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**“A Few Dishonorable Men:”
Coriolanus, Henry V, and the Search for an
Honorable Character**

Sam Gates

The texts of Shakespeare’s plays offer a thematic web of intertextuality, an endless proliferation of connections between ideas which continues to defy the divides of time and place. Love, loyalty, worthiness, morality, glory: these large themes draw lines between characters and plots, with their author continuously questioning their validity. In particular, the concept of honor sits in the center of a thematic solar system, orbited by notions as seemingly diverse as manhood, violence, and nationalism. Yet just as he sets these celestial bodies in motion, Shakespeare also questions their existence, demonstrating the ultimately fallible nature of honor as well as many of its connecting ideals. As literature moves forward in this technological age, some Shakespeare adaptations to film capture the inevitably porous nature of honor, while others do not. Ralph Fiennes’ *Coriolanus*, for example, portrays a cold and cynical world in which honor cannot outlive corruption. On the other hand, Kenneth Branagh’s *Henry V* begins with promise, but eventually falls into the trap becoming a glorifying war movie, entirely missing Shakespeare’s nuanced criticism of the “honor of war.” In both films, the protagonists define honor through manhood, violence, and patriotism; Branagh’s *Henry V*, however, fails where *Coriolanus* succeeds—in seeing the search for honor as ultimately fruitless.

Of the themes I have highlighted which lie tangent to honor, manhood is perhaps the most apparent and ostentatious. Both *Henry V* and *Coriolanus*, the plays, feature protagonists vying for an appropriate display of manhood through “honorable” deeds. Only Fiennes’ film, however, reads such acts of machismo with both Shakespeare’s subtle undermining of honor as an ideal, as well as a postmodernist understanding of gender and feminism. Despite *Coriolanus* representing the epitome of the alpha male, Fiennes’ film taps into the complexity that the text imposes on gender. *Coriolanus* largely separates Rome into gendered spheres, with *Coriolanus*’ world on the battlefield and *Virgilia*’s world in the home signifying the extremes of the male and female worlds. Throughout the play it is made clear that *Coriolanus* “the Man” is equated only with *Coriolanus* “the Soldier.” He is a great warrior because he is able to dominate the masculine sphere:

Thou wast a soldier
Even to Cato's wish, not fierce and terrible
Only in strokes; but, with thy grim looks and
The thunder-like percussion of thy sounds,
Thou madst thine enemies shake, as if the world

Were feverous and did tremble.¹ *Coriolanus*’ honor remains intact where he thrives as the alpha male. In the political sphere, however, his hyper-masculinity is not enough to validate him as a politician, and his honor becomes questionable as his manhood falters. *Volumnia* urges her son to appeal to the common people as a fair and just politician, rather than as a

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soldier after he is banished from Rome: “Thou art their soldier, and being bred in broils / Hast not the soft way... I prithee now, sweet son, as thou hast said / My praises made thee first a soldier, so, / To have my praise for this, perform a part / Thou hast not done before” (III.ii.81). Volumnia (who herself conflates the gender binary) clearly associates the role of the warrior with manhood, but knows that her son’s masculinity is not sufficient to appease the citizens of Rome. Similarly, Coriolanus himself describes the role of the politician in metaphors injected with feminine imagery:

Away, my disposition, and possess me
Some harlot's spirit! my throat of war be turn'd,
Which quired with my drum, into a pipe
Small as an eunuch, or the virgin voice
That babies lulls asleep! (III.ii.111-115)

The alpha male begrudgingly recognizes that his hyper-masculinity is not adequate to the performance of his different roles. Fiennes’ film captures this well, juxtaposing the plight of Rome’s people with Coriolanus’ stoic masculinity. In particular, Fiennes’ red-faced performance at the trial refuses to deny Coriolanus’ nature as an alpha male, while demonstrating that this masculinity cannot win back the trust or liking of the starving Roman citizens, nor preserve his honor in the public eye. Coriolanus’ honor cannot be maintained because his manhood is compromised.

Additionally, the film makes evident how Menenius and Volumnia complicate the idea of manhood and

thus unintentionally undermine Coriolanus' honor. Menenius spends the film in suits, in contrast to Coriolanus' usual uniform or fatigues, and is the representation of the politician role that Coriolanus fails to fulfill. He, like Volumnia, encourages Coriolanus to be less of an alpha male warrior and more a man of the people as Coriolanus faces banishment. Menenius acts as a foil to Coriolanus, and as a less extreme version of manhood, whose advice seeks to improve Coriolanus' image as a politician, but works against his hyper-masculine nature. Because Coriolanus defines his honor through his masculinity, Menenius' advice as a character who breaks the gender binary undermines Coriolanus' honor. Similarly, Volumnia compromises Coriolanus' honor by acting as a personification of gender confusion—a woman and a mother unnaturally imbued with the hardness of a man. In the audience's first encounter with Volumnia, she professes “had I a dozen sons, each in my love / alike and none less dear than thine and my good / Marcius, I had rather had eleven die nobly for their / country than one voluptuously surfeit out of action” (*Coriolanus*, I.iii.18-21). Despite being a mother figure, Volumnia clearly endorses the image of the alpha male warrior that Coriolanus embodies, and believes that honor can be earned only through demonstrations of stoic masculinity. In the film, Vanessa Redgrave delivers a chilling performance, a blood-thirsty woman who would rather see her son die than risk his honor. The film portrays this, again, through costuming. Volumnia contrasts with the much more feminine Virgilia, often wearing pants instead of dresses and once appearing in

uniform next to her son. She at once acts as mother and warrior, both nurturing and violent. Fiennes especially allows Volumnia to cross gender boundaries when she begs Coriolanus not to attack Rome. She speaks of peace rather than of war, and asks her son to give up his role as an alpha male in favor of a role of appeasement. Yet such a request is the very thing that ultimately undermines Coriolanus' honor in Audifius' eyes. In the film, Coriolanus falls to his knees and sobs in his mother's arms, and we see her both as a peacemaker and a mother willing to sacrifice her own son. By comforting her son, Volumnia robs him of his manhood, and furthermore of his honor.

Similar to Coriolanus, Henry V often fills the role of the masculine warrior. Henry's actions, however, ultimately question the idea of manhood as honor, and can be seen to undermine the concept of the chivalrous and honorable hero. The film fails to recognize this, and in doing so, paints Henry as unquestionably honorable and painfully one-dimensional. Branagh's *Henry V* laces the protagonists' honor with an assumed sense of being a man's man, a war hero who pays his dues on the battlefield and in turn is deemed honorable. The plot of *Henry V* is, inevitably, concerned with Henry's honor, manhood, and right to the throne simultaneously. No one of these central ideas exists without leveraging the other two. Indeed, who is a king who is not a man, and what is a man who hasn't proven his masculinity and his right to rule. The beauty of the play, however, lies in the eventual fragility of these notions. As written, the battle of Agincourt is just as Branagh depicts it—glorious, bloody, the model of proven worthiness.

Branagh as Henry fights his fair share in a field of bloodied men, and emerges from the fray as a noble, honorable king—a king who's proven his right to rule. This, however, is precisely where the film fails to capture the full picture of Henry's honor. Despite having won France, Henry's right to the English throne is still in question at the end of the play, and the same doubts plague Henry that plagued his father. If Bolingbrook could simply seize the throne from a king endorsed by a divine right, what would keep Bolingbrook from being deposed himself? In a metadramatic sense, the actors who strut about the stage and parade as kings differ little from those who usurp a king by putting on a crown. And, indeed, Henry the victor has no more right to inherit a usurped throne than he did at the beginning of the play. Because Henry's manhood is distinctly tied to his right to rule, his masculinity remains off-balance even following his heroic victory on the battlefield.

In particular, Fluellen ties Henry's manhood to his honor in the final scene with the glove, and in doing so, brings it up as a point of contention. Fluellen asks the King to kill Williams, reasoning, "Your Majesty, hear now, saving your Majesty's manhood, what an arrant, rascally, beggarly, lousy knave it is."²² The reference is brief and easily overlooked, but the distinct use of the word "manhood" ties Henry's masculinity to his treatment of Williams and how he decides Williams' fate. As Henry breaks his promise to duel Williams and pardons a man who spoke against the King, the scene is ultimately one of confusion and ambiguity, and one which demonstrates that Henry's honor is still in

question. Branagh cut the scene from his film, choosing to portray Henry as a man consistently honorable and “manly” in his actions. The truth of Shakespeare’s character, however, is that his honor is porous and his manhood under constant threat.

Furthermore, Henry’s manhood and honor are necessarily tied to a sense of chivalry, and his treatment of women. Despite the “honor” Henry shows on the battlefield, his treatment of women is ultimately inconsistent, and the women of the play are subjected to both cultural and physical violence. Branagh, however, invariably presents Henry as the image of knight-like chivalry, uncomplicated by either the nuances of Shakespeare’s character or by modern feminist influences. In this way, the film fails to see Henry as a full-bodied and complex character who encounters feminist thought in the modern world. Being the good soldier that he is, Henry does not interact directly with women in the play until after the battle is won. One of Henry’s first mentions of the opposite sex occurs at the siege of Harfleur, during which he treats the notion of the female body less than chivalrously: “What is’t to me, when you yourselves are cause, / If your pure maidens fall into the hand / Of hot and forcing violation?” (III.iii.96-98). Henry threatens to rape and kill the innocent while working to conquer the land of his future wife. Meanwhile, Katherine exists in the play, really, no differently than the land Henry fights for, and the French women his soldiers rape. She is presented merely as a sum of her physical parts, a sexualized body, and a spoil of war; she is objectified in all senses of the term, a collection of named appendages. Henry

approaches her with words of love which, according to Branagh, he delivers in earnest. What Branagh's film fails to recognize, however, is the underlying violence inherent in treating Katherine as an earned reward, given to one who strips her of her language, no less. The same Henry who spilt French blood on (until that moment) French soil, bids the French princess "love me soundly with / your French heart, I will be glad to hear you / confess it brokenly with your English tongue" (V.ii.104-106). Pronouncing her love for the English king robs Katherine of her language, and Henry imposes his Englishness on her as he did the French battlefield. In the end, Shakespeare is acknowledging the paradox of honor defined through manhood. Henry is honorable as a soldier threatening rape, but also as a king vying for the princess' love. The two images are incompatible, and while Henry may have been considered honorable by the standards of his own era, the text demonstrates that those standards are ultimately contradictory, and honor is ultimately fallible. Branagh's interpretation of the text on film, however, overlooks the frailty of honor, and in doing so does disservice to the complexity of the character.

Lying tangent to the concept of manhood, violence also often accompanies a character's search for honor. Branagh's film glorifies the violence in Henry's world as honorable, and again overlooks the critique of "honorable war" that the text pursues. The problem, perhaps, is not violence itself, but Henry's inability to recognize the effect of war and violence on others. To return to Henry's relationship with Princess Katherine, for example, Henry does not recognize how the violence

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he showed toward the French is violence against Katherine herself. One particular passage from Henry and Katherine's meeting highlights this, when Henry says,

No; it is not possible you should love the enemy of
France, Kate: but, in loving me, you should love
The friend of France; for I love France so well that
I will not part with a village of it; I will have it
All mine: and, Kate, when France is mine and I am
Yours, then yours is France and you are mine.
(V.ii.164-168)

Kenneth Branagh croons these lines lovingly at his new bride, and in doing so makes them out to *be* loving. The danger in this is that it overlooks the violence of Henry's actions and in turn his violence toward Katherine. Henry surely could have been sincere in what he said, but Branagh overlooks the inherent conflict between Henry's words toward Katherine and his actions toward France. Moreover, as a modern day interpretation of the play, Branagh's film fails to acknowledge how feminism now interacts with the text, as well as how Shakespeare himself was criticizing Henry and his willingness to resort to violence. Henry searches for honor through such violence without acknowledging the contradiction this violence creates.

The connection between Henry's quest for honor and violence is perhaps most apparent in the St. Crispin's Day speech. The most famous speech from *Henry V* promises the English soldiers glory, that they may speak proudly of how they endured the violence of

war. The tradeoff for violence is recognition—or, at least, that is what Henry tells his men. In these moments, violence *is* honor. The most glaring moment, however, of Henry's disregard for the effect of violence on others, is when the names of the dead are read after the battle, and Henry breaks his promise. He famously avows that "he to-day that sheds his blood with me / Shall be my brother," and assures the men that, no matter their class, they shall all be remembered (IV.iii.61-62). When the men's names are read after the battle, however, the only dead reported are "Edward the Duke of York, the Earl of Suffolk, / Sir Richard Ketly, Davy Gam, esquire: / None else of name; and of all other men / But five and twenty" (IV.viii.97-100). In this moment, the men are not enough to be named; they are not soldiers, but merely victims of Henry's violence. Branagh delivered these lines as a grief-stricken king without recognizing their inherent hypocrisy. Violence remains honorable for Henry in the film, regardless of how honor is taken from others. At the end of the battle, Henry carries a dead messenger boy across the field to the tune of a triumphant hymn, and the boy becomes a symbol not of the innocent lost in battle, but of the English victory. Branagh's Henry becomes a God-like ruler and war hero, and loses the perspective of seeing violence through a critical lens. In short, Branagh's Henry remains impenetrably honorable where Shakespeare's Henry did not.

Fiennes' *Coriolanus*, in contrast, presents the violence of war as senseless, and demonstrates that honor cannot be won through violence. By modernizing the play, Fiennes brings Coriolanus' wartime tactics

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into a familiar world where war is not so readily taken as honorable. Unlike the glorious war scenes of *Henry V*, *Coriolanus* features soldiers inching through deserted cities amidst clouds of bouncing bullets. The soldiers' deaths are numb, fast, and meaningless, and the audience gets the sense that nothing is really being gained from the battles, which resemble that of Iraq or Syria. Volumnia speaks of the war as a thing of honor: "the senate / has letters from the general, wherein he gives my / son the whole name of the war: he hath in this / action outdone his former deeds doubly," but the film is able to read the text critically, and to examine the violence of the play as something superfluous (*Coriolanus*, II.i.120-123). Once again, the audience sees that Coriolanus' skills as a brilliant general are not enough to validate his image as a politician, and the violence he pursues in battle cannot salvage his honor. Ultimately, Coriolanus going against his own nature and choosing to be nonviolent cannot save even his life. Coriolanus himself touches on this contradiction early on in the play: "What would you have, you curs, / That like nor peace nor war? the one affrights you, / The other makes you proud" (I.i.157-159). He recognizes that, in the public eye, no good comes out of either war or peace. Indeed, after winning the battle at Corioli, Coriolanus' violent victory on the battlefield is not enough to win the approval of Rome's citizens (mirroring Coriolanus' difficulty with the identity as an alpha male.) Simultaneously, vying for peace rather than violence when Coriolanus decides not to attack Rome with Aufidius proves equally as problematic, and leads to Coriolanus' death. The general cannot satisfy

the desire for both war and peace, and as a warrior groomed to resort to violence he finds that neither is able to win him honor.

As with any tragic hero's death, Coriolanus faces a moment of realization when confronted with his oncoming demise; he recognizes that his reflex to launch a violent counter-attack on Rome after being banished leads not to redemption or honor, but merely to death. This moment of realization is portrayed particularly well in the film, as Ralph Fiennes as Coriolanus falls to his knees in supplication, weeping as he acknowledges the inevitability of his own death:

O mother, mother!

What have you done? Behold, the heavens do ope,

The gods look down, and this unnatural scene

They laugh at. O my mother, mother! O!

You have won a happy victory to Rome;

But, for your son,--believe it, O, believe it,

Most dangerously you have with him prevail'd,

If not most mortal to him. But, let it come.

Aufidius, though I cannot make true wars,

I'll frame convenient peace. (V.iii.183-192)

Coriolanus faces his fate as a broken man, who defaults for the first time to “convenient peace” when he “cannot make true wars.” Fiennes’ performance is powerful and perceptive, as he weeps neither as a violent warrior nor as a peacemaking politician, but as a man whose honor cannot be salvaged by either war or peace. Moreover, the film demonstrates that even in death violence does not beget honor. After being killed by Aufidius’

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conspirators, Coriolanus' body is thrown into a road, abandoned without nobility or grace, and the screen fades to black. The final, lasting image of the movie encapsulates Shakespeare's commentary on the violence of war, and the fruitless pursuit of honor through violence. Despite Coriolanus' great military prowess, and his hopes of preserving his honor by facing death head-on, he is left in the street, dishonored by his enemy and his own people.

In addition to manhood and violence, both Henry V and Coriolanus search for honor through acts of patriotism or nationalism. Both plays, however, ultimately undermine the very concept of nationalism and furthermore the concept of honor. *Coriolanus* largely does this through the general's shifting political and military alliances, and Fiennes' film demonstrates how Coriolanus' national identity cannot survive. Following citizens through the streets of Rome at the beginning of the movie mirrors Coriolanus' journey into Volscian territory. Although the interiors of Coriolanus' and Aufidius' worlds differ, the view from the streets is quite similar, suggesting that it is difficult to distinguish between the two. The film also capitalizes on showing the relationship between Aufidius and Coriolanus first as one of absolute opposition and then as one of friendship. The initial fight between the two generals is hand-to-hand, face-to-face; it is personal, fit into close quarters, and very physical. Similarly, the men share a moment when Aufidius accepts Coriolanus as an ally that hinges on the homoerotic (both in the text and on film):

...here I clip
The anvil of my sword, and do contest
As hotly and as nobly with thy love
As ever in ambitious strength I did
Contend against thy valour...
Thou noble thing! more dances my rapt heart
Than when I first my wedded mistress saw
Bestride my threshold. (IV.v.108-117)

Both interactions are intimate moments between the two men, blurring the line between Coriolanus' treatment of his allies and his enemies and, furthermore, the allies and enemies of Rome. In the mere act of allying himself with Aufidius and against Rome, Coriolanus confuses his national identity as a Roman. He himself admits, when confronted by his mother after joining with Aufidius, "These eyes are not the same I wore in Rome" (V.iii.37). He no longer fights for Rome, but exists in a limbo of homelessness. Banished from his country and robbed of his nationality, despite his numerous battles fought in the name of patriotism, Coriolanus finds the concept of nationality unstable, and he no longer fights for honor in the eyes of Rome.

To return once more to Coriolanus' confrontation with his mother, Volumnia demonstrates how undermining Coriolanus' national identity also puts his values at odds with one another. While Coriolanus prepares to strike at Rome, Volumnia reminds him that

...we must lose
The country, our dear nurse, or else thy person,

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Our comfort in the country. We must find
An evident calamity, though we had
Our wish, which side should win: for either thou
Must, as a foreign recreant, be led
With manacles thorough our streets, or else
Triumphantly tread on thy country's ruin,
And bear the palm for having bravely shed
Thy wife and children's blood. (V.iii.110-119)

In compromising his own nationality, Coriolanus also compromises that of his mother, wife, and son. If his attack on Rome succeeds, he destroys his family and his former home. If it fails, he must die as a traitor to Rome, and if he surrenders he betrays the only alliance he has. No matter what the outcome, he is still banished, still a homeless refugee without a nationality to protect. This comes to a head as Ralph Fiennes falls to his knees and weeps for the loss of his national identity. When Coriolanus is killed, his body is thrown into the street, exiled and forgotten, without a home, and without honor.

Henry V similarly conflates the idea of national identity, but Branagh's film depicts Henry straightforwardly, as a national hero rather than as a young king struggling with rulership. The film's tennis balls scene does show Henry's struggle trying to prove himself as a ruler, but once the characters get onto the battlefield the film deviates from the tone of the text, and becomes nostalgic and patriotic, no longer questioning Henry's legitimacy, or his nationality. For example, in the text Henry converses with Fluellen after the battle, and touches on his Welsh ancestry. In reality,

this would have been a point of contention for the king, whose right to rule was still in question. The film presents this scene as a moment of patriotism for Henry, who proudly announces his Welsh heritage. This is certainly a viable interpretation of the text, but it does nothing to speak to how Henry's Welsh heritage connects to the dissensions among his soldiers, or how it contradicts with the English patriotism so keenly felt throughout the rest of the movie. Conversations between Gower, Pistol, and Fluellen are largely cut from the film, minimizing the confusion of nationality that is present throughout the play. In particular, the scene where Fluellen forces Pistol to eat a raw leek (V.i) is missing from the film. The scene connotes rape imagery, and very clearly shows that, despite the English victory, not all Englishmen are equally English. When the scene is cut from the film, much of the subtext of Henry's Welsh ancestry is lost, and he can be presented as the unquestionably English king who has won an English war. Moreover, the film cut Henry's confrontation with Williams over the glove, which immediately follows Henry's conversation with Fluellen. During the scene Henry identifies Williams specifically as "an Englishman" (IV.vii.113). Within the context of understanding Henry's Welsh heritage, the confrontation becomes a symbolic showdown between Welsh and English identities. It demonstrates that there is still a war of national identity among Henry's citizens, and that being Welsh still affects Henry's validation as a king. Even though he won the battle for England, the text shows that Henry's own nationality is still in question, causing his honor to sit on shaky ground.

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Also, much like Coriolanus, when Henry allies with his former enemy and marries a Frenchwoman, he puts his nationality—and those of his future children—at further risk. Although he seeks glory and honor through a patriotic victory, Henry's own nationality refuses to be straightforward. The film, however, chooses to portray him as a proud Englishman, whose honor and rulership are unquestionable by the end of the film and, in this way, fails to grasp the nuance of the character and the text.

Branagh's *Henry V* presents the king as he is often presented: glorious and honorable, one of the great kings of history. The beauty of the play, however, is in the examination of Henry's flaws, and in the critique of honor itself. Fiennes' *Coriolanus* succeeds as a Shakespearean adaptation because it resists becoming a gladiator movie or a political thriller. It captures the complexity of violence, manhood, nationalism, and honor, and demonstrates well how the text ultimately undermines these concepts.

Notes

1. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), I.v.27-32.

2. William Shakespeare, *The Life of Henry the Fifth*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), IV.viii.31-32.

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