***Coriolanus***

1. i. Citizens, Menenius, Marcius [later Coriolanus], and Tribunes, on a street in Rome

ii. Senators and Aufidius, in Corioles

iii. Volumnia, Virgilia, and Valeria, in the home of Marcius

iv-x. Battle over Corioles, won by Marcius, hereafter styled Coriolanus

1. i. Menenius, Tribunes, Volumnia, Virgilia, and Coriolanus, in Rome

ii. The Senators elect Coriolanus consul, in the Capitol

iii. The Citizens elect Coriolanus consul, and the Tribunes foment rebellion

1. i. Senators and Patricians stay on stage all scene; Tribunes and then Citizens enter; Senators and Patricians brawl with Citizens; Coriolanus exits; Menenius speaks – on a street in Rome

ii. Coriolanus at home; Volumnia and then Menenius enter

iii. Coriolanus enters presence of Tribunes and Citizens at the Roman Forum

1. i. Coriolanus leaves Rome – scene is set at a city gate

ii. Tribunes versus Volumnia and Menenius, at gate

iii. Roman traitor and Volscian spy, halfway between Rome and Antium

iv. Coriolanus outside the home of Aufidius in Antium

v. Coriolanus inside the home of Aufidius

vi. Tribunes, joined first by Menenius and then by Citizens, in Rome

vii. Aufidius and lieutenant in their camp outside Rome

1. i. Tribunes and Menenius in Rome

ii. Menenius with the Roman Watch; Coriolanus with Aufidius, in camp

iii. Coriolanus with Aufidius; then with Volumnia, Valeria, Virgilia, and young Marcius, in camp

iv. Menenius and Tribunes, joined by a messenger, in Rome

v. Senators and ladies in Rome

vi. Aufidius; Conspirators; Lords; Coriolanus and commoners – in Corioles

Structure of Play

Act I shows Coriolanus alone and conquering.

Act II shows his Roman triumph.

Act III shows his Roman disgrace.

Act IV shows him planning vengeance.

Act V shows him alone and conquered.

Assessing the Character of Coriolanus

Coriolanus has physical courage, valor in combat, strength of body, and skill with weapons – in short, he is a hero. These are the only qualities of his that are universally praised by other characters in the play.

His other qualities are described differently, in the play and by the scholars, depending on who is talking: he has legitimate pride in himself, or he is haughty out of inappropriate pride; he is honest or tactless, honorably angered by mistreatment or scornful of others, consistent or stubborn, inconsistent or merciful . . . and his “unswayedness” (constancy and independence) may be a good or a bad quality.

Assessing the Effect of Context

Both Coriolanus’ behavior and his spectators’ responses to it are highly conditioned by the environment in which they occur. What he is and what he does in war may or may not be the same as what he is and what he does in peace, but in any case no one else’s judgment of him and his behavior stays the same from one context to another. Everyone in the play understands this phenomenon of situational judgment except Coriolanus; if we were to use Aristotle’s terms to discuss Shakespeare’s tragedies (not always a good idea), his ignorance of the effect of changing contexts would be Coriolanus’ fatal flaw.

Assessing the Play

Politically, this tragedy reveals that both the aristocracy and the mob are so faulty that neither is capable of governing well. Personally, the play examines relationships between mother and son, wife and husband, and comrades in arms. It is a very austere work, but it is also very powerful.

Assessing Historicity

From Shakespeare’s point of view, this is a historically factual play, closely based on Plutarch’s biography of Coriolanus. However, modern historians are skeptical of the factuality of Coriolanus himself; he is often described now as a legendary character.