overall understanding of masculinity, which was developed over the previous chapters,

⁴ Roslyn Sulcas, ‘A First Plunge Into Directing Is Hardly Routine’, *The New York Times*, 25 November 2011 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/27/movies/coriolanus-ralph-fiennes-debut-as-film-director.html>> [accessed 15 July 2024].

⁵ John Logan, *Coriolanus: The Shooting Script* (HarperCollins, 2011), p. VIII.

still applies in this chapter. As such, the key phrases of “masculine ideology” and “masculine anxiety” are still very much applicable and inescapable in this chapter. Primarily, this is prevalent in the ways the masculine gender order and the characteristics of masculinity (previously discussed) are both preserved and moulded in the modern adaptation.

Therefore, although for Logan the process of adapting *Coriolanus* to screen seemed natural, compared to the play, the film is a lot less straightforward in its celebration of a particular presentation of masculinity. Perhaps this is due to some intrinsically endearing quality possessed by Martius, which allows Fiennes to “warm to him” or led Logan to cut the ‘more “public” elements of the play [...] to keep the “private” and psychological story [of Martius and his family] central’.⁶ Nonetheless, through certain adaptive choices made by Logan in the screenplay, directorial decisions by Fiennes, or character decisions by Fiennes (Martius) and Gerard Butler (Aufidius), the film’s adaptation is undoubtedly more ambiguous and enigmatic in its portrayal and overall theses about masculinity compared to its Shakespearean counterpart.

The decision to set Fiennes’ *Coriolanus* in a fictional Balkan-inspired state merely calling itself “Rome” has many widespread implications for the film’s portrayal of masculinity. One of the more important consequences is that it creates a sense that the hegemonic form of masculinity is ripe with brutishness, violence, and intragender competition. As explained by L. Monique Pittman, by situating and contextualising the film around the Balkans, explicitly highlighting the regions still struggling with the effects of the 1990 Yugoslav Wars, Fiennes enforces stereotypes of “the Balkan Other”.

[C]omplicating the movie’s critique of masculine identity is Fiennes’s choice to film in Serbia and Montenegro as well as to utilize found news footage from the 1990s

⁶ Logan, p. IX.

Yugoslav Wars. Fiennes's recontextualization of the Roman-Volsi conflict unleashes a raft of stereotypes of the Balkan male as brutally violent and uncontrollable that problematically yoke an entire European region to the patterns of self-destruction manifested by Coriolanus and Aufidius. Thus, Fiennes's filmic and historical intertexts inadvertently impress the seal of Shakespearean approval on dubious European stereotypes of the Balkan Other. We see in Fiennes's film that as adaptative alterations strive to render the canon relevant and accessible, they simultaneously provoke new interpretive and ethical considerations.⁷

In a way, by setting the film in an area of complex geopolitical strife, an Anglo-American audience feels their current luxuriously complex First World necessities for survival drastically erode. Logan studied various pictures of modern warfare to create his screenplay from a wide variety of sources (such as the American-led invasion of Iraq, the British occupation of Northern Ireland, the Somali Civil War, and the Yugoslav Wars)⁸; it creates a feeling where the needs of survival are simplified. It gives the audience a sense of geopolitical distance where the brutish masculinity on display can be fathomed as a problem of the "Balkan Other" (or any Second/Third World Other) and not as a commentary on a globally systemic issue. It also allows an Anglo-American audience to feel a level of self-exoneration when confronted with the violence of *Coriolanus*.

As such, by encouraging the audience to equate the film's fictional violence with the genuine violence of the Balkan region, it not only trivialises the complex historical traumas of the area but also allows a Western European and American audience to treat the violence with a certain level of distance. It becomes an issue of the "barbaric Balkan other" and not a

⁷ L. Monique Pittman, 'Heroes, Villains, and Balkans: Intertextual Masculinities in Ralph Fiennes's *Coriolanus*', *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 33.2 (Summer 2015), pp. 215-244 (p. 216), doi:10.1353/shb.2015.0022.

⁸ Logan, p. 106.

universal issue that is widely applicable. The violence isn't a problem of the Anglo-American "us"; it is a problem of the Balkan "them".

To return to Pittman, she relies on Maria Todorova to inform these stereotypes. She concludes that there is an association in Western Europe between the "Balkan Other" and an expression of masculinity characterised by its 'cruelty, boorishness, instability, and unpredictability'.⁹ Todorova continues to explain that the Balkans are categorised against the remainder of Europe, which conversely symbolises 'cleanliness, order, self-control, strength of character, sense of law, justice, [and] efficient administration'.¹⁰ Thus, despite being set in a fictionalised Balkan state, the film still embodies the very real regional traumas of casualty, genocide, and ethnic cleansing from the Yugoslav wars.

This embodiment continues to perpetuate the racist stereotype that 'violence in the Balkans has been not only a description of a social condition but considered inherent in the nature of its people'.¹¹ Quite obviously, the film entrenches itself in the Balkan region and its past by appropriating the aforementioned real-life news footage documenting the Yugoslav wars. As explained by Pittman,

Coriolanus taps into these troubling constructs of a violent and sexualized Balkan identity packaged as fact thanks to the 1990s media coverage of the Yugoslav Wars. Furthermore, in order to establish an aura of authentic "realness" to the film's depiction of war and martial subjectivity, Fiennes's production team raids and redeploys the very footage responsible for entrenching the broadly drawn outlines of the Balkan sexual and violent aggressor.¹²

⁹ Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 119.

¹⁰ Todorova, p. 119.

¹¹ Milica Bakić-Hayden, 'Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia', *Slavic Review*, 54.4 (Winter 1995), pp. 917-931 (p. 918), doi:10.2307/2501399.

¹² Pittman, p. 229.

The film does little to separate, oppose, or prevent itself from perpetuating these stereotypes; instead, it seems to encourage the audience to make a connection between the setting and its portrayal of masculinity. As such, throughout its runtime, there are moments that exemplify the brutality inherent in its system of masculinity, seemingly encouraging its audience to correlate these expressions of masculinity with the film's Balkan setting.

For example, Fiennes' *Coriolanus* has a fetishistic infatuation with the brutishness of knives and blades. Throughout its runtime, we get this overwhelming sensation that knives are the significant symbol of dominance within the masculine economy of the film. The film opens with a masturbatory-like scene where Aufidius meticulously sharpens his knife on a whetstone (00:00:51)¹³. The rhythmic scraping of the knife against the stone casts a hypnotising spell on the audience – drawing them into the masculine world of *Coriolanus*. It also lays out its promise to the viewer; this is a world of macho violence, where characters will think with the Phallus of their blade.

Due to the importance of the blade in the film, each knife becomes a character. Aufidius' knife, as we see in the close-ups of the opening, is decoratively carved along the top of the flat, from the bolster to its clipped point (*fig. 1*). Mechanically, these carvings offer no benefit to the knife's function. Yet they act to deepen and enrich its character. Aufidius' knife is not merely a tool; it is a tangible extension of his persona (i.e., his masculinity). Those who find themselves at the sharpened end of the knife are momentarily entwined with Aufidius. At the moment of climax, at the release of the red bodily fluid and life force, they relinquish themselves to Aufidius and his masculine dominance, accepting their feminisation. This is to explain the masculine economy of Fiennes' *Coriolanus*: although the modern

¹³ Unless stated otherwise, this and all subsequent references to *Coriolanus* (2011) will be given with a timestamp and are taken from:
Coriolanus, dir. by Ralph Fiennes (United Kingdom, 2011).

setting of the film presents a battle of the firearm, between the American M4 or M16 used by the Roman fighters and the Soviet AK-47 (or in following the Balkan theming, perhaps the derivative Zastava M70) used by the Volsci, the knife remains the most significant weapon throughout the film. While there are practical reasons, serving as a homage to its Jacobean parent, the hand-to-hand combat of Shakespeare's Rome, and satisfying the audience's bloodlust for the complexly choreographed crossing of blades between Aufidius and Martius, knives also hold symbolic significance. Its symbolism serves to signify masculine camaraderie, brutality, and graduation within the gender order.

In the first instance, not every character is masculine or worthy enough to enter the homoerotic dance of crossing blades with Aufidius or Martius. While a sheer majority of the combat in the film utilises firearms, making use of the promise of a quick and insignificant death, the genuinely honourable and masculine death found at the end of a blade is reserved only for those who are worthy. For example, very early in the film, Aufidius records a video to send to Rome from the Volsci Headquarters (00:08:17). In it, he quite unexpectedly shoots a Roman soldier taken prisoner in the head. There is nothing grand and symbolic in the death of the unnamed soldier; there was no pageantry or build-up, and it serves no great purpose in changing the tides of the Roman-Volsci war. It is essentially an insignificant, arbitrary death: death for the sake of death. Similarly, the various deaths of the Roman or Volsci soldiers shown in the combat sequences in Corioles are treated with the same indifference. The very first death on screen that is treated with any level of significance is perhaps the Volsci soldier Martius grapples with before brutally stabbing him in the stomach, throat, and (presumably – as it is out of frame) chest with a furious downward killing blow.

After coming up the stairs of an apartment building containing civilians and Volsci troops, we follow Martius with a handheld medium close-up shot as he sweeps and clears various rooms. While Martius is reloading his pistol, a Volsci soldier ambushes him, grabbing

onto Martius' head and attempts to hold a knife to Martius' throat (*fig. 2*). At this moment, the soldier, thrusting himself into significance, deems himself worthy of crossing blades with Martius. Despite this, the moment, which encapsulates his masculine ego, is short-lived. Quickly, Martius disarms the attacker before dealing with him using the knife that only moments ago was held to his throat. However, the Volsci soldier attempts to assert himself within the masculine realm by trying to cross blades with Martius. Of course, much like how Aufidius' knife has a level of symbolic significance due to the masculine economy and the Phallic significance of knives, Martius' knife would carry similar importance due to his dominant position within the masculine order. As such, by disarming the Volsci soldier and using that insignificant blade rather than his own, Martius thwarts the soldier's attempt at climbing higher within the masculine gender order.

The various moments of knife fighting throughout the films are laden with homosexual/erotic undertones. Due to these homoerotic undertones of hand-to-hand combat, much as in the discussion in the previous chapter on penetration and Martius' wounds, there is a masculine pressure to be the penetrator and not the penetrated. Due to the stereotypical competition between "alpha males" and other examples of establishing a masculine order, such as Connell's "sizing gaze" referred to in the previous chapter, violence and masculinity are seemingly engrained and inseparable. Anton Blok explains,

Violence is not an unchanging, 'natural' fact but a historically developed cultural category that we have to understand primarily as symbolic activity, as meaningful social action. [...] Violence is interwoven with masculinity and the human body often serves as a cultural medium, as a source of metaphorical material to symbolize power

relations. As Campbell writes of Greek pastoralists: ‘There is no more conclusive way of showing that you are stronger than by taking away the other man's life’.¹⁴

Building upon the stereotypically hegemonic traits of masculinity, dominance is quite obviously a desirable trait. This domination can manifest in political or social hegemony (as in Shakespeare’s patrician class) or, more immediately, physical domination associated with being big and strong. John K. Campbell (as quoted by Blok) argues that strength, or masculinity, is best expressed through successful conflict. This perspective highlights how physical dominance is linked to the broader understanding of masculinity within the context of social power. Of course, this need for physical dominance is at conflict with the often-present homophobia of masculine circles. As such, when rituals such as knife fighting are laced with homoeroticism, there is a masculine pressure to be the penetrator (not the penetrated).

Despite the stigmatisation of homosexuality, which especially condemns being penetrated by another man and labels the sharing of bodily fluids as abhorrent, the film voyeuristically enjoys watching characters cross their blades in masculine competition, treating it with a level of camp pageantry. For example, during the first on-screen confrontation between Aufidius and Martius, through alternating extreme close-ups of each character’s eyes, the two exchange piercing glares as they stand across the room clouded with dust and debris from the ongoing fight (*fig. 3*). Methodically and dramatically, the pair hand off their firearms and chest armour to members of their platoon and performatively reveal their knives to their opposite. Like professional wrestlers, sizing each other up, they dance around the ethereal foggy room, exchanging swipes and nicks, grappling for dominance. At

¹⁴ Anton Blok, ‘The Engima of Senseless Violence’, in *Meanings of Violence: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. by Jon Abbink and Göran Aijmer (Routledge, 2000), pp. 23-38 (p. 33); John K. Campbell, *Honour, Family and Patronage: A Study of Institutions and Moral Values in a Greek Mountain Community* (Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 318.

the same time, the captivated audience of their platoons eagerly watches on without intervening. This moment perfectly encapsulates the homoerotic ritual of knife fighting. While Martius lies on top of Aufidius in the heat of battle, their noses touch as they stare into each other's eyes while summoning all the strength they can muster (*fig. 4*). They are but a moment and a different context away from their lips touching and breaking the taboo shroud that *protects them* from the sphere of homosexuality.

Robert Ormsby describes the film's infatuation by recounting the fetishistic obsession with bodily fluid.

With the camera swiftly cutting between a wide range of differently angled longshots and close-ups of the Romans and Volsces shooting at each other, the viewer's senses are assailed by the constant echo of automatic gunfire and by bullets sparking off balcony railings; shell casings pulse out of shuddering weapons, and soldiers on both sides fall dead in pools of blood.¹⁵ (*fig. 5*)

In another moment, during the suicide of Menenius, the camera holds on to the blood slowly dripping from his fingers from the wound on his wrist before slowly tracking down his body and finding the pool of blood gathering between his legs and zooming in on it (*fig. 6*).

Building upon the film's obsession with blood, much like its Shakespearean counterpart, the masculine economy of Fiennes' Rome is founded on war and a person's ability to spill blood. As such, much of Martius' masculine dominance within the film is built on his ability to dominate the battlefield. Given the juxtaposition between the obsession with blood and the fear of the homoerotic/sexual, it is interesting that the transfer of blood is treated with such a level of importance within the film.

¹⁵ Robert Ormsby, 'Coriolanus as failed action hero', in *Shakespeare in Performance: Coriolanus* (Manchester University Press, 2014), pp. 222-243 (p. 227).

Compared to other forms of combat, hand-to-hand combat (especially with the Balkan knife or the Roman sword) has the substantial promise of the sexually adjacent transfer of bodily fluids (i.e., blood). While all warfare features the spilling of blood, it is only at close, intimate distances where its transferal is possible. When I am near, not only does the other release their fluids (their blood, their life force), but it also becomes a part of me; it soaks into my clothes and stains my skin. I may even ingest it. Because of the violence inherent in this transfer, it doesn't come as the result of a consensual exchange or a night of erotic passion. Instead, it is taken by force and often comes at the detriment of the other. That is why, despite its homoerotic/sexual undertones, it can remain dominant in a system that marginalises homosexuals due to its systemic homophobia.

Another critical aspect of how blades are treated in Fiennes' *Coriolanus* is how they show camaraderie between hegemony and act as a way to confer masculinity onto people. For example, following his exile from Rome, Martius seeks out Aufidius to unite and face their new mutual enemy together. Reflecting the passage of time and his newfound feminisation within the gender hierarchy, Martius now sporting medium-length hair and a thick beard, departs from his once clean-shaven appearance. Further, Martius distances himself from his previous persona and elects to become invisible for a clean start. He is no longer in his trademark combat fatigues; he wears a dirty, stained shirt, trousers and an oversized field jacket (*fig. 7*). Once he reaches Antium, Martius seeks out his Volsci other.

The essential scene starts with Martius fighting his way into Aufidius' chamber during dinner, following the action lines of Logan's screenplay: 'Coriolanus powers in, still holding the second Guard by the face [...] Aufidius and his men, all pointing weapons at Coriolanus, are stunned' (pp. 73-74).¹⁶ Finally, Aufidius breaks the uneasy silence of the scene: 'Whence

¹⁶ This and all subsequent references to the screenplay will be taken from:
Logan, *Coriolanus: The Shooting Script* (HarperCollins, 2011).

come thou? [*long pause*] Thy name? [*long pause*] Speak, man! What's thy name?' (00:17:04).

This scene is complex, with a drastic palimpsest of conflicting and contradicting desires which, as if like cross-writing, overlap and intersect, creating a sensation where the audience cannot tell who truly is in control of the situation.

On the one hand, Martius, either in a moment of arrogance or desperation, approaches the object of his hatred, Aufidius ('MARTIUS: I'll fight with none but thee, for I do hate thee. AUFIDIUS: We hate alike' [p. 24]), to rise against Rome for revenge. Conflating his desire for retribution against Rome and Aufidius' hatred for Rome, Martius mistakenly claims to know the desires of the other-*a* (i.e., Aufidius). Aufidius, on the other hand, potentially recognised this attempt from Martius to weaponize and take advantage of him and the Volsci, resulting in his feigned unrecognition of the figure before him. This masculine refusal to be subjugated by Martius again stems from Aufidius' erroneous belief of knowing what the other-*a* desires. Ultimately, because they both, despite the obvious possibility, claim to know what the other wants, it speaks to the anxiousness of masculinity, where both parties attempt to double-cross and back-stab the other in order to gain (or in the case of Martius, rescue) a level of authority within the masculine order. Nonetheless, Aufidius accepts Martius' plan for revenge against Rome and allows him to join the ranks of Volsci soldiers. In the following scene, to formalise their bond and signify the reinstatement of Martius's masculinity under him, Aufidius has Martius showered and given a haircut by an elderly Volscian woman. Through various shots that show Martius' point of view, the audience is transformed into him (*fig. 8*). The hum of the electric razor and the snipping of scissors becomes the soundtrack to Martius' metamorphosis, becoming reendowed with a level of masculine dominance. This moment of the film becomes quite intimate, mirroring the earlier scene when Volumnia changes Martius' bandages after his returns from battle; the interaction between Martius and the Volscian lady serves to enforce the newfound familial bond Martius has found with Aufidius' people. As is

apparent, this moment is shrouded with constancy. Martius has been reborn and returned to his previous glory; he is no longer the dishevelled traveller we saw moments ago. He has returned to his position of the hegemon again. As the audience observes the scene through Martius' eyes, we know the conflating of Aufidius with Martius' new matriarchal figure.

As it is written in the shooting script, Aufidius, standing in the doorway, watches as the Volscian lady cuts Martius' hair before he goes over and, taking the razor, finishes shaving Martius' head (p. 77). In the film's final edit, however, the old lady almost seems to transform into Aufidius. In one shot, it is the Volscian lady cutting Martius' hair. In the next, it is Aufidius before returning to the Volscian lady again—the exclusive use of shots from Martius' point of view further exemplifies this illusion (*fig. 9*). The hallucinogenic coupling of Aufidius and the Volscian lady, as we have in the film's final edit, not only signifies Martius' mindset but also acts to enforce the masculine sphere of blades explored in this section. On the one hand, Martius' daydream acts as a type of Freudian slip, accidentally revealing and acknowledging a level of homosexual/romantic/erotic desire. As explained in the screenplay by Logan, Aufidius shaving Martius' head is a 'deeply personal act, even intimate ... Yet Aufidius employs the same methodical rhythms as when he was sharpening his knife at the opening of the story' (p. 78). By linking this scene to the masturbatory opening scene and choosing to cut the film in this particular way confirms the mutual aspects of masculinity and how it is conferred onto people in various ways. Of course, this aspect does not exclusively exist within the homosexual/romantic/erotic sphere; it could also exist in the homosocial sphere or the competition of the gender order; none the less by invoking blades (whether that is knives, razors, swords, etc.) in this scene, and comparing it to the previously discussed scenes, it serves to exemplify the many ways at which masculinity is conferred, taken, or rejected throughout the film. Whether it is conferred through mutual respect like we see in the first knife fight between Martius and Aufidius or rejected through

Martius's killing of the Volscian soldier, blades are the central ritualistic object of the "Balkan" masculinity.

The film's final scene serves to cement the importance of blades within Fiennes' *Coriolanus*. Following Martius' subordination and infantilisation through his defeat at the hands of his mother and the wider implicit embarrassment of the Volsci (due to Martius' de facto diplomatic position where he became the ideological figurehead of the Volsci regime), Aufidius and his people conspire to kill Martius in a bid to rescue some level of masculine supremacy and lash out at the person who just castrated any remaining masculinity. In the exchange to one of his lieutenants following the signing of a peace treaty with Rome, Aufidius expresses how he feels that Martius's failure against Rome has jeopardised and damaged his masculine authority within the Volscian gender order.

I raised him, and I pawned mine honour for his truth, who being so heightened he watered his new plants with dews of flattery seducing so my friends. At the last I seemed his follower, not partner, and he waged me with his countenance as if I had been mercenary. [...] Therefore, shall he die, and I'll renew me in his fall. (01:51:53)

As such, to recover a dominant social position, much like the Romans had earlier in the story (cf. Chapter 2), he labels Martius as the ideological opposition and conspires to once and for all castrate Martius of his masculinity (through his murder).

As soon as Martius is dropped off at a truck stop marking Volsci-Roman border, Martius is surrounded by a dozen supporters of Aufidius. Of course, with Martius' experienced eyes, he knows what will happen. Much like the earlier "What's the matter" scene where he stands against the rioting Roman plebians, he storms towards the Volscians with a face of fury. Fiennes' temples bulge, his jaw is wrenched shut, and the prosthetic scars applied to his face look like they are about to peel away from his face due to their tense

distortion. Because of the betrayal of his newfound nation and allies, he is bursting with choler and wrath. His indignation is explosive.

As I have established in the previous chapter, it was considered masculine for a person's humours to be at equilibrium. Therefore, Martius, at this time, at least attempts to act measured and balanced, free from choler, melancholy, ennui, or sanguine, despite his evident fury as a way to maintain at least some level of masculine dignity. Perhaps learning from and growing from his exile from Rome, where his temper boiled over and led to his quotable "I banish you" tirade, Martius remains substantially more in control of his passions. He approaches Aufidius with the same level of humility as when he first arrived in Antium following his exile and reports to Aufidius that he has 'returned [Aufidius'] soldier, no more infected with my country's love than when I parted hence, but still subsisting under your excellent command' (1:53:24). Whether Martius' attempts at de-escalating the situation and re-emphasising his commitment to the Volscian people were unsuccessful or Aufidius perceived Martius' failures and recent subordination too much to forgive, Martius' apparent attempt to survive this confrontation at the border was unsuccessful. Aufidius bait Martius' choler, speaking to his men and criticising Martius ('Tell the traitor in the highest degree he hath abused your powers [...] Aye, traitor Martius' [1:53:40]). Aufidius continues, undermining Martius' supposed masculine authority by proclaiming how Martius' emotions betrayed them, claiming that '[Martius] has betrayed [the Volscian people's] business and given up [...] [their] city Rome [...] He whined and roared away [their] victory' (1:54:04). At this point, Martius begins to become more visibly tense. Aufidius, recognising this, unleashes one last jab at Martius, calling him a "boy of tears". Ultimately subordinating him and likening him to an effeminate child that has just been punished by their mother. This had its desired effect and caused Martius to spiral into hysterical rage.

At being conferred the feminine position of “boy,” Martius erupts. Triggering his flight/fight/freeze response. Fiennes’ face trembles with rage, his eyes and prosthetic scars bulge, and he spits every line into the camera.

Measureless liar, thou has made my heart too great for what contains it. “*Boy*”? O slave. Cut me into pieces, Volscies! Men and lads, stain all your edges on me. “*Boy*”? False hound if you have writ your annals true, tis there that, like an eagle in a dovecote, I fluttered your Volscians in Corioles... Alone I did it! “*Boy*”. (01:54:39)

Not responding to Martius’ outburst, Aufidius, with a measured stern face, slowly turns to his supporters and gives his command: ‘Let him die for it’ (01:55:23). The juxtaposition between Martius’ furious vigour and Aufidius’ stern askant gaze brilliantly demonstrates the complexity of the two characters’ situation. On the one hand, due to Martius’ previously explained recent humiliation and castration within the gender order, the self-fulfilling prophecy of the societal expectation of his behaviour has shifted. Whether it is due to an acceptance of a new societal status that explains how Martius ought to behave or that the recent trauma and stress of social relegation has psychologically augmented Martius’ behaviour, reinforcing the structural gender norms, Martius acts in accordance with his newfound caste. Of course, Aufidius, in an attempt to distance himself from the failures of Martius, must continue the performative charade of gender – remaining balanced and calm in fitting his masculine position.

Nonetheless, to confirm the ultimate subordination of Martius, Aufidius’ men draw their knives and advance towards Martius, stabbing and slicing him in the back, leg, stomach and across the face. Of course, as is fitting for a modern action movie protagonist, he must go out swinging. Martius can land a few blows on the attackers but is ultimately overwhelmed and mortally wounded. To return to the discussion on the important symbolism of the knives

throughout the film, the unnamed Volscian soldiers have successfully feminised Martius. They have penetrated him in the ritualistic orgy of masculine combat. The camera inspects Martius and allows his wounds to transform him into what he has always been: insecure, broken, and insignificant. The audience realises that the great man they have watched for the last two hours is nothing more than a shell – an ideological tool used and abused for the perpetuation of socioeconomic difference. However, unlike horror films where the killing of the monster has the promise of a new day free from tyranny, the sound of the film is washed out (only with the final sound of Aufidius plunging his blade into Martius and the later *thud* as his body is unceremoniously discarded into the bed of a truck remain) the audience realises that vicious cycle of oppressive masculinity doesn't end with Martius. Aufidius can now take his rightful place as the hegemon of *Coriolanus*' world, ready to perpetuate the same social conditions that made men like him and Martius necessary. We must ask ourselves if the scene of Aufidius cleaning and sharpening his knife at the start of the film happened at the beginning (i.e., a moment of foreshadowing) *or* the end (i.e., a flash forward). Following the ideological infatuation with masculinity and the symbolism of blades, that scene would not seem out of place in either position. Because of the film's apparent circular structure, the opening sequence wouldn't be out of place and could very much be interpreted as Aufidius sharpening his blade to a eulogy for Martius. Therefore, it is crucial to explore how Fiennes' *Coriolanus* suggests a forever-going cycle of oppressive masculinity.

Due to the previously mentioned retention of Shakespeare's original language, many moments throughout the film, although modern in appearance and interpretation, are nonetheless imbued with Jacobean meaning. One such example can be found in the character of Young Martius, whose dress throughout the film symbolises his subordinate position within the masculine gender order. For background, the historical process of graduation within the gender order, Will Fisher explains that 'sex was not synecdochally reduced to any

one particular part in the Renaissance',¹⁷ demonstrating that boys were differentiated from their more mature counterparts because of many aspects and attributes. These included 'the beard and genitals, but would also have to include clothing, the hair, the tongue, and weapons such as swords or daggers'.¹⁸ Due to the marginalisation of children in early modern England, there was a definitive distinction between the effeminacy of boyhood and the masculinity of manhood. Of course, this distinction carried anxieties around whether boys would successfully be able to differentiate themselves from their mothers and become masculine despite their subordination. Anthony Fletcher explains that '[m]en were nervous about whether their boys would acquire the secure manhood to which the inheritance of their hotter seed entitled them'.¹⁹ He continues that,

Manhood was thrust upon boys. The ceremonial breeching, at about five or six, represented their release from the nursery into the male world. Grown men could look back and reflect on the effeminate stage of life when they were carefree and without responsibilities.²⁰

As mentioned by Fletcher, when a child was born, despite their gender, they were clothed in the feminine clothes of womanhood: gowns, dresses and skirts. As further explained by Linda Baumgarten,

The changing from petticoat to breeches was a big event in a little boy's life.

Occurring anywhere from four to eight years of age, depending on the time period or

¹⁷ Will Fisher, 'The Renaissance Beard: Masculinity in Early Modern England', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 54.1 (Spring 2001), pp. 155-187 (p. 157).

¹⁸ Fisher, p. 157.

¹⁹ Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500-1800* (Bath Press, 1999), p. 87.

²⁰ Fletcher, p. 87.

the family's desires, breeching symbolized growing up and moving from the female domain into that of the male.²¹

As we can see from the increased presence of Young Martius (Harry Fenn) compared to the play, there is a continual juxtaposition between early modern England's idealised masculinity and those that the contemporary setting necessitates. Jacobean convention would acknowledge how Young Martius has graduated into breeches, wearing, depending on the occasion, a collared shirt and trousers (*fig. 10*) or a formal grey ceremonial military uniform with rank pins on the collar, shoulder marks, and a beret (*fig. 11*). Following the modern context of the film, this later ceremonial dress, seemingly implies Young Martius might be some form of military cadet, following in his father's footsteps of becoming educated in the ways of war from a very young age. Baumgarten provides an interesting perspective, explaining that '[a] boy's first dress coat or suit was often styled like his father's. Although their suits were cut along fashionable adult lines, young boys often wore shirts that signalled an intermediate stage between childhood and adulthood'.²²

While under this process of gendering, Young Martius is conventionally masculine enough to wear ruffled shirts no longer; he remains ostensibly linked and subordinate to his father. Hence, his uniform. Rather than interpreting his uniform as a cadet, signifying a level of independence and choosing to follow in his father's footsteps, I view his uniform similarly to someone playing dress-up. This (following Baumgarten's idea of how a boy's first dress coat was styled like the father's) shows how he is an effeminate extension of Martius, dressed as a "mini me".

²¹ Linda Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America* (The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2002), p. 166-168.

²² Baumgarten, p. 168.

Despite this interpretation, Young Martius' militarised uniform could still be seen as exemplifying his subordination to his father, albeit for different reasons. Because of his father's social and gendered position, Young Martius takes on a ceremonial ideological position within Fiennes' Roman society. He is the heir to his father's legacy and masculine dominance; as such, he is thrust into a position where he becomes a subordinate extension of his father, with his behaviour (both good and bad) being an implicit reflection of Martius' masculinity, and being placed in a position where he is expected (in line with the "sensation of desire for the other", c.f. Chapter 2) to act as if he is already the dominant hegemon of masculinity, not as the effeminate preadolescent child that he is. The way he is dressed is emblematic of this complex struggle. Much like how Prince George of Wales doesn't dress nor act like a "normal" 11-year-old, but with an air of regency that is expected from someone who will presumably be The King at some point in the future, Young Martius too has similar expectations placed on him. Just as George is subjugated by his father, William, and is (presumably) precisely instructed and mentored on outwardly appearing proper (as defined by the Royal Family's doctrines and ideology of masculinity and behaviour), Young Martius also undergoes a similar indoctrination. As such, by dressing in a way that is a functional copy of his father, Young Martius is placed in a position of subordination because of the societal expectations placed on him.

Returning to the film's circular structure, Volumnia is placed in a position of dominance over Martius throughout the film. She holds the sole influence over Martius and is responsible for shaping his character. Due to Logan's focus when adapting the story to cut the 'more "public" elements of the play [...] to keep the "private" and psychological story [of Martius and his family] central', the relationships and interactions between the characters take central importance when analysing the intricacies of masculinity. Indeed, these "private"

moments behind closed doors provide the most significant insights into the film's portrayal of masculinity.

The most influential relationship in *Coriolanus* is the relationship between Martius and Volumnia. As his mother, Volumnia perfectly engineered Martius for one task: self-sufficient masculine dominance. As explained by Janet Adelman,

By failing to feed him enough, she makes hunger the sign of his vulnerability, creating him as a virtual automaton who cannot tolerate his own ordinary human neediness and who thus is compelled to act out needs he can neither understand nor satisfy.

Under her tutelage, any acknowledgment of need-starting with the acknowledgment that he, like the crowd he so despises, needs food- threatens to undermine his masculine autonomy, in effect returning him to the maternal breast from which he could never get enough. But finally self-starvation is no solution to the problem of human vulnerability; in the end, it returns him to the same place of deprivation.

Framed by maternal insufficiency, Coriolanus can never successfully wean himself from what he has never truly had: thrusting him out, Volumnia binds him to her. [...]

One does not need the help of a psychoanalytic approach to notice that Volumnia is not a nourishing mother.²³

Through this figurative malnourishment, just like his Shakespearean counterpart, Fiennes' Martius exists at this contradictory point between being masculinely self-sufficient and, due to his presumed upbringing laid out by Adelman, inextricably dependent on and emotionally subjected by his mother. There are many moments throughout the film where this is most apparent – such as the bandage-changing scene.

²³ Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Play, 'Hamlet' to 'The Tempest'* (Routledge, 1992), pp. 147-148.

The bandage-changing scene follows Martius' triumphant return to Rome following the battle of Corioles against the Volsci. In this particular scene, in the privacy of a bathroom, Volumnia carefully and lovingly bandages Martius' wounds. Her face beams with infatuation for her son as her eyes voyeuristically gaze over her son's body (*fig. 12*). This moment of intimacy between mother and son becomes even more significant and poignant once Virgilia enters the room. Framed almost like a wife barging in on and interrupting her husband committing adultery, she stands in the middle of the frame, separating Martius and Volumnia (*fig. 13*). She is thrust into the middle of the relationship between mother and son, showcasing the fact that Volumnia, not her, is the sole object of Martius' desire. This scene gains all the more significance following the preceding scenes, where Volumnia is portrayed almost like an omniscient overseer, governing and narrating Martius' actions in the battle of Corioles. In this particular moment, Volumnia, in their home in Rome, tells Virgilia how '[she] thinks [she] hear[s] hither your husband's drum; Methinks I see him stamp thus, and call thus: "Come on, you cowards! You were got in fear, though you were born in Rome"' (p. 15). Almost confirming her motherly intuition or showcasing to the audience how she successfully ensured Martius would follow the path she laid out for him, the editors cut to Martius lying on the floor following an explosion. While her words ring out, narrating Martius' actions, as if finishing his mother's sentence, Martius cries out, 'You souls of geese that bear the shape of men – Pluto and hell – look to it! Come on!' (00:15:27).

Of importance is the fact that the Volumnia of Fiennes' *Coriolanus* has specifically raised Martius to dominate war. There are various moments throughout the film that show this. In one scene, when Volumnia is talking to Virgilia and explains how if she had a dozen sons '[she] rather have eleven die nobly for their country than one voluptuously surfeit out of action' (p. 14). In another scene, during the ceremony welcoming Martius back from his conquests in Corioles, Volumnia, taking under her breath and almost to herself, professes the

superiority of her son. Her attention is lovingly engrossed on Martius as he slowly and triumphantly walks towards her as a war hero. She speaks, ‘Before him, he carries noise, and behind him, he leaves. Death – that dark spirit – in his nervy arm doth lie, which being advanced declines and then men die’ (00:28:50). Both of these moments act as a way of confirming how Martius is, just as Young Martius is to him, subjugated by his mother. This parallel between the relationship of Martius and Volumnia and then the relationship between Young Martius and Martius acts as a way to showcase the film’s circular structure.

In the previously mentioned celebration of Martius’ triumphant return, Young Martius wears a militarised uniform, symbolising his coupling to his father. While his uniform is similar to his father’s (as aforementioned), it is, in fact, identical to the uniform worn by Volumnia (*fig. 11*). Because of the ideas surrounding Renaissance dress (specifically Baumgarten’s ideas around the styling of a boy’s first suit)²⁴ it creates a sense where Young Martius has been dressed like an effigy of Volumnia. Because of this, and the presumed absence of Martius – due to his occupation – it creates this feeling that Volumnia, as she did with her son, is indoctrinating and raising her grandson to succeed in warfare similarly. Many moments seem to motion towards the fact that Young Martius is being prepared for a position where he will succeed his father. There is the repeated line from the play revealing that ‘he rather play with swords and hear a drum than look upon his schoolmaster’ (00:16:29); there is his very room, which is crammed with toys based on the equipment his father uses (*fig. 14*); and the scene where we can see he is already well practised with a gun, being able to shoot cans from across the garden (00:13:01) – all of which act to support this idea of Young Martius’ militaristic indoctrination.

²⁴ Baumgarten, p. 168.

This contributes to an unsettling feeling around the film's portrayal of masculinity. Some might see Martius' exile and eventual assassination as a positive thing (as positive as it can be) for the broader world of *Coriolanus*, which could allow Rome in both the film and the play the ability to progress towards a more equitable society free from a completely abrasive form of masculinity. This is not wholly possible in the film. Because of the current formation of the socioeconomic structure of Fiennes' Rome, which has Young Martius in a position where he could develop into a characteristic reincarnation of his father, there is a sour note to the ending of the film, which hints towards the perpetuation of the cycle of masculinity.

Following Fiennes and Logan's revitalisation and recontextualisation into a modern setting, we can see how Early Modern English masculine ideals compare to the current ones. Certainly, as we have seen throughout this chapter, the persistent hegemonic traits of *Coriolanus*' masculinity are overwhelmingly toxic. Through its portrayal of violence and the complex socioeconomic structure of the play, which perpetuates power dynamics, the film underscores how Shakespeare's overall arguments (as we saw in Chapter 2) are still remarkably relevant in contemporary society.

The decision to maintain Shakespeare's original dialogue, despite its post-Yugoslav Wars setting, and the use of real-life news footage covering the Yugoslav conflicts both aid in developing the complexities of the film's multi-faceted portrayal of masculinity. Of course, while the film is very much recognisable as a descendent of its Shakespearean parent, due to the restructuring of various character's relationships – such as the increased presence of Young Martius and the restructuring of Volumnia, Virgilia and Martius' relationship into a pseudo-love triangle where both women are seemingly pitted against each other for Martius' desire – the film still allows for a far more nuanced reading of masculinity compared to this original.

Further, by exploring Fiennes' *Coriolanus* in terms of its portrayal of masculinity, we can see how it reinforces the contemporary relevance of Shakespeare's play. By showcasing a violent and oppressive form of masculinity and by remaining ostensibly linked to its Jacobean parent, Fiennes' film reveals how the issues present in the 17th century forms of masculinity are still, in fact, relevant to audiences over 400 years later. Through the film's recontextualization of the play, Fiennes reveals how the identities taken up in the name of the masculine ideology still perpetuate social inequalities and restrain individuals, alienating them within the obfuscations of ideology. In a moment when we seem to be beginning to question our relationship with the oppressive gender roles, *Coriolanus* remains a stark reminder of the trials that come as a result of our commitment to masculinity. By capturing and presenting the enduring struggles of society under gender, Fiennes' film and Shakespeare's play allow audiences in 2024 (and years to come) the opportunity to critically engage with the systems and ideologies that oppress us and shape our lives.

Screen captures from 'Coriolanus' (2011):

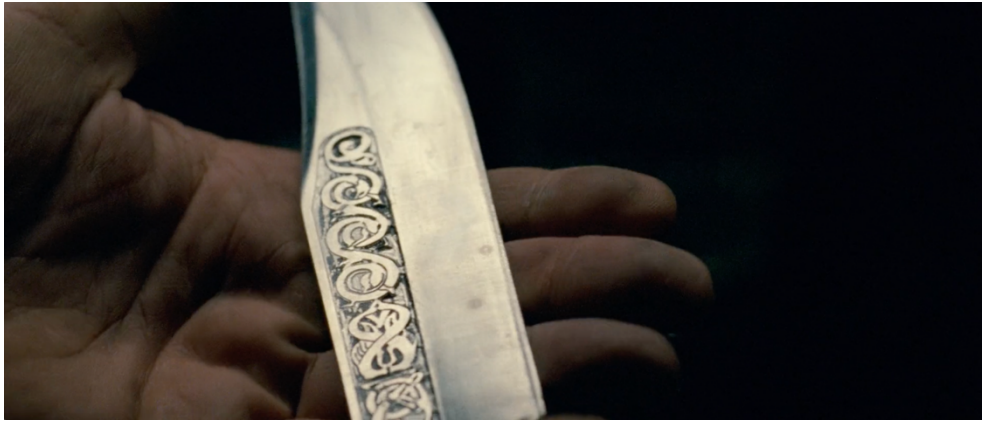


fig. 1 – Aufidius inspects his knife before sharpening it. (00:00:55)



fig. 2 – A Volsci soldier attacks an unsuspecting Martius, holding him at knifepoint. (00:19:04).



fig. 3 –Martius and Aufidius demonstrate Connell’s sizing gaze across a dusty room during the Roman-Volsci conflict in Corioles. (00:22:53)



fig. 4 – Martius, on top of Aufidius, struggles for dominance. (00:24:34)



fig. 5 – The camera breaks the action to gaze at the blood of a fallen Roman soldier. (00:12:00)



fig. 6 – Blood pools between Menenius' legs. (01:36:24)



fig. 7 – Martius, following his exile, grows out his hair and wears civilian clothes. (01:13:24)



fig. 8 – The audience (as Martius) has their head shaved by a Volscian woman. (01:21:23)



fig. 9 – The Volscian woman suddenly transforms into Aufidius. (01:21:34)



fig. 10 – Young Martius, wearing his button-up and trousers, places his gun on a tree stump while his mother watches. (00:13:07)



fig. 11 – Young Martius, wearing his militarised uniform, Salutes his returning father. (00:29:39)



fig. 12 – Volumnia lovingly bandages Martius' body after his return from war. (00:35:04)



fig. 13 – Virgilia interrupts a private moment between Martius and Volumnia. (00:35:19)



fig. 14 – Virgilia puts away a toy gun and model armoured vehicle while Young Martius sleeps. (00:35:45)

Conclusion

This thesis has examined *Coriolanus*' construction of masculinity by analysing and interrogating how Shakespeare, in his 1608 play, and Fiennes, in his 2011 film adaptation, presents an ideological fabric of gender that enables socioeconomic inequalities. Through the close reading of various key scenes, this thesis has outlined Martius as a symbolic figure emblematic of Rome's systemic class disparities, ultimately showcasing how the pervasive masculine ideologies perpetuate the economic and gender subordination of the plebeians and the legitimisation and elevation of the patricians. Certainly, Martius is not solely to blame for these issues. Instead, because he is situated as the hegemonic figurehead of Roman society, he takes on a position where he becomes the supposed cause of the plebeians' misery, reinforcing the ideas around how ideologies remain hidden and seep into the collective psyches of society, enabling ideology's continual grasp. By comparing Shakespeare's Jacobean depiction of performative masculinity with the form presented in Fiennes' post-Yugoslav War adaptation, we can see how many of the issues Shakespeare presented in the 17th century are still relevant and present in the 21st century.

Throughout this thesis, I have utilised various theoretical approaches to provide explanatory backdrops and insights into *Coriolanus*' depiction of masculinity. By focusing on Connell's gender orders, Butler's performativity, and Ásta's concept of conferralism, I have constructed a perspective of gender that is semiotic in nature and builds upon Lacan's psychoanalysis and the Marxist idea of alienation and ideology as a way to showcase how it is an oppressive fabrication which enables socioeconomic disparities. By explicitly focusing on *Coriolanus*' answer to the question "What a Mans Gotta Do", we can see the specific performatives that are considered to be masculine and compare them to those that are considered feminine and how the dichotomy between the two combine to construct an understanding of masculinity for the audience to evaluate against their own beliefs and

experiences. Specifically, through the analyses of this thesis, we can see that Martius, the unlikable protagonist, conforms to a presentation of masculinity that is abrasive and violent and isolates him from the other characters of the text.

By relying on Lacan's understanding of psychoanalysis, specifically looking towards his stages of childhood development (i.e., the mirror phase and the Oedipus complex), we can see how our reality is constructed around the Imaginary and Symbolic order. As such, the attributes which make up our perspective of reality take on linguistic significance. Through analysing the text, we can see how the gendered performatives encouraged by the dominant class of the play create a system where characters are trapped by ideology. Martius, through his childhood, has been raised by Volumnia to fulfil a specific engendered purpose. As the play progresses, we can see how Martius fails to break free from these oppressive bounds of masculinity, leading to his downfall, exile from Rome, and assassination at the hands of the Volsci. Fiennes' adaptation amplifies this tragedy by focusing solely on the private moments between Martius, Volumnia, and Virgilia and then increasing the importance of Young Martius within the text; the audience can see the pervasiveness of the masculine ideology.

Along these lines, by implementing the Marxist perspective of alienation, it further reinforces the sensation of how the characters of *Coriolanus* are tragically trapped within the oppressive system of gender. As such, the audience can see how, by remaining hidden, the masculine ideology forces people into gender competition, subjugating and victimising the characters outside the masculine sphere of dominance as a way to legitimise the continual dominance of the masculine elite. This is manifested in *Coriolanus* through the character's commitment to gender. Every moment of the play and film is shrouded with gendered meaning and significance, creating this overwhelming sensation of how impossible it is to escape the brutish ideologies of masculinity.

In conclusion, *Coriolanus* is a text that captures the historical anxieties of masculinity and thrusts them into contemporary relevance for modern audiences to interrogate through its continual relevance to audiences. By analysing the play and its continual relevance, it speaks to the ever-present struggles people face when carving out an identity for themselves when faced with oppressive socioeconomic and political structures. As audiences return to the work – whether through future adaptations, performances or as a response to changes in political and cultural structures – they will be reminded of the mastery of Shakespeare at capturing the attention of countless people throughout history and how his work has transcended history and different cultural, political, and social contexts.

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