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SHAKESPEARE'S *CORIOLANUS*  
– A SURVEY OF GENRE-CONCEPT STUDIES

The critical theory of genres "is stuck precisely where Aristotle left it"<sup>1</sup>, since though a great deal has been written on genre and on the allied topics of form and structure, the genre-concept is still a nebulous literary phenomenon. Every literary work, whatever its similarities to other works, is *sui generis*, but the complexity and the uniqueness of each work cannot be separated from the generality and the simplicity of the genre-classification. Ellis Schwartz points out:

The genre-concept enables us to classify a work, to understand the general relation between its form and effect, and even to comprehend more fully, its individuality. Yet the genre-concept can never adequately describe any particular play or poem. It can never provide the perception and insight of a trained literary intelligence. It can, however, provide one of the conditions necessary for that intelligence to operate efficiently and accurately<sup>2</sup>.

Indeed, the individuality of any work is most meaningfully established by differentiation, not by isolation. For example the distinctive quality of a tragedy can be better appreciated by comparing it with other tragedies, instead of treating it as if it existed in a literary vacuum. Genre-study does not, however, assume that there are fixed and finalized categories under which every play or poem can be assigned.

Strangely enough, there is no agreed equivalent for the genre-concept in English critical vocabulary: "kind", "type", "form" and "genre" are variously applied. To avoid confusion it is adequate to begin by accepting

<sup>1</sup> N. Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton 1957, NJ, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> E. Schwartz, *The Forms of Feeling*, New York 1972, p. 74.

one satisfactory definition – the definition offered by Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, who formulated their distinction on the “other” and “inner” form:

Genre should be conceived [...] as a grouping of literary works based theoretically, upon both outer form (specific metre, or structure), and also upon inner form (attitude, tone, purpose-more crudely, subject and audience). The ostensible basis may be one or the other (e.g. “pastoral” and “satire” for inner form, dipodic verse and Pindaric Ode for the outer) but the critical problem will then be to find the other dimension, to complete the diagram<sup>3</sup>.

Wellek and Warren’s definition provokes questions: Does a theory of literary kinds involve the supposition that every work belongs to a kind? How far is “intention” involved in the idea of genre? How far is intention involved on the part of a pioneer? on the part of others?

Do genres remain fixed? Presumably not. With the addition of new works our category shifts [...]. Indeed, one characteristic kind of critical performance seems the discovery, and the dissemination of a new grouping, a new generic patter<sup>4</sup>.

Generally speaking, the genre-concept, or the problem of classification of a work of art, should take into consideration the crucial issues – the intention of the author, and the response of the reader. But whereas it is possible and profitable to speculate on the intentions of, say, Milton in *Paradise Lost* or Dryden in *Absalom and Achitophel*<sup>5</sup>, it is by no means possible to state with any degree of certainty Shakespeare’s intention in writing *Troilus and Cressida* or *Measure for Measure* or *Coriolanus*. The response of the reader in the study, or of the spectator in the theatre varies<sup>6</sup>. Each critic responds to Shakespeare’s play in his/her own way, and upon this personal response depends his/her final evaluation of the play. The richer the play, the more complex the response and the more complicated the interpretation.

One of the fascinating things about Shakespearean criticism – especially of the present century – is the diversity of the response to his works; the issue of classification has been one of the chief concerns. Controversy still rages around his “Problem Plays”<sup>7</sup>. Can there be a rigid distinction between “History” and “Tragedy”? If so, what would be the status one accords to his “Roman Plays”?

<sup>3</sup> R. Wellek, A. Warren, *Theory of Literature*, London 1954, p. 241.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>5</sup> See the entries in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, ed. M. Drabble, Oxford 1985, p. 2, 736.

<sup>6</sup> For the theoretical foundation of reader-response criticism see: *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. J. P. Thompkins, Baltimore 1988.

<sup>7</sup> Vivian Thomas illustrates in his survey of criticism devoted to “Problem Plays” that this term has been applied to a great variety of Shakespeare’s dramatic works – in each for a different reason: *The Moral Universe of Shakespeare’s Problem Plays Vision*, London 1987, p. 1–22.

Such questions are especially relevant to *Coriolanus*. Unpopular though the play may be with the general reader, it has received its due share of attention from critics<sup>8</sup>. Some of the criticism is quite conventional, based on more or less orthodox principles; some of it might justifiably be described as new – often controversial. Generic approach permeates majority of critical vistas – each opens a different dimension of the play: the tragic, the grotesque, the heroic, the political, and the satiric.

In a characteristically eccentric fashion, G. B. Shaw asserted that “indeed, the play of *Coriolanus* is the greatest of Shakespeare’s Comedies”<sup>9</sup>. Shakespeare’s First Folio Editors, however, took an altogether different view of the matter. The *Tragedy of Coriolanus*, as John Hemmings and Henry Condell called it, occupies pride of place in the First Folio, as the first play in the section of the Tragedies.

Modern critics are by no means sure. In excluding the play from Shakespearean Tragedy (along with the Roman Plays, and *Richard II* and *Richard III*) as “tragical histories or historical tragedies”, A. C. Bradley explains that Shakespeare would have met criticism of these plays by “appealing to their historic character, and by denying that such works are to be judged by the standard of pure tragedy”. What Bradley finds in *Coriolanus*, are a good many things that are distasteful. Despite his innate nobility of character, Coriolanus is an “impossible” person. He is too simple, and quite ignorant of his own nature: he is a man “totally ignorant of himself, and stumbling to the destruction either of his life or of his soul”<sup>10</sup>.

As if in answer to Bradley, John Dover Wilson classifies the play among Shakespeare’s best tragedies. “Youthfulness”, thinks this critic, accounts for much of the hero’s character, his self-ignorance and self-deception: “when at last the ‘boy’ falls basely murdered by traitors in a foreign land, his glory shining all the brighter for their perfidy, we shall contemplate that ‘instantaneous cessation of enormous energy’ touched not only with awe, but with the tenderness of sorrow and even with the pity which Bradley denies him”<sup>11</sup>. Irving Ribner is another critic who finds the play up to the standards of tragedy. He describes *Coriolanus* as a tragedy of Pride, and

<sup>8</sup> For example Theodore Spencer finds the play “an excellent piece of dramatic craftsmanship” but adds that though we admire it, we admire it in cold blood”, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man*, New York 1943, 198–216. For E. K. Chambers the play is the evidence of “Shakespeare [...] become tedious”, *Shakespeare: A Survey*, New York 1925, p. 258. A. R. Rossiter writes: “*Coriolanus* is the last and greatest of the Histories. It is Shakespeare’s only great political play; and it is slightly depressing, and hard to come to terms with because it is political tragedy”, *Angel with Horns*, London 1961, p. 251.

<sup>9</sup> *Shaw on Shakespeare*, ed. E. Wilson, London 1962, p. 215.

<sup>10</sup> A. C. Bradley, *Shakespeare Tragedy*, London 1962, p. 3 and *Coriolanus*, British Academy Shakespeare Lecture, London 1912, p. 89–92.

<sup>11</sup> *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*, ed. J. Dover Wilson, New Cambridge Shakespeare, p. XI.

warns that we have to be fully aware of the Renaissance significance of this cardinal sin – “the most terrible of the Medieval Deadly Sins, the cause of Adam’s fall and the debasement of the Universe and to the Renaissance moralists, the ultimate source of all violation of degree, civil disorders and calamities which could befall a commonwealth”<sup>12</sup>.

While agreeing that pride is certainly a deep flaw in the hero’s character, Willard Farnham does not by any means think that the tragedy is all that simple. He speaks of an exclusive paradoxical world in Shakespeare’s final tragedies – a world of “taints and honours”. The tragic flaw of Coriolanus is pride, but “the paradox of Coriolanus is that in this pride [...] there is not only everything bad but also everything good by which he comes to be a subject for Shakespearean Tragedy”<sup>13</sup>.

Kenneth Burke takes an original view of *Coriolanus*, beginning with the assumption that tragedy “require[s] some kind of symbolic action, in which some noble form of victimage is imitated, for the purgation or edification of an audience”. Elsewhere in his work, Burke comments on this aspect of the tragic hero as a sacrificial victim. Though in contrast with the typical sacrificial victims of Greek tragedy he finds that Coriolanus rather resembles a character in a satyr-play, he does not find the tone of the play as satiric at all – despite the hero’s excesses, most of the genuinely “good” characters in the play love and admire him, and are loyal to him. Hence Burke’s idea that “grotesque” would be a truer description of the play. He proceeds in his essay to consider “Coriolanus’s qualifications as a scapegoat, whose symbolic sacrifice is designed to afford an audience pleasure”. The “cathartic” function of the play is given added emphasis and complexity, by making family, class and national motives focus on the inner conflict of the individual:

[...] the play so sets things up that Coriolanus maneuvers himself and is maneuvered into a situation whereby this individualistic, mother-motivated, Patrician patriot is all set to attack his own country, which at the beginning of the play he had defended with signal valour. As Granville-Barker has well said, ‘Play and character become truly tragic only when Martius, to be traitor to Rome, must turn traitor to himself’<sup>14</sup>.

Philip Thomson also classifies the play as “grotesque”. The nature of the Grotesque, which according to him, consists of: Disharmony, the Comic and the Terrifying, Extravagance and Exaggeration, and Absurdity, seems to be reflected in the picture that Cominius paints of the hero (IV.vi. 90–96). Coriolanus is at once grand and unnatural, terrible yet absurd,

<sup>12</sup> I. Ribner, *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*, “English Studies” 1953, No. 34, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> W. Farnham, *Shakespeare’s Tragic Frontier*, Berkeley 1950, p. 2, 207.

<sup>14</sup> K. Burke, *Coriolanus’ and the Delights of Faction*, “Hudson Review” 1966, No. 19, p. 185 and id., *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Berkeley 1973, p. 39–40, 198.

comic yet awesome; Cominius couches his description in extravagant terms – in a word, we deal with a “grotesque tragedy”. The effects of the Grotesque, says Thomson, are aggressiveness and Alienation. Tension and Unresolvability<sup>15</sup>.

Yet, to dub *Coriolanus* a “grotesque tragedy” is to oversimplify matters. This critical approach overlooks the importance of the political theme; Shakespeare's characters are distorted into caricatures, and in general the error is committed by trying to place an Elizabethan play in a thoroughly modern context. While it is a measure of the timelessness of all great literature that it can be viewed from contemporary context, such a view is only one phase of the play. The Universality of a play cannot be narrowed down. All that can be said is that there is an element of the Grotesque in *Coriolanus*.

Another relevant and instructive perspective to the genre of *Coriolanus* is provided by Reuben Brower. Analyzing the play in the light of ancient heroism and epic, he arrives at the conclusion that it is “the most original of Shakespeare's heroic dramas”. As a key to this mode, Brower quotes Cominius's encomium on Martius (II,ii, 82–87); “the core of this speech is an epic or rather Graeco-Roman tradition”. The critic continues to give a concise account of the Renaissance image of the ancient hero, influenced by Homer, Virgil and Seneca – the complex blend of which is ideally reflected in the Renaissance theory of the Heroic Poem – a theory at once Romantic and Classical, Virgilian and Homeric, which involved a re-interpretation of the ancient image in the Renaissance terms<sup>16</sup>.

The “heroic image” is also the key to Matthew N. Proser's understanding of the play. For Proser, the tragedy arises out of the discrepancy between this hero's “self-image” and his real nature. Coriolanus and Othello, as soldiers, are placed in situations with which their military training cannot cope. If Coriolanus is to be true to his own image of himself as the honourable soldier, it follows that he is never true to what lies below that image – his own human nature. He turns traitor to the people, traitor to Rome, traitor to the Volsces, but when he turns traitor to himself only to prove true to his mother, his hitherto humanity betrays him to his enemies. At this stage, when he is most human, his true inner nature is projected, which proves to be the source of his own destruction<sup>17</sup>.

Similarly, Eugene M. Waith sees “tragic vision” as closely allied to “heroic vision”. He draws the attention to the heroic qualities of Coriolanus – his superhuman valour, his absolute integrity, his god-like power of

<sup>15</sup> P. Thomson, *The Grotesque*, London 1972, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> *Coriolanus*, ed. R. Brower, The Complete Signet Class Shakespeare, New York 1972, p. 1319–1320.

<sup>17</sup> M. N. Proser, *The Heroic Image in Five Shakespeare Tragedies*, Princeton 1965, p. 4, 94.

destruction. These qualities are emphatically brought out in contrast: to the bluff geniality of Menenius, who is ever ready to compromise; to the cunning treachery of Aufidius, who is, like the Tribunes, an opportunist; and to the many-voiced, ever-shifting multitude. Waith even defends Coriolanus on his weakest point:

It is sometimes thought highly ironic, that Coriolanus, who prides himself on his constancy, should be guilty of the supreme inconstancy of treason to his country. In fact, however reprehensible he may be, he is not inconstant. Shakespeare makes it clear that his first allegiance is always to his personal honour.

Therefore, Waith argues that it is "a special variety of tragic experience [...] we undergo in this Heroic Tragedy"<sup>18</sup>.

Northrop Frye is also of the opinion that the presence of the heroic element in a tragedy is what makes the tragic experience profoundly exhilarating. He thinks that it makes no difference to the nature of the tragedy, that Macbeth or Coriolanus should be "good" or "bad". What matters really is that both of these characters are "heroes", and are worthy of having tragedies written about them. Frye classifies *Coriolanus* as a "Tragedy of nature and fortune"<sup>19</sup>.

Insofar as it is based on literary tradition, and on the historical background of the classics, this heroic approach is essentially a specialized one, and therefore limited. But it does provide a valuable perspective on the play, especially in that it does not seek to deny the tragic quality of *Coriolanus*. Yet, the enormous change in attitudes and approaches to Shakespearean Tragedy evokes many questions: How does one judge a tragedy? Or, what is more relevant to us? How does one judge an Elizabethan tragedy in the twentieth century? What are the criteria to be applied? Aristotelian, Nietzschean, Hegelian or Bradleyan? "Tragedy" has meant different things to different people through the ages, and now signifies a complex art-form, for which there can be no simple definition, no fixed criteria"<sup>20</sup>.

What is unique about the Roman Plays is Shakespeare's treatment of history, which gains an extra dimension through the poet's tragic vision. The plays are personal tragedies depicted in a public context<sup>21</sup>. This

<sup>18</sup> E. M. Waith, *The Herculean Hero*, New York 1962, p. 13-14, 134.

<sup>19</sup> N. Frye, *The Tragedies of Nature and Fortune*, "Stratford Papers on Shakespeare" 1961, p. 38-51.

<sup>20</sup> I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, London 1970, p. 247.

<sup>21</sup> D. Traversi says: "The political and the personal elements, which Shakespeare had elsewhere treated with varying degrees of emphasis, but which seem always to have been associated in his maturing thought, are now brought together in a new and distinctly Roman vision, for which Plutarch provided the foundation"; *Shakespeare: The Roman Plays*, London 1963, p. 17.

inextricable weaving of personal motives into a broad public context provokes the question: How far are the Roman Plays political? Are they in fact, histories or tragedies? This political aspect has been of special interest to several critics, notably in *Coriolanus*.

While grouping *Coriolanus* with *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra* under the title "Great Tragedies", L. C. Knights remarks emphatically that *Coriolanus* is "the consummation of Shakespeare's political wisdom". He thinks it a remarkable feature of the play that no distinction can be made between history and tragedy:

The fundamental insight that this play embodies is that political and social forms cannot be separated from, are in fact judged by, the human and moral qualities that shape them, and the human and moral qualities that they foster<sup>22</sup>.

While it is undeniably a political crisis which is brewing in Rome, one cannot help but see that it is the personal disorder of the hero which fans the flames. His personal qualities again, are the direct result of the social pressures which work on him – the Patrician class in general, and his mother in particular.

A. P. Rossiter, on the other hand, feels that the political theme endangers the tragic qualities of the play. While believing firmly that the play is about power, about state, or **the state**", the critic nevertheless warns against perversities of interpretation – "passionate political side-tracks". He dismisses partisan approaches which make out the play to be Fascist or Communist in its leanings. The tragic conflict of the play is not in personal, but in political life; and that aspect of it which catches our minds first is the conflict between classes<sup>23</sup>.

For a more historical approach, one turns to J. E. Phillips's book, *The State in Shakespeare's Greek and Roman Plays*. He believes that such plays as *Henry V*, *Troilus and Cressida* and *Coriolanus* embody a concept of the state – a fundamental notion in Shakespeare's political ideology. Only the proper understanding of this basic concept can aid us in solving the dramatic problems that these plays present. This does not mean that we locate the political theory of each play and study it in isolation – rather, it means that we study the dramatic function in the political concept, and not its ideological value to Shakespeare. For Phillips, *Coriolanus* is a play about "violation of order and degree": insofar as it is a tragedy, it is the tragedy of a nation, for it dramatizes the disastrous consequences of violation of those principles by which a healthy political society is maintained. On the one hand, the Plebeians with their politically ambitious Tribunes constitute

<sup>22</sup> L. C. Knights, "*King Lear*" and the Great Tragedy: *The Age of Shakespeare*, Harmondsworth 1955, p. 249.

<sup>23</sup> A. P. Rossiter, *op. cit.*, p. 236–251.

a menace to the political and social stability of the state. On the other hand, Coriolanus as a potential ruler, neglects the responsibilities of a governor or ruling head. On both accounts, order is destroyed and Rome is brought to the verge of destruction. Civil war and foreign invasion follow. This is, in fact, "the principal political lesson" conveyed by the play<sup>24</sup>.

Thinking on similar lines, Norman Rabkin admires the play for its "great double-vision of the world and man's place in it". In the situation that Shakespeare has chosen to dramatize is implicit a question which is as relevant to our present society as to the Roman Republic. Martius's choice in the play is that of absolute allegiance to his ideals. Whether this is right or wrong, the consequences are disastrous. The end of his political career, his banishment from Rome, his alliance with the Volsces, and his final decision to spare Rome – these events are as much his choice as they are his opponents<sup>25</sup>.

Another critic faced with the same ambiguity between "political" and "tragic" is David Hale. He denies that the Fable of the Belly is crucial to the play's theme – it is too simple an analogy with which to comprehend the complex political situation depicted in the play. For him, Shakespeare strikes here a balance between personal and political issues, with the emphasis changing from time to time<sup>26</sup>.

Several attempts have also been made to interpret the play in terms of Jacobean politics and Renaissance political thinking. There is a comprehensive account of contemporary political background in respectively: Gordon Zeeveld's and Clifford Davidson's articles<sup>27</sup>. Studying the political aspect of Shakespeare's plays, creates two problems. On the one hand, we should avoid the error of extreme modernism in interpretation; and on the other hand we should not commit the mistake of supposing that Shakespeare's plays are so many dramatic expositions of conventional Elizabethan beliefs. Like all great literature, the plays deal with the vital issues of life. Politics is one such vital issue, and Shakespeare examines it in the context of his plays. It is misleading to ascribe any one character's opinions to Shakespeare himself. Nor can we suppose that Shakespeare was seriously concerned over the rival merits of Democracy and Monarchy at the time of writing

<sup>24</sup> J. E. Phillips, *The State in Shakespeare's Greek and Roman Plays*, New York 1940, p. 169.

<sup>25</sup> N. Rabkin, *Coriolanus – The Tragedy of Politics*, "Shakespeare Quarterly" 1966, No. 77, p. 195–212; quotation p. 196.

<sup>26</sup> D. Hale, *Coriolanus – The Death of a Political Metaphor*, "Shakespeare Quarterly" 1977, No. 22, p. 197–202.

<sup>27</sup> G. Zeeveld, "Coriolanus" and Jacobean Politics, *MLR* 1962, No. 67, p. 321–334; C. Davidson, "Coriolanus" – A Study in Political Dislocation, "Shakespeare Studies" 1968, No. 4, p. 263–274.



*Coriolanus*. It so happened that the material of the play raised certain questions of politics, and Shakespeare dealt with these questions with that “wonderfully philosophic impartiality” that Coleridge admired so much.

There is “political meaning” in any Shakespearean play only to the extent that we respond to it. The weight we give to this political meaning depends entirely on our interpretation of the play. Great actors from Kemble to Olivier have played the titular role in such a manner as to impress uppermost in the audience’s mind the personal tragedy of the hero and his mother, while the political theme is only given a secondary emphasis<sup>28</sup>. But it is there forming part of the intellectual content of the tragedy and any interpretation which fails to take this aspect into consideration cannot be complete.

In his essay, *Coriolanus: Tragedy or Debate?* D. J. Enright attempts to see why the play cannot be understood within the conventional criteria of tragedy. He draws attention to the fact that the play is full of comments by other characters on the hero – comments which often amount to explicit judgements. That there should be such a great deal of commentary makes Enright question the depth of the hero’s character. The fact that the hero is described heavily from the outside results in his being something of a disappointment to us in reality. *Coriolanus* is used much as a “subject for argument among parties who are fundamentally in agreement on the subject”, so Enright concludes that “the play has certain qualities of an intellectual debate”<sup>29</sup>.

I. R. Browning, in his essay, “*Coriolanus*”: *Boy of Tears* proceeds to refute Enright’s idea of the play<sup>30</sup>. But Browning seems to have misunderstood the point of the discussion, for he takes up a psychological approach to the hero’s character, while Enright discusses style and tone.

The dissatisfaction of most critics with the tone and spirit of the play provides the starting point for Oscar J. Campbell to propound a different theory of the play, and indeed of Shakespeare’s tragic art. The critic suggests that the bitterness of *Measure for Measure*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Timon of Athens* and *Coriolanus* may have been “an artistic device, the product of a satiric impulse”. The satiric form of *Coriolanus* provided the dramatist an excellent opportunity to illustrate his political teaching. What we face here is not the tragedy of the fall of a great man destroyed by forces

<sup>28</sup> See: G. C. D. Odell, *Shakespeare From Betterton to Irving*, Vol. 2, New York 1966, p. 104, 258 and S. Beauman, *The Royal Shakespeare Company: A History of Ten Decades*, Oxford 1982, p. 233.

<sup>29</sup> D. J. Enright, “*Coriolanus*” – *Tragedy or Debate?*, “The Apothecary Shop” 1957, p. 32, 42 (London).

<sup>30</sup> I. R. Browning, “*Coriolanus*” – *The Boy of Tears*, “Essays in Criticism” 1955, No. 5, p. 18–31.

beyond his control. It is rather a picture of social and political chaos caused both by subversive forces of democracy, and by a man who is temperamentally incapable of being a good ruler: "The drama then, is a satiric representation of a slave of passion designed to teach an important political lesson".

As Bradley has done earlier, Campbell draws the attention the difference in treatment between Coriolanus and the earlier tragic heroes. The "truly" tragic heroes are endowed with several noble traits; other characters in the play are full of praise for them. These heroes are given soliloquies which reveal their inner struggle and win sympathy. Even at the verge of tragic catastrophe, they utter poignant speeches which reveal the loftiness of their characters; and after the death of the hero, an encomium is delivered on his soul. Campbell points out that all these concomitants of "true" tragedy are absent in *Coriolanus*. The play is full of derogatory comments on the hero, some of them bitterly derisive; he has no impassioned soliloquies to utter, so much so that his nature seems poor and shallow; his most memorable speeches are nothing but bitter vituperation and abuse; the positive qualities he displays are offensive; he is his mother's puppet, and is so afraid of her that he is rendered absurd, and robbed of true tragic grandeur and awe. It

gives final emphasis to the satiric view of Coriolanus. His automatic response to the artfully arranged provocation has at last entrapped him to his death. His end is the direct result of an over-stimulated reflex mechanism. The catastrophe of such an automation is not tragic. [...] it awakens amusement seasoned with contempt<sup>31</sup>.

Campbell's drastic statements on the play cannot stand up to close scrutiny. But he makes his argument plausible enough by stating that if we are not to accuse Shakespeare of artistic ineptitude, we must see that he did not mean *Coriolanus* to be a tragedy at all, but a satire.

This is indeed an unusual viewpoint. But it is by no means without supporters. Norman Brittin remarks that

[...] certain characters in works nominally tragic may have a tendency to cross over into comic territory. There are not many; but a few of Shakespeare's later creations have been given such a temperament and put in such situations that they show at times, something of the quality of comic characters. Of these Coriolanus is the outstanding example<sup>32</sup>.

Interesting enough, Brittin's essay is entitled *Coriolanus, Alceste and Dramatic Genres*. Drawing attention to the ambiguous response to characters like Shylock and Malvolio who are comic and tragic, he compares Coriolanus to Alceste, the hero of Moliere's comedy, *Le Misanthrope*. This similarity,

<sup>31</sup> O. J. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Satire*, New York 1925, p. vii-ix and 198-199.

<sup>32</sup> N. Brittin, *Coriolanus, Alceste and Dramatic Genre*, PMLA 1956, No. 71, p. 799-809, quotations p. 799.

according to Brittin, lies in their “egoistic self-absorption”, and egoism is a fault for which comic characters are punished. They are both remarkably alike in several other respects too – in their rigid incorruptibility, severe integrity and blunt honesty that amounts to tactlessness. These qualities are in themselves quite admirable. But Shakespeare and Moliere put their heroes to test in social situations where they prove quite “impossible”. While we grant that Coriolanus is blunt, outspoken and honest, he proves utterly unadaptable in a public situation, so that when he finally consents to submit to a “custom” that he loathes, he is put in the position of a hypocrite.

This lack of adaptability, this rigid one-sidedness on the part of Coriolanus, makes Brittin regard him as a character of excesses – in short, a “humorous” man. The political and social situations in which he proves to be an utter failure, invite detached comic judgement, and as such, to Brittin *Coriolanus* “fails to give satisfaction as a tragedy”. The critic repeats the by now familiar complaint that the play lacks “the customary concomitants” of tragedy. Coriolanus himself seems an unsatisfactory tragic hero, for his “humour” renders him absurd<sup>33</sup>.

Though Campbell and Brittin readily speak of *Coriolanus* as “Tragic Satire”, such a combination of two separate literary forms is difficult to define. Satire itself is a distinct artistic genre with numerous marked characteristics of its own. Further, there are difficulties in adapting it to the theatre. In his book *The Cankered Muse*, a study of English satire in the Renaissance, Alvin Kernan observes that “the different literary modes are not, finally, interchangeable ways of making the same statement, but distinct perspectives that reveal the world on which they open from different angles”<sup>34</sup>. Kernan thinks that the Renaissance dramatists, insofar as they were satirists, invariably subordinated satire to tragedy or comedy. This raised quite a few problems, for

[...] a hero from one genre is always a failure in another: Satan would make an excellent tragic hero, but in the epic world of *Paradise Lost* he becomes both villain and fool; Gregers Werle has all the attributes of the tragic hero, but in the bitterly comic world of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*, he is only a trouble-maker<sup>35</sup>.

Is Coriolanus then, a mistake as tragic hero? His “unlovely” qualities are obvious enough. He seems to possess every attribute that we associate with the satirist – a blunt, straightforward honesty, a fearless determination to tell the truth, a mastery of irony, caricature and disabling imagery, and the power of fierce invective and vituperation. One recalls Northrop Frye's remark that “genius seems to have led practically every great satirist to

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> A. Kernan, *The Cankered Muse*, Yale 1959, p. 145.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 253.

become what the world calls obscene"<sup>36</sup>. Savagery, despair, hate, pride, intransigence – is that all there is to this much maligned Shakespearean hero? Maligned he is, as is clear from Campbell's remark:

Shakespeare naturally avoids arousing sympathy for a man whom he wishes to deride. The murder of Coriolanus is not the moving death of a great hero; it is the deserved result of a supreme exhibition of his folly<sup>37</sup>.

Campbell's own detestation for Coriolanus is quite obvious in this pronouncement. But Shakespeare's detestation is quite another matter. Campbell fails to see the better part of the tragic character – that revealed in his relationship with his wife, his family and friends.

Kernan places his finger on the essential difference between satire and tragedy, in distinguishing the characteristics of "the satirist as hero" who lacks perception: "every tragic hero has pronounced satiric tendencies, but he also has additional dimensions; chief among them is his ability to ponder and to change under pressure"<sup>38</sup>. But does Coriolanus undergo a change? We can see his tragic self-awareness and the sense of impending doom in Act V, scene iii (186–190). In the fury and indignation caused by Aufidius's provocative taunts in the final scene, Coriolanus, nevertheless, repeats the familiar error of losing his temper and mounthing his anger, so that it seems that he meets his end in utter blindness and ignorance.

Applying the conventions of satire to the stage-play, Kernan further remarks that the scene of satire

[...] is always disorderly and crowded, packed to the very point of bursting. The deformed faces of depravity, stupidity, greed, venality, ignorance and maliciousness group closely together [...] and stare boldly at us<sup>39</sup>.

Yet, this would be too harsh a description to apply to *Coriolanus*. While the mob in its blind fury can be horrifying, there are moments when we can see them as the simple and honest individuals. In *Coriolanus* is depicted a mixed world – not only are the lurking treachery of Aufidius, the cunning opportunism of the Tribunes, and the fickleness of the populace, but also the genial good humour of Menenius, the honourable authority of Cominius, and above all, the warmth, grace and love of a woman like Virgilia. If we are to view the play as a satire, the whole seems to suffer a distortion. Stressing the satirical element in the public context of the play, we are only too apt to ignore its human context, the personal relationships which are so deftly interwoven into the political theme. "It is nonsense to call it a satire" writes Rossiter, "yet throughout there are deft touches of ironical

<sup>36</sup> N. Frye, *op. cit.*, p. 235.

<sup>37</sup> O. J. Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

<sup>38</sup> A. Kernan, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

suggestion that strike the iron demi-good between the joints of the harness [...] Shakespeare [...] is aware of a potential absurdity<sup>40</sup>.

There is an element of grim irony about the tragedy, but it is extremely dangerous to speak of possibly satirical portions of Shakespeare as certainly satirical, especially when this leads on to the conclusion that Shakespeare detested and derided some of his tragic heroes. Ultimately, it comes down to the question of Shakespeare's intention – and that must remain the final unanswerable.

As the survey of the criticism makes clear, the genre-study of *Coriolanus* does not lead us straight to convenient label for the play. We cannot definitely call it – “grotesque Tragedy”, “Political Play” or “tragical Satire”. Indeed, it is not the ultimate end of genre-study to label works of literature in that manner. Genre-study does not merely determine the form of a particular work; it also shows how that work “belongs” to a certain genre, and is yet unique – unique in that it departs from the generic norm to a certain degree. This is especially true of *Coriolanus* which critics have found difficult to classify within the conventional norms of Tragedy or History.

Each generic approach, opens up new dimensions of the play. Some of these approaches deal with elements of the “outer” form. For instance, D. J. Enright's analysis of the play as a Debate, is based on the assumption that the iron, metallic quality of the verse of *Coriolanus* is utterly different from the poetry of the other tragedies. This examination allows the critic to arrive at the conclusion that the play has the qualities of an intellectual Debate. On the other hand, Campbell's approach is more concerned with the “inner” form – the attitude and purpose of the dramatist, and the response of the audience. He analyzes what he thinks is Shakespeare's intention towards the hero, and outlines what he imagines the response of the audience would be like.

But it is not as if each critic maintains a rigid distinction between approaches to the inner and outer form. The tragic approach to the play does not deal essentially with inner form. Again and again the critics see that the play lacks those “customary concomitants” of tragedy such as moving, impassioned poetry, reflective soliloquies, and the supernatural atmosphere – the elements considered as typical of the outer form of a Shakespearean Tragedy. From that point of view, even the death of the protagonist at the end of the play may be seen as an essential part of the structure of a tragedy – that aspect which in fact clinches the play as a tragedy. Brittin views *Coriolanus*'s death as a definite snag in his approach to the play as a satire.

What do we gain from the bewildering variety of the twentieth century approaches to this play? Criticism has gone to extreme lengths as far as

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<sup>40</sup> A. P. Rossiter, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

*Coriolanus* is concerned. Dover Wilson, for example, asserts emphatically that the death of Coriolanus raises in the respondent the truly tragic emotions of pity, awe and fear; on the other end of the scale we have Campbell who is of the firm opinion that the final movement of the play arouses nothing but disgust and contempt. On the middle ground are critics like Brower who sees the play as "heroic", while Burke perceives in it the elements of the "Grotesque". Yet another set of critics highlights the political theme of the play, arguing that this aspect is as significant as, or perhaps even more significant than, the tragic aspect.

What emerges clearly is that no single approach can answer the problems that the play raises. We learn once again that *Coriolanus*, as we should no doubt learn with each Shakespeare's play, that there can be no single key to the interpretation of Shakespeare. In the ever-shifting currents of twentieth-century criticism, it is not possible wholly to apprehend any work of art by means of a single approach. The pluralistic approach has this advantage in that it strikingly testifies to the richness and complexity, not only of Shakespeare, but also of modern critical thought. Norman Rabkin remarks:

We are lucky to have many avenues. It is not insignificant that each time a new approach is developed. Shakespeare turns out to be the chief exemplar of the virtues which that approach recognizes for the first time. Like his continual popularity, this fact is testimony to his enduring greatness<sup>41</sup>.

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**KORIOŁAN WILLIAMA SZEKSPIRA  
– STUDIUM POJĘCIA GATUNKU LITERACKIEGO**

Autorka artykułu przedstawia kontrowersje wokół pojęcia gatunku literackiego na podstawie anglo-amerykańskich prac krytycznych poświęconych *Koriolanowi* Williama Szekspira, które ukazały się w krytyce literackiej XX w. Przegląd tych prac klasyfikujących *Koriolana* jako tragedię, groteskę, sztukę historyczną, polityczną i satyryczną, doprowadza do konkluzji, że tylko poprzez zastosowanie pluralistycznej metody interpretacji można otrzymać głębsze i wnikliwsze zrozumienie tekstu dramatycznego. Bogactwo i złożoność idei Szekspira sprzyja tej metodzie i zaświadcza o wielkości jego geniuszu.

<sup>41</sup> N. Rabkin, *Approaches to Shakespeare*, New York 1961, p. xii.