

Coriolanus

INTRODUCTION

FOR *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare turned once more to Roman history as told by Plutarch and translated by Sir Thomas North in the *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* published in 1579. This time he dramatized early events, not much subsequent to those he had written about many years previously in *The Rape of Lucrece*. Plutarch gave him most of his material, but he also drew on other writings, including William Camden's *Remains of a Greater Work Concerning Britain*, published in 1605, for Menenius' fable of the belly (1.1). Though he needed no source other than Plutarch for the insurrections and corn riots of ancient Rome, similar happenings in England during 1607 and 1608 may have stimulated his interest in the story. The cumulative evidence suggests that *Coriolanus*, first printed in the 1623 Folio, is Shakespeare's last Roman play, written around 1608.

In the fifth century bc, following the expulsion of the Tarquins, Rome was an aristocratically controlled republic in which power was invested primarily in two annually elected magistrates, or consuls. For many years the main issues confronting the republic were the internal class struggle between patricians and plebeians, and the external struggle for domination over neighbouring peoples. Among the republic's early enemies were the Volsci (or Volscians), who inhabited an area to the south and south-east of Rome; their towns included Antium and Corioli. According to ancient historians, Rome's greatest leader in campaigns against the Volsci was the patrician Gnaeus (or Caius) Marcius, who, at a time of famine which caused the plebeians to rebel against the patricians, led an army against the Volsci and captured Corioli; as a reward he was granted the cognomen, or surname, of Coriolanus. After this he is said to have been charged with behaving tyrannically in opposing the distribution of corn to starving plebeians, and as a result to have abandoned Rome, joined the Volsci, and led a Volscian army against his native city.

This is the story of conflict between public and private issues that Shakespeare dramatizes, concentrating on the later part of Plutarch's Life

and speeding up its time-scheme, while also alluding retrospectively to earlier incidents. He increases the responsibility of the Tribunes, Sicinius Velutus and Junius Brutus, for Coriolanus' banishment, and greatly develops certain characters, such as the Volscian leader Tullus Aufidius and the patrician Menenius Agrippa. The roles of the womenfolk are almost entirely of Shakespeare's devising up to the scene (5.3) of their embassy; here, as in certain other set speeches, Shakespeare draws heavily on the language of North's translation.

Coriolanus is an austere play, gritty in style, deeply serious in its concern with the relationship between personal characteristics and national destiny, but relieved by flashes of comedy (especially in the scenes in which Coriolanus begs for the plebeians' votes in his election campaign for the consulship) which are more apparent on the stage than on the page. Though Coriolanus is arrogant, choleric, and self-centered, he is also a blazingly successful warrior, conspicuous for integrity, who ultimately yields to a tenderness which, he knows, will destroy him. *Coriolanus* is a deeply human as well as a profoundly political play.