'Never shame to hear / What you have nobly done': The Representation of Existential Shame in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*

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Abstract:
This article focuses on the uncanny prefigurations of existentialism in Shakespeare's final tragedy *Coriolanus* (1608). The researcher contends that *Coriolanus* is riddled with the existential concepts of individualism, authenticity, the relationship between the self and the other, the dynamics of subjectivity and objectification, the other gaze, shame, bleeding, blush and bodily and linguistic abhorrence. Shakespeare suggests that Coriolanus experiences these existential manifestations in his attempt to create his identity away from the gaze and language of the other that challenges his self fashioning. In contrast to the negative treatment of the Other in Sartre's doctrine, the researcher follows Beauvoir's argument that the self-other relation is potentially mutual. The author argues that Coriolanus achieves his subjectivity and self-assertion, which is also, paradoxically, self-negation, by acknowledging his mother, wife and son and Romans whom he strives to deny throughout the tragedy so as to assert his independence.

Key words: bleeding, blush, existentialism, linguistic abhorrence, sacrifice, shame

Introduction

The relationship between existentialism and tragedy cuts deep to the bone. The suffering and anguish of the individual, the exercise of choice, the conflict between the self and the other and the overlapping between the subjectivity and objectification of the individual are among the existentialist themes that form and constitute the nature of the tragedy. Frye (1967) argues that existentialism is the crux of Shakespeare's tragedies:

> the conceptions that existential thinkers have tried to struggle with, care, dread, nausea, absurdity, authenticity, and the like, are all relevant to the theory of tragedy. Tragedy is also existential in a broader, and perhaps contradictory, sense, in that the experience of the tragic cannot be moralized or contained within any conceptual world-view (p. 4).

Shakespeare's literary work is, arguably, the trunk that gives birth to existentialism. Jean-Paul Sartre was an avid reader of Shakespeare. In one of his letters to Simon de Beauvoir, Sartre (1992) shows that he was immersed in reading Shakespeare's plays: 'I've read *Troilus and Cressida* again and, you know, liked it less than last time. On the other hand, I'm enchanted by *Antony and Cleopatra*, a little gem. It's true that the guy is astounding' (p. 353). Later he ponders, 'I've

discovered new ideas on liberty, facticity, and motivation and I'm coming up with, God forgive me, bold new ideas about human nature' (p. 416). Shakespeare's tragedies anticipate existentialist concepts in a peculiar theatrical style. Nuttall (2007) observes that 'Shakespeare has as much to do with existentialism as with Elizabethan neo-stoicism' (p. 379). While existentialism is a contemporary philosophy, its ideas exist before the conception of such terminology. As Holbrook (2010) notes, 'the drive towards authenticity is not only a nineteenth-century or post-Romantic phenomenon. It has a Classical and Renaissance dimension' (p. 139).

In this analysis of existential shame in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, the author argues that Shakespeare's protagonist Coriolanus is fissured by the roles he must assume in his problematic relationship to his civic mother, Rome and his maternal mother, Volumnia. Selleck (2008) observes that 'The selves coined by Renaissance speakers and writers are various, but they share a tendency to locate selfhood beyond subjective experience, in the experience of an *other*' (pp. 1-2). The researcher contends that Coriolanus' shame, blush and linguistic abhorrence, which occur within the scope of the other, reveal his fantasy to distance himself from others so as to assert his sense of individuality. However, Shakespeare shows that individuality is centered on the acceptance of the other; Coriolanus progresses from his hostile relations with others into an intimate encounter with others.

Shame

Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* is a tragedy of shame that emerges from Coriolanus' consciousness of his body being an object to the gaze of others, that gives him the sense of being objectified and alienated from himself. Because the activity of looking inscribes relations between the self and the other as power relations between active subject and passive object, shame, a 'self-conscious emotion' (Fischer & Tangney, 1995), occurs when the self becomes an object to the gaze of the other. According to Sartre (2003), the look of the other 'makes me be beyond my being in this world and puts me in the midst of the world which is at once *this world* and beyond this world' (p. 285).Coriolanus wishes to be 'to shame unvulnerable' (5.3.73), showing, as he tells the senators, problematic aversion towards his bodily exposure to the public eyes: 'I cannot / Put on the gown, stand naked, and entreat them, / For my wounds' sake, to give their suffrage' (2.2.135-37). Fernie (2012) argues that 'there is something symptomatic in the protagonist's antipathy to nakedness and excessive sensitivity to the gaze of others' (p. 213). Coriolanus is confounded to realise that his body exists as an object for the other who challenges his fantasy that he is an 'author of himself / And knew no other kin' (5.3.36-37). Once Comenius delineates Coriolanus' heroic deeds, '*Coriolanus rises and offers to go away*' (2.2.63, original emphasis). That Coriolanus is experiencing a complex form of shame is made explicit as one of the senators retorts, 'Never shame to hear / What you have nobly done' (2.2.65-66). Coriolanus' shame is, therefore, exacerbated by the fact of 'being-for-others' (Sartre, 246) who have the ability to diminish his subjectivity. Coriolanus' feeling of shame, which creates the dramatic tension in the play, is manifested in his blushing, 'the physiological response to shame' (Velleman, 2001, p. 40).

Blushing

For female figures, blushing is a sign of virtue while for male figures, it is a metaphor for existential shame. While Sartre focuses on the negative construction of shame that arises from the conflict between the self and the other, shame has positive sides illuminated in the 'shame of the

blushing virgin characterising lovely warmth' (cited in Zahavi, 2011, p. 217). The virgin's blush, as Clark (1996) points out, was widely deployed in texts representing the Virgin Mary, the epitome of the feminine virtue of modesty and sexual purity (pp. 111-28). Hamlet's view that his mother's overhasty marriage to Claudius 'blurs the grace and blush of modesty'(3.4.40) reveals that female modesty is associated with 'grace and blush' that his mother loses thanks to her shameful, sexual desires. Coriolanus praises Valeria, a friend to Coriolanus' mother and his wife Virgilia, by calling attention to her blush as a manifestation of the feminine virtue of decency. He praises her as 'the moon of Rome, chaste as the icicle / That's candied by the frost from purest snow / And hangs on Diane's temple' (5.3.65-67). While Valeria's blush is a sign of the feminine virtue of modesty, Coriolanus' blush is a facial expression of existential shame. In response to the 'good addition' (I.9.70) to his identity after his victory over Coriolis, he says to the patricians and the plebeians: 'I will go wash. / And when my face is fair you shall perceive / Whether I blush or no' (I.9.67-69). Coriolanus is thoroughly agitated of blushing: 'It is a part / That I shall blush in acting, and might well / Be taken from the people' (2.2.144-46). His blushing before others suggests that, as Sartre (2003) puts it, he 'is vividly and constantly conscious of his body not as it is for him but as it is *for the Other*' (p. 376). In other words, Coriolanus is aware that his body is '*a thing outside [his] subjectivity*, in the midst of the world that is not [his]' (p. 376). Coriolanus' blush, an internal bleeding that rushes to his face, parallels '[t]he blood upon [his] visage' (I.9.93). That Coriolanus is 'a thing of blood' (2.2.107) is made clear in a number of stage directions: '*Enter Martius bleeding*' (1.4) and '*Enter Martius, bloody*' (1.6). Both blushing and bleeding challenge Coriolanus'individuality, revealing the erosion of his being towards the other that undermines the self-assertion and independence that he strives to maintain.

Bleeding

Coriolanus' bleeding wounds which serve as a visual representation of his memories as a soldier of Rome signal his masculinity and potential feminization. Volumnia,'the most noble mother of the world' (5.3.49), is proud of her son's wounds –'O, he is wounded, I thank the gods for't!' (2.1.118) – claiming that these wounds, which 'become him' (2.1.120), 'will be / large cicatrices to show the people when he shall stand / for his place' (2.1.143-45). While Volumnia associates words and blood with heroism, Coriolanus' wounds are problematic because they provide an opening into his body, destabilizing the sense of sovereignty and enclosure he strives to maintain. The wounds threaten Coriolanus' agency through their association with the leaking female grotesque body, marking out 'a shameful token of uncontrol' (Parker, 1993, p. 284). Coriolanus' wounds, which 'smart / to hear themselves remembered' (1.10.27-8), open like a speaking mouth and begin to bleed because they are talked about: 'if he show us his wounds and tell us his deeds, we are to put our tongues into those wounds and speak for them' (2.3.5-7). Coriolanus' antipathy towards, disgust of, bodily exposure emanates from his desire to maintain a classical body which is, closed and finished, created by his denial of the other in its own construction. However, the eyes and tongues of others push him to the sphere of the grotesque body which is 'open to the outside world' through its orifices, especially those of the 'material lower bodily stratum': genitalia, buttocks and anus (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 26, 21). That Coriolanus is aware that the other may read his wounds as a sign of grotesque body is manifested in his construction of his wounds as corporeal manifestations of power and vitality rather than impending death. His comment to Lartius, a Roman senator and fighter, that his blood 'is rather physical / Than dangerous to me'(1.5.17–18), suggests that he regards himself a divine being and, as Eugene M. Waith (1962) observed, his 'god–like' triumph over the Volscians 'borders on the supernatural' (p. 125). However, while

Coriolanus strives to detach his body from the public gaze, it becomes an object to the gaze of the other in the tragic closure as his body is borne in a public funeral marched by Aufidius (5.6.148-155).

Coriolanus denies the consciousness of the plebeians to transcend their freedom which poses a challenge to his freedom by degrading them and pushing them to the level of animals which lack a discourse of reason and whose chief purpose is to feed their bellies. Coriolanus' disregard for his body and his abhorrence of food and feeding are in a sheer contrast to the citizens whom Coriolanus denounced as 'musty superfluity' (1.1.221), 'noisome musty chaff' (5.1.26) and a 'herd' (3.1.34). Coriolanus emphasises the corporeality of the Romans—'Bid them wash their faces / And keep their teeth clean' (2.3.61–62)—considering that they, ruled by their mouths and bellies, should be excluded from the public sphere of politics. While Coriolanus cannot renounce his bodily need (5.1.50, 5.2.35-36), as Stanley Cavell (1985) puts it, 'what he incessantly hungers for is […] not to hunger, and not to desire, that is, not to be mortal' (p. 249). Volumnia's 'disturbing […] attitude towards feeding' (Adelman 1992, p. 148) is reiterated by Coriolanus who 'persistently regards food as poisonous' (Adelman 1992, p. 149). Coriolanus' disdain for his body raises the possibility that he harbours a death wish, as substantiated by his call upon the Volscians to 'Cut me to pieces, Volsces men and lads; / Stain all your edges on me' (5.6.112–13).

The Eloquence of Action

Coriolanus is a tragedy of language riddled with images of mouths, ears, tongues and breath. However, despite the tragedy's reiterative focus on language, Coriolanus derides words and shows problematic antagonism to language. The play opens by drawing attention to speech, as the Citizens urge one of them to 'Speak, speak' (1.1.2) to exhort his fellow citizens to assault Coriolanus, and the play concludes, once Coriolanus is killed by the Volscians, with Aufidius ordering that a drum be beaten so 'that it speak mournfully' (5.6.151). Alexander Leggatt (1988) argues that Coriolanus is 'remarkably shrewd, articulate, and quick-thinking,' adding that 'he is also alert to the exact significance of words' (p. 201). While Coriolanus is articulate, his outspokenness shows his distrust of language. Shakespeare's description of Coriolanus as 'ill-schooled / In bolted language' (3.1.323-24) suggests that he is not good at using the manipulative function of language.

Coriolanus embodies his mother's instructed belief that 'Action is eloquence' (3.2.76). Sicherman (1972) argues that 'Coriolanus and Cordelia have one trait: both reject formal public utterance' (p. 189). In Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1603), Cordelia defies her father's demand of flattery asserting that truth and goodness is associated with action not empty words (I.1.90-92, 224). As Hamamra (2016) notes, contrary to the conventional association of silence with obedience and submission, Cordelia's silence is 'subversive' and it is a sign of 'a threatening female agency', for it 'undermines Lear's game of words' (p. 32). In *Coriolanus* female silence is figured out as a sign of submission while Coriolanus' silence (like that of Cordelia) is associated with action and strength. Coriolanus praises his wife Virgilia as his 'gracious silence' (2.1.170). Yet, he figures out his own silence as a critique of words as opposed to actions, proclaiming to Brutus: 'oft / When blows have made me stay I fled from words' (2.2.69-70).While Virgilia's silence is demure, his silence, which is incompatible with the political domain, renders him disqualified for public office: 'It then remains / That you do speak to the people'(2.2.133), says Menenius, a father figure to Coriolanus, reminding Coriolanus that military action should be substantiated by rhetoric in the Roman world of politics. Menenius and Volumnia attempt to persuade Coriolanus

to deploy an artistic Machiavellian hypocrisy (like that of Menenius who flatters them despite of his despise of them) so as to persuade the citizens to approve his position as consul. However, unlike Menenius who greets the plebeians as 'friends' (1.1.60), Coriolanus uses animal imagery (1.1.156-157) to address and castigate their inferiority. While Coriolanus' mother advises him to use the mechavillian rhetoric of flattery (III.ii.57), Coriolanus detaches himself from such manipulative discourse which suggests that he is an object to the needs of the other (2.1.197-98, 3.3.89-91). While Hamlet is a man of inactivity and words, Coriolanus is a man of actions. Coriolanus chooses either silence or 'the unambiguous expressive power of his sword' (Calderwood, 1995, p. 81), fashioning himself as a soldier whose dexterity on the battlefield does not augment to the sphere of eloquence.

The Otherness of Language

Coriolanus' abhorrence of speech and listening emanates from the fact that language is a site of otherness; language is an impure substance that moves from the mouth of the speaker to the ear of the listener in a process of circulation where one repeats what is spoken. Coriolanus disdains speech, for it entails his articulation what he aurally receives from the tongues of others. Cavell (1987) aptly points out that

> A pervasive reason Coriolanus spits out words is exactly that they are words, that they exist only in a language, and that a language is metaphysically something shared, so that speaking is taking and giving in your mouth the very matter others are giving and taking in theirs (p.165).

Cavell's conception of Coriolanus' spitting out his words that enter through the mouth and circulate through the interior body brings to the surface the anality (anus) that is embedded in the protagonist's name, Coriolanus. Cavell (1987) argues that Coriolanus' 'disgust is a function of imagining that in incorporating one another we are asked to incorporate one another's leavings, the results or wastes of what has already been incorporated' (p. 169). In addition to his abhorrence of speech, the uncanny breath of otherness, Coriolanus strives to fortify his ears against speech which is, moving from speaker's mouth, through air, and into the listeners' ears, makes it open to affliction (Bloom, 2007). This interpretation is substantiated by Coriolanus' denouncement of the Plebeians as 'curs whose breath I hate / As reek o' th' rotten fens' (3.3.119-20), implying that their speech– 'As the dead carcasses of unburied men, / That do corrupt my air' (3.3.121-22) – has the ability to contaminate his ears and body. Unlike Hamlet and Othello who seek transcendence through discourse and who are immersed in storytelling, Coriolanus refuses to acknowledge the words and opinions of others, wishing that they forgot him (2.3.56-58). However, Coriolanus' desire to have his life story forgotten is frustrated, for Aufidius tells it in the tragic closure, making Coriolanus, in death, an object to his words (5.6.149-155).

Coriolanus objectifies the other in order to preserve his subjectivity which is based on controlling the other's image of him. He assaults the Roman citizens to denigrate their right to voice their opinions of him (1.1.159-61), claiming, as Fish (1976) notes, that dignity can only be 'bestowed by himself on himself. That is what grieves him, the ignominy [...] of submitting himself to the judgment of anyone' (p. 991). While Coriolanus' linguistic and social impotence makes him the'chief enemy to the people' (1.1.6-7), he responds to his banishment with an illusion of domination – 'I banish you!' (3.3.122) –'declar[ing] himself outside (or, more properly, above) the system of rules by which society fixes its values'(Fish, 1980, p. 202). He seeks'a world elsewhere' (3.3.134) and intends to 'fight / against my cankered country with the spleen / Of all the under-

fiends' (IV.v.92-94). Thus, as Walker (1992) argues, Coriolanus' cutting himself off from others and his abhorrence of speech is 'a contempt for linear time and a desire to live in a single transcendent moment, such as the moment of violence' (p. 171). In Coriolis, he pushes himself to the erratic power of gods.As Cominius says,'[h]e is their god. He leads them like a thing / Made by some other deity than nature / That shapes man better' (4.6.91-93). Menenius thinks that Coriolanus' 'nature is too noble for this world' (III.i.255). However, when Coriolanus turns against Rome, he becomes 'a kind of nothing, titleless' (5.1.13).

The Reciprocal Relationship between the Self and the Other

While Coriolanus creates his sense of subjectivity by opposing the Plebeians, he confirms his individuality by likeness to his enemy, Aufidius: 'I sin in envying his nobility, / And were I anything but what I am, / I would wish me only he' (1.1.225-27). Aufidius remarks: 'I would I were a Roman, for I cannot, / Being a Volsce, be that I am' (1.10.4-5). Adelman (1992) suggests that 'the noble Aufidius is Coriolanus' own invention, a reflection of his own doubts about what he is, an expression of what he would wish himself to be' (p. 156). The conflict between the self and the other as illuminated in the problematic relationship between Coriolanus and Aufidius collapses into a complex form of identification and a conflict between the self and the self. Coriolanus, who turns a deaf ear to the praise of others, is dependent on Aufidius' words to consolidate his identity (1.1.228-30) and seeks Aufidius' opinion of him; 'Spoke he of me?' (3.1.12) reveals his dependence on Aufidius to confirm his subjectivity. Coriolanus' dependence on the other to confirm his identity anticipates Sartre's philosophy that the other is the image of the self. While the other limits one's freedom by objectifying one's self, Sartre (2003) says, 'I need the Other in order to fully realise the structures of my being' (p. 295).

Coriolanus' fashioning of his identity results in the assimilation of the other that questions his initial self-sufficient identity. Coriolanus is merely acting out a role in a play whose real author is not him, but his mother, and in which his authorship does not assert but thoroughly disintegrates his identity. Sartre (1945) states that people are 'condemned to be free' (p. 5) and to make choices that define and justify their existence. However, while Coriolanus regards himself as an 'author of himself' (5.3.36), his identity is formed by his mother, whose 'praises made thee first a soldier' (3.2.109), and who suckled him to 'spit forth blood'(1.3.43). Coriolanus' verbal and marital aggression emanates from his desire 'to please his mother' (1.1.35-36), the agent of his heroic construction and 'the honoured mould / Wherein this trunk was framed' (5.3.23). Coriolanus' 'bloody [martial] heroics' (Adelman 1992, 146) are 'constructed in response to maternal power' (p. 146). While subjectivity is associated with speech, Coriolanus is not the subject who masters language, but he is the instrument of his mother who articulates his words – 'Methinks I see him stamp thus, and call thus' (1.3.34) –and performs the role she has fashioned for him: 'Come on, you cowards, you were got in fear / Though you were born in Rome!' (1.3.35-36). Belsey (1985) asserts that '[t]o be a subject is to speak, to identify with the 'I' of an utterance, to be the agent of the action inscribed in the verb' (p. 15). In reiterating his mother's words and playing the role she prescribes for him, his heroic identity is discontinuous and questionable. Voluminia and Rome are associated with each other, for she signifies Rome and Roman identity. The state which creates him the 'epitome of Roman cultivation' (Miles, 1996, p. 156) is associated with his maternal mother as manifested in Menenius' remark that she 'is worth of consuls, senators, patricians, / A city full; of tribunes such as you, / A sea and land full' (5.4.53-55). While Coriolanus bears his wounds and voice for his civil and maternal mothers, his refusal to show the

Romans his wounds and his resistance to subsume his voice to that of Rome suggests his defiance of the system of which he is a product.

Coriolanus' attempt to assert an 'absolute unsocial identity, undetermined by social relations' (Lowe, 1986, p. 94) fails when yields to his mother's logic of shame that she deployed to curtail his desire to destroy Rome. Coriolanus seems impervious to change: 'And I am constant' (1.1.234), he vociferates. 'You keep a constant temper' (5.2.93), Aufidius says when Coriolanus resists the allurements of Comenius and Menenius. However, in response to his mother's kneeling and tears and'annihilating rhetoric' (Berry, 1973, p. 311), he 'melt[s]' as he is not of 'stronger earth than others'(5.3.28-29), declaring, 'Sink, my knee, i' the earth' (5.3.50). Coriolanus' shameful acknowledgement of his family – 'let us shame him with our knees' (5.3.169) – signals his return to his authentic self when he sees that his stand against Rome is solely role-playing (5.3.40-42). While Coriolanus renounces all family ties (5.2.81), he ends up holding his mother's hand, child-like, accepting his m/other as a part of his self image and assertion.

Coriolanus is forced to acknowledge his mother, as indicated by the stage direction: '*He holds her by the hand, silent*' (5.3). Adelman (1992) notes that:

> Volumnia had once before brought Coriolanus to submission by reminding him of himself as a suckling child (3.2.129); now virtually her last words enforce his identification with the child that she holds by the hand [...]. But at the same time she reminds him of his dependency, she disowns him by disclaiming her parenthood [...].
> Just as his child entered the scene holding Volumnia's hand, so Coriolanus againbecomes a child, holding his mother's hand (p. 161).

Holding hands is a powerful symbol of unity, mutual respect and love. In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), Juliet says to Romeo that the subtle way of articulating love is to hold one another's hands: 'For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch, / And palm to palm is holy palmer's kiss' (1.5.96-97). In this respect, Shakespeare contradicts Sartre (2003), who focuses on the otherness manifested in the action of touching and being touched: 'I see my hand touching objects, but do not *know* it in the act of touching them. [...]. For my hand reveals to me the resistance of objects, their hardness or softness, but not *itself*' (p. 328). Coriolanus' touching hand feels the smooth texture of his mother's touched hand, which is a silent expression and affirmation of his mutual relationship with his m/other. While Coriolanus is threatened by the existence of the other, his subsequent mutual relationship with others confirms Beauvoir's words that there is a 'bond of each man with all others' and that 'no existence can be validly fulfilled if it is limited to itself. It appeals to the existence of others' (Beauvoir, 1976, pp. 70, 67). While Coriolanus earlier sees the other as a threatening force to his subjectivity, he now responds to his m/other, putting the lives of his mother, wife and son before his. Coriolanus' claim that his mother's actions are 'most mortal to him' (5.3.189) suggests that he will sacrifice himself to avert the tragedy of Rome as his mother fashions his role: 'I had rather had eleven die nobly for their country than one voluptuously surfeit out of action' (1.3.24-5). As Leggatt (1988) argues, Coriolanus saves Rome from Volsces, even though he is aware that his reconciliation with the Romans will lead to his death: 'All he can do is provoke his own death, leaving us to wonder if the provocation is fully conscious or not. He attacks Coriolis; he attacks Rome; and finally he tears himself apart' (p. 214). In ordering Aufidius and his men to cut him into pieces, Coriolanus chooses to immortalize himself as a roman soldier. Aufidius' talk of Coriolanus' impending death –'served his designments / In mine own person, holp to reap the fame / Which he did end all his' (5.6.34-36) – reveals Coriolanus' reap of immortality through his submission to the code of

sacrifice that Rome demands of its citizens. Coriolanus' loss of his self for others is a repossession of the self; his subjectivity is enhanced by his experience of self-cancellation.

Conclusion

The author argued that Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* prefigures the existentialist trends of authenticity, self-assertion, alienation, shame, blush, bleeding, antipathy to the otherness embodied in discourse, the gaze of the other and the conflict between the self and the other. The researcher has pointed out that *Coriolanus* undermines the view that subjectivity is based on a unified, autonomous identity; Volumnia and Rome are mighty forces that fight against Coriolanus' fantasy of individuality and independence, revealing that he is the effect rather than the cause of the subjectivity that he aspires to attain and maintain. While Coriolanus' identity is based on the negation of the other that poses a challenge to his authorship of the self, he ends up incorporating the other as a crucial part of his self assertion which is based, paradoxically, on a disintegration of the self. Coriolanus chooses to avert the tragedy of Rome at the expense of his life, negating his body to affirm his heroic identity.

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