

## EXISTENTIAL NEEDS AND POLITICAL DEEDS IN *CORIOLANUS*

José Manuel González Fernández de Sevilla  
University of Alicante

Should we look for the reason why *Coriolanus*<sup>1</sup> has been so underrated by Shakespearean criticism<sup>2</sup> and so neglected as far as stage performances are concerned,<sup>3</sup> we shall find that the play “has often been misunderstood and has never been very popular.”<sup>4</sup> However *Coriolanus* should be praised for its uniqueness and complexity as it is a complete literary masterpiece that makes dramatic sense. Thus a new understanding and critical revaluation are needed to come to terms with all its theatrical potential. We intend to show why it is, together with *Antony and*

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<sup>1</sup> Textual quotations are taken from the Arden Shakespeare edition. Philip Brockbank ed. *Coriolanus*. London and New York: Methuen, 1976 (rpt. 1984).

<sup>2</sup> A. C. Bradley maintains that *Coriolanus* stands apart from other tragedies of Shakespeare because it is not one of “the great four”. Critics associated with *Scrutiny* “expressed their indignation at the growth of impersonal, violent, mass society through their comments on *Coriolanus*, especially in his guise as heroic warrior.” Finally “Psycho-analytic criticism has strongly emphasized *Coriolanus*’ infantile relation to his castrating mother.” Cfr. M. Charney, “*Coriolanus* and *Timon of Athens*” in S. Wells ed.: *Shakespeare: Selected Bibliographical Guides*. Oxford University Press, 1974, pp. 217-219.

<sup>3</sup> A. C. Bradley wrote in 1912 that *Coriolanus* “was seldom acted, and perhaps no reader called it his favourite play.” Cfr. B. Vickers, *Shakespeare: Coriolanus*. London, E. Arnold, 1976, p. 7. Surprisingly there is no direct evidence of its having been performed in Shakespeare’s lifetime, and its stage history has been complicated by adaptations. Cf. Adrian Poole, *Coriolanus*. London, Harvester, 1988, xv.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. Vickers, op. cit. p. 7.

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*Cleopatra*,” Shakespeare’s most assured artistic success.”<sup>1</sup> To begin with let’s focus our attention on the dramatic genre in which it might be included. To say that it is just a Roman play<sup>2</sup> or a tragedy<sup>3</sup> leaves out some important questions. Contemporary criticism should take into account all the radical material it has and all the basic interpretations it shows. Then it might well be considered as a historical tragedy because both the tragic element and the historical implications shape the whole life and actions of the hero of Corioles. The personal tragedy of Coriolanus is more than a dramatic representation. It is also an expression of contemporary historical reindications. Thus the play was intended to have a metatheatrical dimension with a real influence on the historical context.

Coriolanus has a special theatrical appeal owing to his complex personality and strange identity. He is always beyond expectation and definition. He is just Caius Martius Coriolanus. He is human and divine at the same time. He is like us but just different. He accomplishes and fulfils the utopian ideal of integrity, pride and honesty. He is the hero and the superman. However he is also the representation of human failure in its eternal fight against misuse and abuse. He cannot get rid of external manipulation coming from matriarchal authority and senatorial commands. That is why he is both a victor and a traitor. From these revealing facts we can perfectly understand Sicinius’ words which describe him as “a traitorous innovator” (3.1.173). His tragedy and success reside in his perpetually active contradiction. He is hated and loved. And this is the supreme proof of his humanity and attraction. He is more a leader than a heroic personification with all kinds of good qualities and virtues because he is radically human in his personal confrontation with destiny and adversity. Coriolanus, like Hamlet, must face a personal dilemma: to be himself or to act “like an engine” that “when he walks the ground shrinks before his treading” (5.4.18-19). He, unlike Hamlet, reaches a decision. He tries hard to be himself but he fails time and time again. There is no other solution for his existential question but to live without being. Therefore he becomes the hero of a stricken city, knowing beforehand that defeat will be his reward. The existential framework in which Coriolanus must live and

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. T. S. Eliot, “Hamlet” in *Selected Essays*. London, Faber, 1932 (rpt. 1980), p. 144.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. V. Thomas, *Shakespeare’s Roman Worlds*. London, Routledge, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. D. Mehl, *Shakespeare’s Tragedies: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 178.

exist makes him appear inhuman and horrible. Finally he becomes a monster. We are forced to admit, together with Menenius, that Martius “has grown from man to dragon” (5.4.13-14). The absurdity of an existence of complete alienation ends in exile and death. But it is not his fault. He is predestined to follow what others say. Under these circumstances for Coriolanus to be human is to be theatrical. Thus the hero must play his role to please other people’s desires. His existence is a performative act. Personal convictions and social impositions make him a very skillful actor and a professional entertainer. He knows how to act from childhood. His mother, Volumnia, was his drama teacher. She taught him how to act and what to perform. External appearances are the radical tenet of the daily show. Acting has nothing to do with his personal decisions but with the intentions of others. It is Coriolanus himself who, following Volumnia’s theatrical patterns, presents a brilliant practical outline of dramatic activity to us. The theatrical transformation he must undergo to play his existential role is expressed as follows:

Well, I must do’t.  
Away my disposition, and possess me  
Some harlot’s spirit! My throat of war be turn’d,  
Which choired with my drum, into a pipe  
Small as an eunuch, or the virgin voice  
That babies lull asleep! The smiles of knaves  
Tent in my cheeks, and schoolboys’ tears take up  
The glasses of my sight! A beggar’s tongue  
Make motion through my lips, and my arm’d knees  
Who bow’d but in my stirrup, bend like his  
That hath receiv’d an alms!

(3.2.110-120)

Acting is described as something unnatural which requires a positive effort. It is a perversion and disorder of Coriolanus’ own identity. The man changes his personality to play his role. Again he is ready to satisfy the demands of the audience. He prefers to be what they expect him to be rather than be himself. He is not allowed to change the plot. And to succeed in his theatrical enterprise he accepts being the victim. This status means a radical contradiction because acting is more than entertaining. It is not a natural disposition, it means becoming another person through an indecent act of existential prostitution. He must be possessed by “some harlot’s

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spirit” and become his own contradiction. The representation of his personal drama requires a radical change in order to abandon his military condition and be transformed into something completely different,” ... into a pipe/ Small as an eunuch, or the virgin voice/ That babies lull asleep!”. He must be false to his nature because he cannot be the man he is said to be. He is the leading star of the political *belly* rotted by civil disorder, accepting his dramatic holocaust in order to be the saviour of an unredeemable world. And in his performative role he is supreme. Undoubtedly he is one of the outstanding acting characters within the Shakespearean dramatic universe. For him to live is to act. Thus acting, in his case, has existential connotations. Existence becomes essentially theatrical. In *Coriolanus* the theatrical dimension within the play itself reaches its peak. It is theatre about theatre. Reality and dramaticity are indistinguishable and interchangeable. The dramatic role is completely assumed by Coriolanus when he follows someone’s instructions. However when he is expected to be the director of his own tragedy, he is lost. Confusion makes him forget his part in his unending drama. He does not know what to do nor where to go. He cannot distinguish between fiction and reality. So life becomes the stage where the hero has to face the demands of an audience that claims the right to be entertained. The peculiar theatrical situation requires a very particular character in order to perform a metatheatrical function. This superb interpretation produces a permanent and irritating *maladjustment*<sup>1</sup> in Coriolanus. He is always unable to adapt himself to the real situation. He is condemned to exist in perpetual inadaptation; a consequence of the social roles he is compelled to play. We may say that he is the many-sided figure ready to act and to please public expectations, redeeming the city from foreign invasion. He must be judged and identified for what he does and not for what he is. He will be the manipulated factor within an alienated society.

Coriolanus is a tragic hero in perpetual need of being himself. He exists and acts in reciprocal alienation. He is internally divided because he is incapable of adapting himself to the critical situation of Rome burning in popular rebellion. However his antisocial attitude is the external revelation of his radical necessity of people who are the opposite element of his internal contradiction, for he cannot be without them. His heroism cannot be tested without the mob, and his rejection is the most reliable test of his

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<sup>1</sup> Paul A. Cantor, *Shakespeare’s Rome. Republic and Empire*. Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1976, p. 79.

engagement with society which is the basic element of his theatrical performance. To be himself he must be projected onto the others who are the reason and possibility of his political strategies. Being a lonely hero, he cannot be alone. J. Bayley is right when he asserts that “ ... Coriolanus is the most public, the least solitary of Shakespeare’s heroes.”<sup>1</sup> He needs to hear the voices of his enemies and the accusations of the tribunes. And when exile comes, he is forced to look for another country and different people to share his radical alienation and confrontation. He needs an anti-hero to express in actions all his human and military power. Aufidius might be the solution to his social demands. The Volscians are the last opportunity to overcome his antisocial disposition. However he fails in his final attempt to be socially accepted. Thus Coriolanus becomes the perfect outsider.

Linguistic abuse and semantic manipulation are also responsible for his existential banishment. Coriolanus’ antisocial behaviour is also a consequence of his inability to communicate. The linguistic fight will be his most outstanding failure. From the very beginning he is aware of the inadequacy and fallacy of words which are considered to be noisy sounds. The whole play is abused and perverted through verbal discourse. Words are not used according to their value. They are not intended to perform a communicative function. They are not text but pretext. They are reversed in their meaning. Words are only air, pure exhalation. A mechanical act, an instinctive action. In this way words become noise. It is the only resource people have to be heard and to express their complaints and discontent. They shout, for the intensity of their cries is the only possible way they have left to air their views. Then dialogue is not possible because both Coriolanus and the plebeians lack “a viable language”.<sup>2</sup> The opening of the play seems a dramatic discourse for deaf people without any possible mutual understanding. Everyone wants to speak but nobody is ready to listen. Consequently we find, throughout the whole performance, a verbal perversion and also a linguistic rebellion. People support their right to speak and to be heard. And this is the most radical failure of Roman

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<sup>1</sup> He places limits on his critical position adding “Except in one respect”. In any case his argumentation is valid to support our personal approach. Cfr. John Bayley, *Shakespeare and Tragedy*. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, p. 147.

<sup>2</sup> James L. Calderwood, “*Coriolanus*: Wordless Meanings and Meaningless Words.”, *SEL* 6 (1969), p. 213.

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authority. The combination of “meaning and meaninglessness”<sup>1</sup> is the origin of the verbal confusion and linguistic maladjustment within the dramatic universe. Thus it is that “In an unstable society whose verbal currency is fluctuating back and forth between inflationary and deflationary levels, one can never know at any time what words are worth ... ”<sup>2</sup> The verbal symbol is not permanent. It is always in continuous fluctuation depending on the exchange rate on the market and the profit made from verbal currency. There is not a fixed linguistic code, “With every minute you do change a mind,/ And call him noble that was now your hate,/ Him vile that was your garland.” (1.181-183). This verbal contamination reaches Coriolanus through maternal education. For Volumnia the function of words is to falsify truth since they are bastard elements. Therefore she causes linguistic prostitution. To speak is not to communicate but to breath words with no real meaning at all. However Coriolanus knows how to react to his mother’s verbal manipulation. The maternal command is transformed into an obsession for being meaningful. His distrust of language is the result of living in a world of linguistic imposition since words, like drums and trumpets, are profaned. He is conscious of the verbal conflict,

between a stationary meaning and drifting words, between private meanings incapable of fitting into a public language and a public language that has become meaningless, or, as we have said ... between wordless meanings and meaningless words. Isolated from one another in this fashion, both meanings and words become self-destructive as well as destructive of language generally.<sup>3</sup>

He can no longer stand suffering the verbal nonsense which brings social and political confusion. Language has also become a contradiction. Therefore Coriolanus must admit his defeat in his fight against linguistic abuse though he has always shown verbal integrity. He does not mind being rejected by his countrymen or by his family, for telling the truth is his only verbal intention in order to express his feelings and ideas. However he is often misunderstood. He has forgotten that truth is not to be spoken. And linguistic exile is the beginning of his complete isolation. His verbal inability comes from the fact that he is a foreigner, speaking a different

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<sup>1</sup> M. Grivelet, “Shakespeare as Corrupter of Words”, *SS* 16 (1963), p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> James L. Calderwood, *op. cit.* p. 217.

<sup>3</sup> James L. Calderwood, *op. cit.* p. 220.

language. Therefore leaving the city is a necessary action if he wants to be understood. It is also a deliberate and personal choice because Coriolanus is not only the victim but also the agent of the people's banishment. He banishes them for their corruption since they are "As the dead carcasses of unburied men" (3.3.122). In this situation Coriolanus is forced to look for a meaningful language. It is the great victory to be won if Rome wants to be free from chaos and sedition. Finally action will be his last and more efficient word. His deeds will openly speak for him. Silent actions are the only language he is going to use in his verbal exchange with people. And through action which, in this case, is eloquence (3.2.76) he dominates and manipulates the dramatic universe of the play. Fortunately he has discovered a much more sophisticated and effective way of communication which has an immediate impact on the listener. He has the advantage of being essentially a man of action who knows how to mean without speaking since he is a hero for what he did not for what he said. He becomes the antitype of the Roman orator. Thus we learn that his linguistic weapons are integrity and honesty without any formal usage of rhetorical elements as words are naturally intended for communication. For this reason his alliance with Aufidius and the Volscians is more meaningful than all his words spoken in the marketplace. Now everybody knows the real Coriolanus. In Rome there is no doubt of the meaning of his intentions. At last actions have spoken louder than words. In this way he, through political action, tries to restore speech.

Coriolanus' needs are partly satisfied with political confrontation. Politics is his only successful activity. *Mori pro patria* is his greatest ideal to which he devotes all his energies and his complete life. Hence *Coriolanus* is an essentially political play for it cannot be properly understood and performed without its relation to power and the government of people. Recent Shakespearean criticism points out its political involvement and implications.<sup>1</sup> A. Poole holds that "Most critics have had

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. J. Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy. Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*. Brighton, The Harvester Press, 1984; Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*. London, Methuen, 1985; Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare*. Oxford, B. Blackwell, 1986; Terence Hawkes, *That Shakespearean Rag*. London, Methuen, 1986; John Drakakis ed., *Alternative Shakespeares*. London, Methuen, 1985; J. Dollimore and Alan Sinfield eds., *Political Shakespeare*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1985; Graham Holderness ed., *The Shakespeare Myth*. Manchester, Manchester University

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something to say about the antagonistic political principles apparently embodied in the figures of Caius Martius and “the people”.<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly this play is “Shakespeare’s most immediately political”.<sup>2</sup> However we should know what is meant by the term *political* before we reach a conclusion about the importance of the political aspect in a critical interpretation of the play. Politics, in this case, refers not only to a general preoccupation with public affairs or to “a lively concern with the ends and methods of public actions”<sup>3</sup> but also to a positive interest in particular matters related to the assertion of power, to the abuse of authority and to social rebellion. Therefore it can be said that *Coriolanus* is political in the sense that it “is about power: about State, or *the* State; about order in society and the forces of disorder ... about conflict, not in personal but political life; and -the aspect which catches our minds first- about the conflict of classes.”<sup>4</sup> It seems to me that personal conflict cannot be separated from political confrontation since it is both the consequence and the active principle of social subversion. However the political implications of the play are stronger than these. Politics is what really matters in *Coriolanus*. The material, the plot and the characters have an immediate and direct political connotation. But its most distinctive political feature is the radical consciousness that the play presents about rebellion and disorder. We should bear in mind that Renaissance drama, and especially Shakespearean drama, exhibits a deep concern with political matters. So the dramatist tries to reverse and change reality through drama. He devises his performative strategies to subvert and to provoke the audience. Hence in *Coriolanus* there is a theatrical awareness of the subversive possibilities of drama and the practical intention of reflecting common expectations. The dramatic strategies are arranged in order to achieve political aims. In this

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Press, 1988. The political approach is also a basic tenet for teaching Shakespeare today. Cfr. Ann Thompson, “*King Lear* and the Politics of Teaching Shakespeare”, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41 (1990), pp. 139-146. B. Vickers, “*Coriolanus* and the Demons of Politics”, *Returning to Shakespeare*. London, Routledge, 1989.

<sup>1</sup> A. Poole, op. cit. xviii.

<sup>2</sup> B. A. Brockman ed., *Coriolanus*. London, Macmillan, 1977, Introduction p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> L. C. Knights, “Shakespeare’s Politics: with Some Reflections on the Nature of Tradition”, K. Muir ed., *Interpretations of Shakespeare*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1953, pp. 86-87.

<sup>4</sup> A. P. Rossiter, “Political Tragedy”, in B. A. Brockman ed., *Coriolanus*. London Macmillan, 1977, p. 145.



way the dramatist tries to demystify imposed patterns and beliefs using theatrical weapons to provoke social involvement. And the political intention, in this case, means “the capacity to be not only intellectually, but emotionally and purposively, engaged by the management of public affairs.”<sup>1</sup>

Political perversion and practical subversion are not general dramatic characteristics as some of the theatrical episodes dramatized in the play may reflect contemporary events. Thus drama is a topical media to express social disension and oppression. Theatre was also a place of social propaganda and political awareness which projected the contextual complaints shared by a concrete social order since drama gives a good account of contemporary facts. The opening of *Coriolanus* could not be more brusque as “Shakespeare portrays the unreasoning violence of mob action”.<sup>2</sup> The plebeians rebel against the official power. The outburst of the rebellion is on its way. People express themselves using weapons. Everywhere there is physical tumult. It seems, in principle, that the only reason for their revolt is hunger. They are desperately looking for something to eat. And, at first sight, there is not an immediate political cause as the first citizen speaks “in hunger for bread, not in thirst for revenge” (1.1.24-25). This mutinous action might have been a reflection of the social conditions of the time and the attitude of the people against the government that was unable to provide the necessary food for them since “Shakespeare and his contemporaries lived with the permanent threat of dearth, the memory and fear of hunger as a widespread human and social fact.”<sup>3</sup> What is most surprising is that food shortage and harvest disaster which were a real threat for Europe at that time provoked so few occasional outbreaks of disorder in England.<sup>4</sup> However dearth, as in the play, was not the only cause of historical disorder. There was also a strong confrontation between classes. “Antagonism towards the mob ... was indeed expressed

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 149.

<sup>2</sup> Robert S. Miola, *Shakespeare's Rome*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Adrian Poole, op. cit. p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. John Walter and Keith Wrightson, “Dearth and the Social Order in Early Modern England” in Paul Slack ed., *Rebellion, Popular Protest and the Social Order in Early Modern England*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 128.

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time and again in Jacobean England.”<sup>1</sup> It led to a conscious class hostility. There was, then, among some of the common people an increasing hate of the rich whom they regarded as exploiters. The *belly* metaphor (1.1.95 ff.) might be a visual presentation of the social confrontation. In addition to physical needs and social division, political discontent was a manifest demand under the reign of James I, culminating in the peasant revolt which began in Northamptonshire in May 1607 and soon spread to other counties. This topical situation is something to bear in mind if we try to know all the basic contextuality which might explain and give reason for the dramatic material and theatrical intentionality of *Coriolanus* since the dramatic performance might be a reflection of the historical conditions in England. It shows new patterns of social behaviour and opposes the orderly arranged Elizabethan World Picture. Critics have found “the play intimately involved with Jacobean political and social conflict. It seems almost certainly to echo current debate over parliamentary versus royal prerogatives.”<sup>2</sup>

However the political sense of *Coriolanus* is more radical and decisive. In it we get “Shakespeare’s most detailed analysis of politics”.<sup>3</sup> There is a theatrical discussion of central political issues. We may say that “the play is a political treatise in dramatized form.”<sup>4</sup> Power and authority are the two more critical disrupting forces within the dramatic universe of the play. Its abuse and manipulation are the cause of the situation which is out of control. The scarcity of bread is a consequence of something more radical, namely the perversion of the political body:

... They ne’er cared  
for us yet. Suffer us to famish, and their store-  
houses crammed with grain; make edicts for usury,

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<sup>1</sup> J. Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy. Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*. Brighton, The Harvester Press, 1984, p. 225.

<sup>2</sup> B. A. Brockman ed., op. cit p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> B. Vickers, *Coriolanus*. London Ed. Arnold, 1976, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Hans-Jürgen Weckermann, “*Coriolanus*: The Failure of the Autonomous Individual” in B. Fabian and K. Tetzeli von Rosador eds., *Shakespeare. Text, Language, Criticism. Essays in Honour of Marvin Spevack*. Hildesheim, Olms-Weidmann, 1987, p. 335.

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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. If the wars eat us not up, they will; and  
there's all the love they bear us.

(1.1.78-84)

Lack of care is the political sin. The belly is completely infected as the Roman authority does not serve the people but abuses and manipulates them in order to make a profit and to maintain power at any cost. Political corruption is the ultimate cause of social instability. The leaders of the city project their own ambition and frustration onto the “many-headed multitude” (2.3.16-17) as there is a positive “displacement of disorder from within the dominant onto the subordinate.”<sup>1</sup> The figure of Coriolanus should be judged and viewed from this political scope. He is a representative member of the establishment who has the responsibility of fighting the Volscies on the battlefield at the same time as he represents the possibility of overcoming internal insurrection. And he is ready to play the political role as best he can. He embodies the ideal of a politician since he can adopt “various kinds of image -a monument, a machine, a monster, a god, a thing.”<sup>2</sup> He is the only one able to fight against “The beast with many heads” (4.1.1-2) because he knows what strategies to use. Coriolanus is a cunning politician who follows certain Machiavellian-like patterns in his political disguise for “He's a lamb indeed, that baes like a bear” (2.1.10) and a “viper” whose arrogance “would depopulate the city” (3.1.261). However his political instinct lacks the gentle touch, and he becomes the chief enemy of the people.

*Coriolanus* is more than a play. It has metatheatrical sense, for it shows a positive intention beyond the dramatic representation. There is, through theatrical exposition, political awareness of contemporary implications. Thus we are shown that political abuse and social

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<sup>1</sup> J. Dollimore, “The Case for a Political Cultural Analysis of Shakespeare: The Instances of Displacement and Perversion” in M. Barbeito ed., *In Mortal Shakespeare. Radical Readings*. Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, 1989, p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> A. Poole, op. cit. p. 23.

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manipulation create subversion and corruption in the management of power. Unfortunately little has changed since Coriolanus' day.

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