

CORIOLANUS AND ACHILLES

To Donald Russell
on his eighty-fifth birthday

Ever since the researches of Theodor Mommsen¹, the tradition of Coriolanus’ march on Rome has been generally regarded as a “myth” and an “Old Roman legend” (to quote Ogilvie)², given, *inter alia*, the total absence of any evidence for the existence of a consular with the required name at the required time. But the myth has been put together out of various pre-existing elements, as myths or legends in Livy, for instance, regularly are³, and a very central aspect of Coriolanus’ story will repay closer investigation than it has hitherto received.

I begin from what must seem a very remote starting point. A widely spread and primeval story-pattern relates how a deity is seized by anger and quits the company of his or her fellow-deities. The consequences of this withdrawal are catastrophic in various ways, and the offended divinity has to be coaxed back and reintegrated within the society of the other gods. The best known instance of this pattern from ancient Greek literature is doubtless the story of Demeter’s withdrawal in grief for Persephone, but the antiquity of the motif is guaranteed by its existence in ancient Egypt⁴ and its appear-

¹ “Hermes” 1, 1870, 1 ff. = *Römische Forschungen* 2.113 ff. A handy summary of the case against historicity in E.T. Salmon, “CQ” 24, 1930, 96 f., who himself proceeds to a defence in part. The main dissident in Mommsen’s own lifetime was J. J. Bachofen in *Über die Geschichtlichkeit der Coriolanussage* (*Ges. Schr.* 2, 17 ff.) who resented being deprived of a prop for his theories regarding Roman matriarchy and felt personally assailed because his mother’s name was Valeria: see L. Gossman, *Orpheus Philologus: Bachofen versus Mommsen on the Study of Antiquity* (“Transactions of the American Philosophical Society” 73, 1983), 30 and 44, with the review by Momigliano, “Journal of Modern History” 57, 1985, 330 = *Ottavo contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico* 412 f. The chief defender of the tradition’s historical status today is T. J. Cornell: see, for instance, his *The Beginnings of Rome* (London and New York 1995), 307 and, 458 n. 35.

² In his commentary on Livy Books 1-5 (Oxford 1965), 315 f. Ogilvie provides bibliography on Coriolanus, to which may be added the contributions by Dumézil and Momigliano mentioned below, n. 18.

³ In the Tarpeia episode, for instance, we find the motifs of the girl who comes to the well to collect water (cf. *Od.* 10.107, *Gen.* 29.9 ff. etc.), the daughter who betrays her father and country for gold (cf. *Scylla* etc.), the misunderstood riddle (*scuta pro aureis donis*) and so on. Tarpeia as a female whom the hero must resist is actually quite relevant to Coriolanus’ dilemma: see e.g. Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Los Angeles 1979), 76 f.

⁴ See my remarks in “ZPE” forthcoming.

ance within the Sumerian tale of Enki and Ninhursag⁵. In this second instance, when the gods are in despair, the fox promises to bring back the absentee deity and does so, a detail whose full significance we shall return to later.

A similar, perhaps derivative, pattern is to be found in the context of stories of heroic mortals. Transition from the first to the second class⁶ is made easier by the example of Philoctetes, who, like the god Hephaestus, is cast out of the company of his peers and ends up in a cave on the island of Lemnos. There are admittedly some minor differences of detail: for instance, Philoctetes does not initially abandon his companions of his own volition and in a furious rage. But he is soon in a state of overwhelming fury against them, and this fact motivates the usual complications when his former comrades are obliged to seek him out and woo him back⁷.

The most familiar embodiment of this pattern on the heroic level is, of course, the story of the anger of Achilles. Here too, as with the foregoing instance, the hero's non-participation in combat has dire consequences for his former *hetairoi*, who risk losing the war and must therefore lure him back. As part of Homer's narrative of the embassy which endeavours to do just that, we are given Phoenix's account of yet another hero who withdrew from combat in a fit of heroic pique and had to be persuaded back: Meleager (*Il.* 9.524 ff.). The similarities between the two heroic careers here juxtaposed are so great that only two explanations are possible: either the story of Meleager was the source for that of Achilles in the *Iliad* at large, or the reverse is true and the details of Achilles' case have influenced the story of Meleager as recounted by Phoenix. In earlier times the former hypothesis seemed more plausible, but at present the latter is accepted as the most satisfactory way of accounting for the facts⁸.

It has been said of Plutarch's Coriolanus that his "characteristic quality...

⁵ See G.S. Kirk, *Myth its Meaning and Functions in ancient and other cultures* (Los Angeles and Cambridge 1970), 91 ff.; Burkert as cited in the previous note, 123 ff.

⁶ Given the similarities here considered between the angry withdrawal of a divinity and of a hero, it is interesting to note V.iii.10f. from Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, spoken by the titular hero, of an unsuccessful attempt to appease him: [Menenius] "Lov'd me... / Nay *god*ded me indeed". The italicised verb is "aptly coined for this play", as P. Brockbank's note *ad loc.* in the Arden edition observes.

⁷ Note especially Philoctetes' curse on the entire Greek army at vv. 1040 ff. of Sophocles' play.

⁸ For a clear statement of the facts see the commentaries *ad loc.* by Hainsworth (Cambridge 1987) and J. Griffin (Oxford 1995), the latter of whom briefly touches on the relevance of Coriolanus (see note 21 below). Given Bachofen's involvement in the matriarchal potentialities of the Coriolanus story (above, n.l), it is interesting to read H. Petersmann's article *Homer und das Märchen*, "WS" 15, 1984, 57 ff.

is anger”⁹, and this may serve as a reminder that his career too bears all the benchmarks of the wrathful hero whose withdrawal has such catastrophic consequences for his former associates that they must send appeasing embassies to him. As in the case of Philoctetes just cited, the match is not complete in every detail. In particular, it may be objected that Coriolanus goes far further than the mythical heroes considered above. He not merely passively abstains from combat, but goes so far as to join the enemy ranks, a consideration which explains the other most obvious difference in his story, the failure to reintegrate the appeased hero back within the ranks of his former society. And yet one may question whether there is really very much difference, or was in the ancient world, between the harm done through abstention from battle and that wrought by going over to the enemy. The first verses of the *Iliad* come to mind, especially as glossed by R. Renehan¹⁰: “were we unfamiliar with the tale and these verses turned up on a papyrus, there would be only one natural interpretation of them: a mighty hero... became angry for some reason with a clan or tribe called the Achaioi and killed in battle many of these Achaioi, foreign enemies of his... In fact, of course, the Greek here means... that... Achilles caused the death of many Achaioi, who were his friends and countrymen and at whom he was temporarily angry, but he caused their deaths only indirectly, by refusing to fight along with them against their common enemy, the Trojans, who did the actual killing”. Note too the Greek army’s attitude to Achilles as revealed in Aeschylus’ *Myrmidons* fr. 132c Radt in Lloyd-Jones’ Loeb translation (2.592): “they will stone me! The torturing of Peleus’ son with stones will prove no blessing – never think

⁹ H. Heuer, “Shakespeare Survey” 10, 1957, 51. On the anger of Livy’s Coriolanus see Schönberger as cited below n. 12, 246, who quotes 2.39.11 (of Coriolanus’ response to the first embassy) *atrox responsum* (compare 35.1 of his earlier speech on the corn crisis as being *et senatui nimis atrox sententia*) and his claim that *exsilio sibi irritatos, non fractos animos esse* and 40.3 *nec... motus esset multo obstinatio adversus lacrimas muliebres erat*. Note also 35.6: *venientem Volsci... benignius in dies colebant, quo maior ira in suos eminebat*. Shakespeare’s use of the theme may be exemplified by three key passages involving three key figures: “wrath o’erwhelmed my pity” (Coriolanus in I.ix.84), “Anger’s my meat; I’ll sup upon myself/ And so shall starve with feeding” (Volumnia in IV.ii.50 f.), and “My rage is gone/ And I am struck with sorrow” (Aufidius at V.vi.147, having just killed Coriolanus “in this rage /Provok’d by him”: 135 f.).

¹⁰ “CP” 82, 1987, 115. The association between the dilemmas of Achilles and Coriolanus would be even closer if Bruno Snell were right (*Scenes from Greek Drama* (Los Angeles 1964), 3 ff. = *Szenen aus griech. Dramen* (Berlin 1971), 4 ff.) to infer that Aesch. fr. 132c Radt implies an uniliadic, fifth century, presentation of Achilles as a traitor to the state. However, the grounds for such an hypothesis are shaky: see, for instance, the criticisms of Lloyd-Jones, “Gnomon” 37, 1965, 12 ff. and “CR” 23, 1973, 192 f. = *Academic Papers* [I], 210 ff. and 219 f.

it! – to the Greeks in the land of Troy... Shall fear of the Achaeans force me to lay my hand upon my spear...? ... Why, if I alone by my absence from the battle caused this great rout, as my comrades say, am I not all in all to the Achaean host?”

I am not the first scholar to link Coriolanus’ career in this way to those of wrathful heroes from Greek myth. W. Aly¹¹ alleged the relevance of Achilles and O. Schönberger¹² more subtly that of Meleager. The latter particularly stressed the similarities between the various embassies sent to the two heroes and it is to this all-important issue that we must now turn. Schönberger pointed out the correspondences between the sequences of embassies in Meleager’s case (according to Homer)

priests and elders
father
mother and sister
comrades
wife

and in Coriolanus’ case (according to Livy)

¹¹ *Livius und Ennius: von römische Art* (Leipzig 1936), 37 and 44, preceded by W. Soltau, *Die Anfänge der röm. Geschichtschreibung* (Leipzig 1909), 68 and 109. Aly, followed by Schönberger as cited in the next note, supposes Livy’s association of Coriolanus with a hero mentioned in the *Iliad* to derive directly from Ennius’ *Annales*, a theory one may join with Ogilvie (above, n. 2) in finding “unattractive” not least because, to quote Otto Skutsch’s commentary on the fragments of the *Annales* (Oxford 1985), p. 306, “there is no trace of the story of Coriolanus” in what survives of the epic. Skutsch does believe that Livy drew on Ennius’ poem: see H.D. Jocelyn, in *Studies in Latin Literature and its Tradition* (Brink Festschrift 1989), 60 n. 67. Schönberger objects that “Coriolan wird von keinen Nestor angesprochen”, which, by implication, rather misrepresents the situation in the *Iliad*. If one bears in mind the Aeschylean Achilles (see above), the resemblances between the two figures can be reasserted (compare in particular *egone has indignitates diutius patiar quam necesse est?* at 2.34.10 as a summary of Coriolanus’ impatience and the overall tone of Achilles’ speech in Aesch. fr. 132c Radt). However, the main aim of the present article is not to argue for specific links of this sort, but to establish the enduring nature of the general pattern of the hero who retires in anger and must then be appeased.

¹² “Hermes” 83, 1955, 245-8. By separating priests from elders and mother from sister in the list of Meleager’s suppliants; and by treating the second and abortive embassy of orators as a separate item and distinguishing “the women” in general from the three family members (who are then treated each as a separate item) in the list of Coriolanus’ suppliants, Schönberger arrives at two lists of seven, a significant folk-tale number: see “CQ” 54, 2004, 608 n. 17. But in the case of Coriolanus these shifts savour too much of desperation, and it is more natural to think in terms of that other folk-tale device (see n. 16), the division of a narrative into three parts (so, for instance, Momigliano as cited below, n. 18).

orators (= elders ?)

priests

mother and wife and two children.

Schönberger does not make the following points, but Meleager seems to have no children. And Coriolanus certainly has no surviving father to come on embassy, while his comrades are not available for this, being the very soldiers he will be fighting if the peace overtures fail. Given these explanations for the relevant divergences, the two lists are remarkable for their resemblances to each other.

About five years before Schönberger's article, J.Th. Kakridis¹³ had published some remarks on the embassy to Meleager which are highly relevant to the present enquiry. He extrapolated from various folk-tales not involving embassies to a wrathful hero the notion of an "ascending order of affection"¹⁴ or "moral pressure"¹⁵. Thus, in the story of Alcestis and Admetus, the hero approaches first friends, then parents, and finally wife, in his attempt to find a substitute who will die for him, and only the last and climactic figure agrees. Generalising from this and other cases, Kakridis produced the following ascending scale featuring the number three so beloved of folk-tale¹⁶:

friends/companions

mother/father

husband/wife

This sequence is sometimes expanded to form five elements by making mother and father two separate consecutive stages, and by inserting after them as a further stage brother/sister. The value of such a template, when applied to the sequence of embassies sent to Meleager, is clear: it shows how, to bring Meleager's position into closer correspondence with the position of Achilles, which it is paradigmatically illustrating, the hero's comrades are brought as near the peak of the ascending order of affection as they can be, without displacing the wife who finally succeeds in persuading the hero to relent¹⁷.

¹³ *Homeric Researches* (Lund 1949), 19 f. and 152 ff.

¹⁴ The phrase "ascending scale of affection" derives from Kakridis (last note), 20.

¹⁵ The modification "moral pressure" comes from Hainsworth's commentary on *Il.* 9.574 ff. (p. 138).

¹⁶ See "CQ" 53, 2003, 34 n. 13.

¹⁷ In Achilles' case there is merely one embassy not a series of them, but D. Lohmann, *Die Komposition der Reden in der Ilias* (Berlin 1970), 258 ff. may be right to suggest, in effect, that the one embassy contains the elements of three, with Odysseus representing the leadership, Ajax the soldiery, and Phoenix the hero's father. For the issue of whether three significant figures in folk-tale are encountered successively or simultaneously see the article

If we do what it did not occur to Kakridis to do and apply his findings to Coriolanus, we discover several interesting considerations. For instance, A.D. Momigliano¹⁸ has said of the story of Coriolanus, “it is... Coriolanus’ mother, who induces her son to renounce the fight against Rome... what men cannot do women achieve”. To begin with this last consideration first, the idea that frail women should succeed where powerful men have failed may take us back to a detail emphasised at the start of this article. We noted there that, in attempts to lure an angry deity back, success often attends the seemingly unpromising candidate, e.g. the fox in the tale of Enki and Ninhursag or the bee in the story of Telepinus, or Dionysus, who is not yet even an Olympian god, but wins through where the superficially impressive Ares had failed, in the fetching back of Hephaestus¹⁹. Secondly, we may ask whether it is really Coriolanus’ mother or his wife who deserves the credit. The wife is taken to be the decisive force by Schönberger, who observes that, in Livy’s treatment, Coriolanus is silent during his mother’s speech and only moved to utterance by his wife and child: *uxor deinde ac liberi amplexi, fletusque ab omni turba mulierum ortus et comploratio sui patriaeque fregere tandem virum* (2.40.9: note the word order, with *uxor* at the beginning of the sentence and *virum* at the end). On the other hand, in Livy, as in Plutarch and therefore Shakespeare²⁰, it is only the mother who gives vent to significant speech²¹. Perhaps, then, those scholars are right who see the mother as

cited in the previous note, 33 f.

¹⁸ “History and Theory” 23, 1984, 20 = *Ottavo contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico* 152. Cf. his characterisation of the story as falling into a “crescendo of the first two acts, then the *anticlimax* [my italics] of the victory of a woman in the third act”: he is comparing the story of Coriolanus with that of Lars Porsenna, who is opposed by Horatius, Mucius Scaevola, and Cloelia, and retreats in the face of the third. This is part of a critique of George Dumézil’s ideas on the “trifunctional approach to Roman civilisation”. Momigliano observes Dumézil’s reluctance to follow the obvious implications of his tripartite approach by identifying the first embassy with the army (the identification of the second with the priesthood and the third with reproduction is more straightforward for Dumézil).

¹⁹ See my forthcoming article in “ZPE”.

²⁰ With Shakespeare, of course, there is the further complication of the stage-effect of dumb supplication. See the remarks of Philip Brockbank in the Introduction to his Arden edition of the play (p. 57): “Coriolanus is moved first by what he sees, not what he hears (V. iii. 22-33); gestures of submission (curtysing, bowing, nodding, kneeling)... words fall into ambiguous silences. The remarkable fidelity of much of the scene’s verse to [Plutarch] does not confine Shakespeare’s effects to Plutarch’s”.

²¹ So, for instance, Griffin (above, n. 8), 135: “in Rome, characteristically, it is not the wife but the mother who prevails”; cf. Schönberger (above, n. 12), 248 on the “spezifisch römisches Ethos in der Gestalt der Mutter”. On the other hand, Aly (above, n. 11), 37 thought the whole idea of sending women in this context unroman and derived it from Jocasta’s

the significant figure and identify this as a specifically *Roman* trait.

Quite independently of any of the considerations analysed thus far, Shakespeare's Coriolanus has been associated with the Homeric Achilles by, for instance, Reuben A. Brower²², who writes, considering the issue of "Coriolanus and the Heroic Tradition", that "perhaps Coriolanus is most like Achilles in his passionate pride, in his 'choler', in his shifting from 'rage to sorrow', emotions that lie very close together, as Plutarch had noted. But he comes nearest to the essence of Homer's hero in his absoluteness, in his determination to imitate 'the graces of the gods', in his will to push the heroic to the limit until he destroys his own society along with his enemy's. In reducing all virtues to *virtus*, he is the Greek hero Romanised, while in appealing to 'Great Nature' and at the same time asserting the greatness of his own nature, he betrays the Stoic ancestry of the Elizabethan tragic hero".

Had Brower known of the fragment from Aeschylus' *Myrmidons* mentioned above, he could have expanded the discussion to include comparison of the Aeschylean Achilles with Shakespeare's hero. For instance, one may juxtapose the former's indignant "they will stone me! The torturing of Peleus' son will prove no blessing – never think it! – to the Greeks in the land of Troy... am I not all in all to the Achaeans?" with such outbursts as

Let them pull all about mine ears, present me
Death on the wheel, or at wild horses' heels,
Or pile ten hills on the Tarpeian rock,
That the precipitation might down stretch
Below the beam of sight: yet will I still
Be thus to them (III. ii. 1 ff.)

or

Let them pronounce the steep Tarpeian death,
Vagabond exile, flaying, pent to linger
But with a grain a day, I would not buy
Their mercy at the price of one fair word (III. iii. 87 ff.).

Shakespeare's Coriolanus has also been compared with Sophocles' Ajax, which is interesting for reasons over and above the links between him and Achilles. H.D.F. Kitto²³ has written that "it is not easy to think of two char-

embassy to her warring sons in Euripides' *Phoenissae* (followed by Ogilvie (above, n. 2), 334).

²² In *Hero and Saint: Shakespeare and the Graeco-Roman Heroic Tradition* (Oxford 1971), 372.

²³ *Poiesis: Structure and Thought* (Los Angeles 1966). The quotations that follow derive from pp. 372, 387, and 394 respectively.

acters in drama who are more like each other than Ajax and Caius Marcius: each a magnificent fighter; but proud, convinced of his own worth, dedicated to his own sense of honour, and far too rigid to deal with the demands of life... Like Ajax, [Coriolanus] will have things his own way or not at all... [Coriolanus] is like Ajax: he cannot... 'think as becomes mortal man'." Ajax is another hero who departs wrathfully from the company of his peers (feeling he has been cheated of the arms of the newly slain Achilles). In his case, however, there is no time for the sending of reconciliatory embassies, since he launches a murderous attack on his erstwhile comrades which is only thwarted by the intervention of Athena who sends him temporarily mad. The "rising scale of affection" considered above²⁴ is also relevant to Sophocles' hero, for when his concubine Tecmessa tries to persuade him out of suicide at vv. 485ff. of the play, she appeals chiastically to her own position as wife (487-505), to his one son (499), to his aged father and mother (506-509), to his son (510-513), and to her own position as wife again (514-521). Given that, as we reminded ourselves above, Coriolanus has no father, this is practically the same combination of familial forces that confronts the Roman hero (and Tecmessa does immediately proceed, at Ajax's behest, to produce Eurysaces, the son).

Kitto is aware that there are important links between Coriolanus and Achilles too, however, and it is with a return to these that I wish to end. Jasper Griffin has observed that "the relation of the warrior to his society, the tension between self-assertion and the common good... is one of the central themes of the *Iliad*", especially as manifested in the anger of Achilles, whose "stubbornness in Book 9, and... enjoyment of his own anger (18.107-10) bring about... the ruin of his own life"²⁵. Awareness of a like ruin may be said to infuse the words of Coriolanus to Volumnia at the climax of Shakespeare's play :

O my mother, mother! O!
 You have won a happy victory to Rome;
 But for your son, believe it, O believe it,
 Most dangerously you have with him prevail'd,
 If not most mortal to him.. (V.iii. 185 ff.).

This may serve as a reminder of some of the difficulties that beset a hero's career. Coriolanus yields to his family (or his patriotism) but little good it does him, any more than a similar ultimate yielding benefited Meleager. He, as Homer has Phoenix remind us, got no advantage from the gifts originally promised him. The detail is doubtless intended to enforce upon us the reali-

²⁴ See n. 13.

²⁵ As above (n. 8), 28.

sation that Achilles too, after losing his greatest friend Patroclus, will meet an early end. Ajax refuses to listen to his wife and goes off to a self-willed death.

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APPENDIX

Livy 2.35.6 pictures the banished Coriolanus leaving Rome in a frenzied rage: *in Volscos exsulatum abiit, minitans patriae hostilesque iam tum spiritus gerens*. Plutarch's *Life of Coriolanus*, whose source²⁶ is Dionysius of Halicarnassus and not Livy, has no such picture. It is all the more striking, therefore, that Shakespeare in Act III, sc. iii, 120 ff. has his hero deliver himself of an imprecation very much in keeping with what might be inferred from Livy, either because he glanced at a translation thereof, or, more probably, because he felt this is what his hero would do in the circumstances:

You common cry of curs! whose breath I hate
As reek o'th'rotten fens, whose loves I prize
As the dead carcasses of unburied men
That do corrupt my air: I banish you!
And here remain with your uncertainty!
Let every feeble rumour shake your hearts!

... ..

For you the city, thus I turn my back.
There is a world elsewhere!

Interestingly, Plutarch's *Life of Camillus*, a general whose career supplies a useful counterpoint to Coriolanus', since he too was exiled from Rome and then called back²⁷ when enemies threatened his country, does have an equivalent scene of excoriation at the moment of going into exile. We are told (13.1) that, on leaving, he called down curses on his fellow citizens "in the manner of Achilles" and Appian *de reb. Ital.* 8.2, describing the same event, talks of Camillus invoking the Achillean curse. It appears there may have been a *topos* involving curses or at least very bitter remarks, uttered by an exiled hero as he left the city gates. At any rate, one thinks of Demosthenes, who, according to Plutarch's *Life* (26.4), is said, having got quit of the city, to have stretched his hands up towards the acropolis and to have asked, "Athena, goddess of the city, why do you delight in these three most terrible

²⁶ See D.A. Russell, "JRS" 53, 1966, 34 f. = *Essays on Plutarch's Lives* (ed. Scardigli), 357 f.

²⁷ For the contrast between Coriolanus and Camillus, the betrayer and the saviour of Rome, see, for instance, Momigliano as cited above n. 18, 32 = 151.

beasts, the owl, the snake, and the people?"'. Passages such as these must have inspired the most famous passage in Sallust, his account of Jugurtha's remark after being expelled from Rome: *postquam Roma egressus est, fertur saepe eo tacitus respiciens postremo dixisse urbem venalem et mature perituram, si emptorem invenerit* (*De bello Jug.* 35.10). Shakespeare puts the device to brilliant use at the beginning of Act IV of his *Timon of Athens*²⁸ when the titular anti-hero, on leaving his native city in self-imposed exile, begins:

Let me look back upon thee. O thou wall
That girdles in those wolves, dive in the earth
And fence not Athens! Matrons turn incontinent!

And so on.

M. D.

²⁸ The play's sub-plot exploits the pattern of an angry hero's withdrawal when it has Alcibiades exiled from Athens. Alcibiades, we should remember, is paired with Coriolanus in Plutarch's *Lives*. The motif of embassies to appease the hero is, however, transferred to Timon himself: the Athenian government vainly tries to persuade him to use his friendship with Alcibiades to beg off that hero's impending invasion.