



“The only true and lasting meaning of the struggle for life lies in the individual, in his modest peculiarities and in his right to those peculiarities.”

Individuals and the Collective in *Coriolanus* and *A Sentimental Education*.

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Attempts to define democracy, in principle and (as much as possible) in practice, are likely to isolate certain fundamental, immutable tenets; a succinct example may be of democracy as “a political system in which the members regard one another as political equals, are collectively sovereign, and possess all the capacities, resources, and institutions they need in order to govern themselves.”¹ Implicit in such a vision of democracy is a notion of individualism: every single person is entitled to represent their will on a legislative stage, as well as reserve liberties for themselves on a more local level. Theoretically, this settlement is meant to ensure personal wellbeing, and public peace, but how well does this theory translate into reality? The purpose of this essay is to address this question, by using William Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* and Gustave Flaubert’s *A Sentimental Education* to examine the relationship between the group and the individual.

Coriolanus is known as Shakespeare’s “political” play, as at its core are the questions of authority, the franchise, freedom and submission that are of eternal relevance to the discussion of democratic ideals. The main vehicle for this theme is the conflict between the plebeians of Rome and the city’s greatest general, Caius Martius, later Coriolanus. This animosity is clear from Coriolanus’s entrance, where he greets the plebeians as “dissentious rogues/That, rubbing the poor itch of your opinion Make yourselves scabs” (*C*, 1:1:163-165) This relationship only becomes more fractious, and after Coriolanus has outraged the plebs he is banished from Rome, putting him on course for a tragic demise.

Before engaging with this relationship in detail, it is necessary to grapple with the difficult, if not insoluble, issue of Shakespeare’s own political persuasions, at least as they are expressed in *Coriolanus*. *Coriolanus* has often been viewed as “deeply conservative”, with critics emphasizing the heroic protagonist’s victimization at the hands of the unruly mob and their duplicitous tribunes.² There is much in the text to support this idea; in the scene of Coriolanus’s banishment for instance, the discourse of the plebeians is reduced to that of a braying mob, as they repeat the tribunes’ invective with mindless gusto: “It shall be so, it shall be so! Let him away!/He’s banish’d, and it shall be so!” (3:3:106-107) In contrast to this, Coriolanus and other figures of authority leave the “commoners contemptible” with their more sophisticated rhetoric.³ However, there are compelling reasons to doubt the complete success of these interpretations.

The plebeians are not so vile that they cannot understand Roman politics; as Annabel Patterson shows, in *Coriolanus* “for the first time...the people...speak *for themselves* as a political entity, with legitimate grievances, and with a considerable degree of political self-

¹ R.A. Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1989), p.1.

² A. Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice*, (Basil Blackwell: Cambridge, MA; 1989), p.121.

³ J. Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (2nd edn; Picador: London, 2008), p.99.

consciousness.”⁴ Take the First Citizen, who opens the play by committing the “mutinous Citizens” to order, before persuading them to act “in hunger for bread, not in thirst for revenge.” (1:1:22-24) Similarly lacking in anarchistic fervour is the First Citizen’s response to Menenius Agrippa’s famous parable of the Belly, as he tries to engage Agrippa by taking on the analogy directly, “Your belly’s answer – what?” (1:1:113), rather than resort to force. Agrippa ultimately gets has the last word in the exchange, mocking the Citizen as the “great toe” of the plebeian assembly (1:1:154), but as Philip Brockbank notes, the Citizen’s interruptions illustrate “the intelligence of the citizens and...their schooling in the received political wisdom.” (C, p. 103)

Moreover, is Coriolanus a tragic hero worthy of an audience’s sympathy? Harold Bloom’s judgment that Coriolanus is “an overgrown child...at best, a disaster waiting to happen” is far more accurate in my opinion.⁵ His oft-repeated strategy for dealing with the plebeians, “Hang ’em!” (examples include 1:1:180 and 2:3:58) and his petulant response to his exile, “You common cry of curs...I banish you!” (3:3:120-123) are not the responses of a mature statesman. Another point made by Patterson relates to Coriolanus’s malleability: whilst the plebs are pilloried for their capriciousness, “that Coriolanus is twice persuaded to change *his* mind by his mother is somehow not subject to the same stigma.”⁶ The role of Volumnia is of particular importance, as in conjunction with Coriolanus she represents a specifically Roman ethic that idolizes martial valour and success, or noble death, on the battlefield. She states clearly that if Coriolanus was slain “his good report should have been my son” (1:3:20), and when she sees that Coriolanus has been wounded she thanks “the gods for’t” (2:1:120).

This moral outlook is central to this discussion. Shakespeare’s favour does not necessarily lie with his protagonist, and the analysis below will develop this point to show that Coriolanus’s rigidly self-centred and aristocratic moral code bears the greatest responsibility for his tragedy. Jonathan Bate has already been quoted supporting, as it were, the positive view of Coriolanus and his acolytes, but in an introduction to *Coriolanus* he makes the following point: “If *Antony and Cleopatra* is about the tragic consequences of the dissolution of Romanness, *Coriolanus* is about the equally tragic result of an unyielding adherence to it.”⁷

From his entrance Coriolanus positions himself against the plebeians and he exploits any opportunity to attack them; take for instance his account of the battles against the Volscians: “our gentlemen,/The common file – a plague! tribunes for them! –/The mouse ne’er shunned the cat as they did budge/From rascals worse than they.” (1:6:42-45) Often there is some truth to Coriolanus’s grievances – in this case the soldiers stayed in the trenches whilst he entered Corioles alone – but he fails to appreciate that without the Roman people he would have no standing at all. Coriolanus complains that the plebeians plan to “curb the will of the nobility:/Suffer’t, and live with such as cannot rule” (3:1:38-39) but the nobility are dependent on the “common” majority for their own existence. Caius Martius may become Coriolanus at the order of Cominius, but the permanence of this title ultimately depends on the consent of the people. This subject of names, as Frank Kermode has shown, is imperative. When Coriolanus has been banished from Rome and prepares to meet with Tullus Aufidius, his nemesis and leader of the Volscians, he is rendered nameless and homeless. He resides “Under the canopy” (4:5:39) and, more significantly, he goes unrecognized by Aufidius until he reveals himself: “My name is Caius Martius...My surname, Coriolanus.” (4:5:66-69) Kermode writes: “the entire play is named after an “addition” to the name Caius Martius,

⁴ Patterson, p.127.

⁵ H. Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (Fourth Estate: London, 1998), p.578.

⁶ Patterson, p.129.

⁷ J. Bate and E. Rasmussen (eds.) *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2007) p.1537.

and...the loss of this name will cause his death.”⁸ This insight is worth expanding upon: alienated from his home and his achievements, Coriolanus is no longer Rome’s legendary general, to the extent that even his greatest rival cannot recognize him. Coriolanus describes himself as “a dull actor now/I have forgot my part and I am out,/Even to a full disgrace.” (5:2:40-42). Coriolanus may have airily declared that “There is a world elsewhere!” (3:3:135) but this is false: Rome is his world, and without this anchor in his life, he is destined for a brutal end. He confirms what Aristotle writes in his *Politics*: “Any one who by his nature has no state is either too bad or too good...he is like the war-like man condemned in Homer’s words as ‘having no family, no law, no home’; for he who is such is by nature mad on war: he is a non-cooperator like an isolated piece in a game of draughts.”⁹

This is something that Coriolanus only seems to recognize in his final, and fatal, meeting with his family. At first he tries to steal himself against affection, letting “All bond and privilege of nature break” (5:3:25), but ultimately he is convinced to try and bring peace to the warring parties. One of Volumnia’s most potent tactics is an appeal to the fate of Coriolanus’s name: “if thou conquer Rome, the benefit/Which thou shalt thereby reap is such a name/Whose repetition will be dogged with curses” (5:2:142-144) This suggests the symbiosis described above: whilst Rome depends, to an extent, on Coriolanus’s good fortune, the *good name* of Coriolanus is based on the well being of the state, plebs and all. Coriolanus’s predicament, if not the whole subject matter of the play, might be best understood by using certain philosophical currents that were most influential just after Shakespeare’s time. Indeed there were many “neo-roman” philosophers who were directly inspired by the republican sentiments that saw Rome reject its kings and institute “a system of annual magistracies” that conceived of a free state as being imperative to a free people, and facilitated Rome’s ascension to superpower status.¹⁰ It is ironic that Coriolanus should have “fought/Beyond the mark of others” (2:2:88) in deposing the tyrannical Tarquin, yet fail to realise what was so objectionable about the old regime.

In our own time, when sixty per cent of Britons “almost never” trust their elected officials, it may be tempting to view Coriolanus as a laudable figure, opposing artificial and pusillanimous politicians.¹¹ But such a conclusion would ignore the fact that Coriolanus exemplifies the conceited arrogance that threatens the safety of the state and its constituents. *Coriolanus* shows the necessity of carefully balancing personal needs and the common good. Individuals like Coriolanus have specific abilities that are of great importance to the well being of the community, but over indulgence of these strengths is potentially disastrous – modesty, as suggest by the opening quotation from Vasili Grossman, is the key. In failing to appreciate this sense of or need for solidarity, Coriolanus is deprived of his identity and ultimately of his life.

Flaubert’s *A Sentimental Education* makes an intriguing comparison piece for *Coriolanus*. The issue of mass politics, and the potential conflicts that can emerge from this, is an integral part of Flaubert’s narrative, but unlike in *Coriolanus* it is not expressed as a struggle between the protagonist and a political group. For the most part, Flaubert’s characters observe rather than participate in political activity, but this does not necessarily mean that Flaubert’s novel is apolitical. Indeed, as summarized by Jacques Rancière, a popular interpretation of Flaubert has been that his “disregard for any difference between high and low subject matters, for any hierarchy between foreground and background, and ultimately between men and things” make his work intrinsically democratic.¹² Rancière presents the argument that a new politics of literature involved the identification of “mute

⁸ F. Kermode, *Shakespeare’s Language* (Penguin: London, 2000), p.252.

⁹ Aristotle, *The Politics* (Penguin Classics: 2nd edn. London, 1981), pp.59-60.

¹⁰ Q. Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1998), pp.61-3.

¹¹ ‘A Plague on their House’, *The Economist* 1/1/2011-7/1/2011, p.21.

¹² J. Rancière, *The Politics of Literature*, *SubStance*, 33:1 (2004), p.12.

pebbles” that “wore on their very bodies the testimony of history. And that testimony was much more faithful than any discourse. It was the unfalsified truth of things, opposed to the lies and chatter of orators.”¹³

Rancière’s essay offers multiple avenues to explore the text, and one of these is the place of literature or art within *A Sentimental Education* itself. Cisy for example aspires to be “like Prince Rodolphe in the *Mystères de Paris*” (*SE*, p. 239), a popular literary character who, as Douglas Parmée explains: “frequent[ed] the underworld on humanitarian missions – an unlikely role for Cisy, who is silly, soppy and, like many of the characters in this novel, lacking in self knowledge.” (pp. 479-480) The final part of this astute description could also be applied to Flaubert’s protagonist: Frédéric Moreau. Frédéric is a passionate enthusiast for “romantic novels” (p. 11) and his heroes include tragic and amorous characters like “Werther, René, Franck, Lara and Lelia” (p. 17). The influence of this inculcation is evident in his admiration for Madame Arnoux, who Frédéric desires in the style of a courtly lover: “You seemed to me like a moonlit summer’s night, full of scents and soft shadows, whiteness and infinity” (p. 458).

With the application of Rancière’s thoughts, the foolishness of these abuses of literature can be marshaled to greater critical effect. The practice of imitating romanticized, fictional heroes is quite laughable in itself, but it could also be said that they are utilizing literature in the style of the *ancien regime* critics that Flaubert helped to displace. In Rancière’s account, “there were high genres, devoted to the imitation of noble actions and characters, and low genres devoted to common people and base subject matters”, but in Flaubert’s vision the very idea of imitating the noble players of great fiction is satirized.¹⁴ Rancière’s politics of literature could therefore be seen as undermining the ability of literature to help fashion an identity, and the consequences of this are clear in *A Sentimental Education*. Many of the characters with cultural or intellectual pretensions are treated with incisive cynicism, like the artist Pellerin, who in pursuit of publicity makes a habit “of showing his face at all funerals and other events that would be reported in the Press” (p. 60). However, this theme is perhaps best illustrated in the scene of a duel between Frédéric and Cisy, where a social and literary convention associated with chivalry and honour is mercilessly subverted; the hopeless Cisy goes “white as a sheet...his head jerked back, his arms swung outwards and he fell flat on his back in a faint” (p. 250).

Another noteworthy feature of the novel that connects to this point is the presentation of masses. The restless working classes play an important role, and are defined by their undirected and chaotic behaviour. In the first scene of public unrest, the restless crowd cannot identify a particular enemy (“‘Down with Guizot!’ ‘Down with Pritchard!’ ‘Down with traitors!’ ‘Down with Louis-Philippe!’” [p. 31]) or what to do: “Some of the crowd struck up the ‘Marseillaise’; others suggested going to Beranger’s house. ‘To Lafitte’s!’ ‘To Chateaubriand’s!’ ‘To Voltaire’s!’” (p. 32) Instead they set their sights on an asthmatic university professor, “a poor man...highly regarded in all quarters” (p. 31) who they abuse into retreating from a lecture theatre.

Similarly uninspiring are the revolutionary events of 1848. Admittedly, the action is somewhat more impressive, as barricades are erected, bullets rolled and violence breaks out between the people and the authorities. Yet Flaubert continually undermines the revolutionaries, showing that their activity is hopeless and even banal. Rather than enthuse about the depravity of the elite, or praise the virtues of radical politics, one man being restrained by his wife rebukes her: “I’ve always done my bit, in 1830, in ’32, ’34 and ’39! Today there are people fighting and I’ve got to fight too!” (p. 311) Another converses with Frédéric “in the matter-of-fact tone of a gardener amongst his plants” (p. 311), all the while

¹³ Ibid, p.17.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.13.

firing and reloading his weapon. In another passage, Flaubert echoes Edmund Burke's famous *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and his eulogy for an Age of Chivalry, as the revolutionaries attack the royal palace, "smash" and "tear up" the interiors whilst "gratifying their personal whims; some were dancing, some were drinking." (p. 315)

This portrayal of revolution is far from optimistic, as it is at different times routine and at other times destructive and repulsive. The shortcomings of some of the higher-class characters have been explored above, but it is illuminating to go beyond the individual foibles and consider their actions as a group. Frédéric may believe in "his own superiority" (p. 72) over the working classes, but the behaviour of his clique also draws Flaubert's critical eye. The scene of Rosanette's party, for example, depicts a confusion to match that of the proletarian rabble. Here a Knight in Armour quarrels with a Russian Postilion (p. 137) a Stevedore imitates a clown whilst a Clown becomes an orangutan, and a Native Women pretends to be a ship (p. 138). Another example might be the event at the Alhambra, where women cackle "like hens; from time to time a couple of gentlemen would square up to fight; a pickpocket was arrested." (p. 81) In isolation these frivolities seem quite harmless, but viewed in the long term they have a profound and deleterious effect. In Frédéric's case, this is beautifully captured by Flaubert towards the end of the novel, in a sparse but evocative account of Frédéric's life. His friendships are "nipped in the bud" and his affairs become "insipid" to the point that desire "lost its edge, the very springs of feeling...dried up" (p. 455) inside him.

All of this serves to highlight a crucial theme: the pervasiveness of failure throughout the text. Lawrence Schehr observes that Flaubert "shows no belief in a progress narrative. His characters fail repeatedly and decline. Each of his works is a construct of insufficiencies on the level of the plot and in the formation of character".¹⁵ The failure in *A Sentimental Education*, is deeply related to the topic of this essay, for Flaubert's characters struggle to find meaning both as individuals and as a group. The main issue in both cases seems to be a failure to connect with a source of meaning. The rebellious lower classes, unlike those in *Coriolanus*, have no unifying platform on which to make a stand, whilst the bourgeoisie are preoccupied by a lust for wealth and material satisfaction.

One might interpret Flaubert's portrait as a confirmation of Plato's criticism of the democratic character, one that is deficient of "any order and restraint" and indulges in unnecessary desires.¹⁶ But this view is not entirely adequate in my opinion. For one thing, some of the ideas that emerged in the discussion of *Coriolanus* bring some of Plato's premises into question. Plato's ideal state depends on a guardian class educated in the good and noble, and specialized in the task of defending the realm. Yet *Coriolanus* fulfills these criteria only to succeed in becoming an oligarchic figure; as I attempted to show above, what he really needed was a common touch. A more useful theory to apply here would be the sentiments found in Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.

Tocqueville makes the point that in America, where privileges of wealth and birth count for less, given the egalitarian measures in the constitution, strangers of all classes "readily congregate in the same places and find neither danger nor advantage in telling each other freely what they think."¹⁷ In a country that has faced slavery, segregation and McCarthyism, amongst other ills, and currently experiences tense political rivalries, this may appear to be a flattering diagnosis. But the principle that Tocqueville recognizes is a valuable one: social cohesion is best achieved in an environment where people of all stations can contribute to and critique society in equal measure. As suggested in the analysis of

¹⁵ L. R. Schehr, 'Flaubert's Failure' in ed. Timothy Unwin *The Cambridge Companion to Flaubert* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2004), p.208.

¹⁶ Plato, *The Republic* (Penguin Classics: London, 2007), pp.294-8.

¹⁷ A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America and Two Essays on America* (Penguin Classics: London, 2004), p.656.

Coriolanus, this ethos empowers individuals to pursue their own needs whilst also bringing a collective together to protect this liberty and develop a sense of communal cooperation, as each individual helps sustain an institution worth defending.

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