

A Tale of Three Butterflies: Etymology and Entomology in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*

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### Introduction: An Insect, a Child, and a Man

Across twenty years and almost nine hundred thousand words, the word “butterfly” appears just seven times throughout William Shakespeare’s collected works.<sup>1</sup> The butterfly’s distribution, as well as frequency, displays a notable irregularity. The word first appears in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, where Titania commands her courtiers to attend to Bottom with all the care of nature: “And pluck the wings from Painted butterflies / To fan the moonbeams from his sleeping eyes: / Nod to him, elves, and do him courtesies.”<sup>2</sup> The subjects of violence, losing their wings to fan the flames of Titania’s misshapen ardor, these butterflies perish to serve the will of another. Two years later, the word reappears in *Troilus and Cressida* as a simile for humankind’s capricious affections, spoken by the greatest Greek warrior of them all, Achilles: “What the declined is / He shall as soon read in the eyes of others / As feel in his own fall; for men, like butterflies, / Show not their mealy wings but to the summer.”<sup>3</sup> In 1605, Lear immortalizes the butterfly in one of his most memorable speeches: “So we’ll live, / And

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<sup>1</sup> Aweinberg. "Shakespeare FAQ." Folger Shakespeare Library. February 12, 2018. Accessed May 09, 2018. <http://www.folger.edu/shakespeare-faq>.

<sup>2</sup> Shakespeare, William. "Search Results." Open Source Shakespeare: Search Shakespeare's Works, Read the Texts. Accessed May 09, 2018.

<https://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/search/search-results.php>. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, TLN 5.3. 3131-8. For the reader’s information, I will refer to Open Source Shakespeare as “OSS” going forward. For *Coriolanus*, I will refer to the Arden third edition; for others of Shakespeare’s plays, I will use the OSS for reference.

<sup>3</sup> *Troilus and Cressida*, OSS TLN 3.1.1948-51. This speech is essentially the ostensible moral of *Timon of Athens*, extracted from five acts and, anticipating it, distilling it into just a few eloquent lines. Why even write *Timon* after that? Perhaps Shakespeare’s later plays can be fruitfully seen as evolving commentaries on past issues, a phenomenon well-traced by scholars and certainly applicable to Shakespeare’s use of single words, “butterfly” especially.

pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh / At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues / Talk of court news...”<sup>4</sup>

These mentions, years apart from one another, yield to three more in *Coriolanus*, written just a short time after *Lear*. The word occurs four times in three separate places: in act 1, the matron Valeria tells of young Martius playing with a butterfly; in act 4, Cominius compares the zeal of Coriolanus’ approaching Volscian army to that of “boys pursuing summer butterflies, / Or butchers killing flies”; lastly, in act 5, upon returning in failure from a desperate peace-seeking mission Menenius solemnly compares Coriolanus to a butterfly grown from a lowly grub: “There is differency between a grub and a butterfly; / Yet your butterfly was a grub. This Coriolanus is grown / From man to dragon: he has wings; he's more than a / Creeping thing” (*Coriolanus*, IV-V, vi-iv, TLN 3130-2, 3740-3).

Upon further examination of Shakespeare’s use of “butterfly” in *Coriolanus* versus his previous works, several distinguishing characteristics emerge that enhance the word’s unusually prominent position in the play, strongly suggesting an artistic deliberation behind the word’s dramatic employment. The Oxford English Dictionary lists “butterfly” as a word bearing a historical frequency rating of approximately 1-10 occurrences within each million spoken or written words of English, a model that Shakespeare (7 times across 890,000 words) roughly follows – but in *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare decisively breaks with this model, using “butterfly” four times across 27,500 words, a ratio 18.4 times greater than his works as a whole, and 14.5 times greater than the word’s broader representation in the English

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<sup>4</sup> *King Lear*, OSS TLN 5.3.3134-7.

language.<sup>56</sup> The startling potency of the word “butterfly” in *Coriolanus* grows yet more resonant when evaluating it within its dramatic contexts. In act 1, Valeria’s story of young Martius and the butterfly provides a cryptic, visceral clue of the adult Martius’ upbringing; Cominius’ speech in act 4 contributes to a moment of great dramatic tension, as Rome braces for Coriolanus’ vengeful spirit; in act 5, Menenius’ despair thickens an already palpable atmosphere of panic in Rome. Shakespeare selected the butterfly to fulfill a specific rhetorical, symbolic, and dramatic purpose in his final tragedy – but what, and why did he do so? One of this project’s overarching goals is to uncover the butterfly’s embedded significance, applying that analysis to the scenes of *Coriolanus* in which it resides.

Ultimately, I will argue that the butterfly’s thematic significance as emblem of vulnerable youth and evolving metamorphosis is central to evaluating act 1 scene 3 of *Coriolanus*, especially Valeria’s story of young Martius playing with the butterfly. Because the adult Coriolanus is prominently compared to a butterfly twice elsewhere in the play, I assert that when young Martius plays with the butterfly, he simultaneously toys with a beautified insect and the ugly fate of his father, reflecting his susceptibility to the same pressures and nurturing forces that shaped his father’s personal development before him – Volumnia’s tyranny in particular. Following a systemic analysis of Valeria’s anecdote, I argue that the significance of young Martius’ actions lies not in eventually “mammocking” the butterfly, but in the thirty minutes of peaceful play preceding it, thereby pushing back on

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<sup>5</sup> Oxford English Dictionary entry, “butterfly”:  
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/25408?rskey=FOEkYr&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>.  
 The OED will serve as an important authority in my explorations of butterfly etymology, and will be called on for reference at various points going forward.

<sup>6</sup> If a ratio is made for Shakespeare’s total words minus those of *Coriolanus*, then this disparity becomes even more statistically significant – Shakespeare uses the word “butterfly” almost 40 times more often in *Coriolanus* than he does outside of it.

conventional interpretations of the scene. Finally, I will demonstrate that young Martius, contrary to Volumnia's bold pronouncements, actually possesses a sensitive, kind spirit – and the son's character provides a crucial glimpse into the father's own spirit at this young age, revealing that the older Caius Martius once originally possessed a tranquil spirit as well. This project is an exercise in character analysis disguised as an entomological study, an enormity of motif-tracing packed into a single scene-piercing spear – and the result, ideally, offers a persuasive explanation for the inclusion of Valeria's curious, and often deemed unnecessary, story of young Martius and Shakespeare's only living butterfly.

To locate the butterfly's importance in *Coriolanus*, I will trace the butterfly's heritage from two perspectives - first as a word in English, and secondly as a literary symbol in the cultural tradition spanning Hebrew, Greek and Roman literatures through the Renaissance and Early Modern England, all contributing to Shakespeare's eventual participation in this tradition. In a survey of the butterfly's legacy as a literary symbol, I will construct a set of meanings associated with the butterfly that can be compared to Shakespeare's sporadic use of the term throughout his dramatic career. In the work of Roman poets like Ovid, whose magisterial epic *Metamorphoses* cast a long shadow over Elizabethan poets like Spenser and Shakespeare, the butterfly appears as a transformative creature key to the central idea of metamorphosis explored in the text. Petrarch carried the butterfly into the Italian Renaissance, employing it as a symbol for the unrequited love for Laura expressed in his *Sonnets* — these works, translated by the Tudor poets Wyatt and Surrey during Henry VIII's reign into English, were almost certainly read by Shakespeare, and influenced his own impactful work in the sonnet form. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, praised and read widely long past the poet's death in the early fifteenth century, contain a single memorable butterfly in the Nun's Priest's

Tale that marvelously prefigures the doomed butterfly prince of Spenser's *Muiopotmos*. In the sixteenth century, Shakespeare's contemporaries variously experimented with the butterfly as a motif, symbol, and figurative device in ways that reflect strongly on Shakespeare's own use of the word in his early plays: Sidney, Spenser, Marlowe, Jonson, and Donne among others use the butterfly to advance their literary processes. Finally, examining Shakespeare's engagement with the butterfly in plays like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and most significantly, *King Lear*, I will make the claim that the butterfly's symbology in the Western tradition as received by Shakespeare contained primary associations with youthfulness, life, and sensibility, but also metamorphosis, fragility, victimhood and death.

## Chapter I: The Butterfly as Literary Symbol in the Early Modern Consciousness, From Ovid to Shakespeare

The butterfly's histories as a literary symbol and a word in English are not perfectly synonymous, nor perfectly aligned. The butterfly existed as a literary symbol long before the English language came into being, but it was not until the eleventh century that Old English began to encompass Dutch and Anglo-Saxon antecedents to arrive at the term "butter-floege," a term philologists believe derives from descriptions of the insect's excrement, while other sources posit folk legend that suggested the creatures exhibited a strange propensity to fly away with unguarded butter.<sup>7</sup> The OED defines the butterfly scientifically, as "an insect belonging to any of those diurnal species of lepidoptera, or scaly-winged flies, which have knobbed antennæ, and carry their wings erect when at rest." This definition corresponds to a metaphor used as early as in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and likely earlier, as a figurative device, a literary heritage absorbed into English during the Middle Ages, with figures like Chaucer appropriating the butterfly's symbolic potency in new non-mythological contexts including the beast fable. In surveying the history of the butterfly's figurative and literal use in the literature of Western Europe from antiquity to the early modern era, this project does not place any claim on exhaustively presenting each case of the butterfly's appearance in western literature — such a project would likely demand a separate thesis of its own, and a broad focus extending far beyond textual analysis of an English early Jacobean tragedy. The reason for the following analysis of the butterfly will always remain trained on eventual discussion of

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<sup>7</sup> "butterfly, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2018, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/25408](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/25408). Accessed 12 April 2018.



*Coriolanus*, and in this spirit, this chapter will present several critical examples of butterflies in western literature that Shakespeare is likely to have witnessed and considered when writing it into his own works, especially *Coriolanus*. With this framework in mind, the following survey becomes far narrower and productive in scope.

Ovid, the great poet promulgator of Greek mythology via his Latin-language *Metamorphoses*, received an important translation into English by Arthur Golding in 1567, which became a source utilized by Shakespeare time and again during the production of his plays. Golding's Ovid features the butterfly directly once, and once apocryphally, but in both instances his usages are critical to understanding the evolving concept of the butterfly as a representative for change, a physical talisman for Ovid's project of metamorphosis. In the *Metamorphoses* Book XV, Golding translates Ovid's discussion of Pythagoras' scientific and philosophical achievements; during Pythagoras' explanation of the idea of autogenesis, the natural regeneration of biological life and transformation from life to death and then again into new life, the butterfly provides a primary example for the phenomenon: "The Caterpillers of the feelde the which are woont to weave / Hore filmes uppon the leaves of trees, theyr former nature leave, / (Which thing is knowen to husbandmen) and turne to Butterflies."<sup>8</sup> Nature's ceaseless process of change, of transformation, is epitomized in the words of Golding's Ovid's Pythagoras with the caterpillar's metamorphosis into a butterfly, arguably the most readily available instance of physical boldly transformation available to Greco-Roman eyes.

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<sup>8</sup> Naso, Publius Ovidius. *Ovid's Metamorphoses: The Arthur Golding Translation, 1567*. Translated by Arthur Golding. Edited by Jonathan Bate. Paul Dry Books, 1965, pg. 367.

The second “Ovidian” valence of the butterfly ultimately descends from the Roman poet’s mythological storytelling, but resides in a work from the second-century Numidian writer Lucius Apuleius Madaurensis named alternatively *Metamorphoses*, or *The Golden Ass*. This collection of stories from Greek and Roman mythology, linked together by the disconnected travels of a picaresque protagonist, owes its legacy to the enormously popular story of Cupid and Psyche, a tale which soon embedded itself inextricably within the west’s cultural consciousness. In Greek, “Psyche” means both “butterfly” and “soul” — a critical pairing — and Cupid’s love for Psyche in *The Golden Ass* enables Platonic readings on the affinity of love for the soul, and the power of love to bring rebirth to the soul, just as a chrysalis transforms into a beautiful butterfly.<sup>9</sup> Angela Moorjani holds the myth of psyche as inaugurating this strand of butterfly symbolism, carrying on into the twentieth century and beyond: “For both the pearl and the butterfly are motifs of psychic rebirth linked to interior entombment and self-generation. (The figuration of the soul as a butterfly has a particularly rich history, for instance in the legend of Psyche’s awakening to new life through Eros.”<sup>10</sup> Even in the mystical, quasi-Gnostic poetry of HD’s mid-twentieth century *Trilogy*, Moorjani asserts, the butterfly’s connection with the soul was so unconsciously reinforced that it could be taken for granted. Although Madaurensis’ proto-novel fell out of popular view during the Middle Ages, the butterfly’s linguistic association with innocence and the soul persisted, easily available for Shakespeare and his contemporaries to pick up themselves.

In the fourteenth century, Francesco Petrarca used the butterfly as a stinging reminder for his inability to satisfy his romantic longings, featuring its symbolic power in several of his

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<sup>9</sup> Moorjani, Angela. *The Aesthetics of Loss and Lessness*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992, pg. 125.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

famous sonnets. In the last of his Babylon Sonnets, a sequence centered upon the idea of envisioning Avignon — the seat of fourteenth-century Papal exile since known as the “Babylonian Captivity” of the Catholic Church — as a cesspool of corruption and iniquity, Petrarch trains his keen frustration upon himself:

As at times in hot sunny weather  
 A guileless butterfly accustomed to the light,  
 Flies in its wanderings into someone’s face,  
 Causing it to die, and the other to weep:  
 So I am always running towards the sunlight of her eyes,  
 Fatal to me, from which so much sweetness comes  
 That Love takes no heed of the reins of reason:  
 And he who discerns them is conquered by his desire.  
 And truly I see how much disdain they have for me,  
 And I know I am certain to die of them,  
 Since my strength cannot counter the pain:  
 But Love dazzles me so sweetly,  
 That I weep for the other’s annoyance, not my hurt:  
 And my soul consents blindly to its death.<sup>11</sup>

Petrarch, the woe-begotten forsaken lover, compares his “fatal” yearning for Laura to a butterfly’s mortal fascination with bright lights, selecting the butterfly as an example of nature innocently courting its own tragic doom. Laura’s eyes radiate a light from which “so much

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<sup>11</sup> Petrarca, Francesco. *The Canzoniere, Or, Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta*. Edited by Barbara Manfredi. Translated by Mark Musa. Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 2005, pg. 610.

sweetness comes,” Petrarch-as-butterfly simply cannot resist, almost biologically, his loving instinct to pursue the affection radiantly emanating from his love’s optic epicenters. Note, as well, how Petrarch cleverly exploits the double meaning of “butterfly” and “soul” in Greek; unable to resist the pull of attraction despite his knowledge of future pain, he embraces his fate: “and my soul consents blindly to its death.” Petrarch’s soul, his inner butterfly, meets a biologically prescribed end, but one not without his characteristically self-pitying pathos. Just as Ovid initiates the tradition of associating the butterfly with metamorphosis, Petrarch’s poetry widely spread an influential depiction of the butterfly as an agent of naïve endangerment, a trusting victim of a cruel world. Petrarch identifies as the butterfly here, but future poets, especially Chaucer and Edmund Spenser, go further with this symbolic resonance.<sup>12</sup>

Shortly after Petrarch but in late-fourteenth century England, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400) participated in a grand revival of vernacular English literature, reclaiming the “common” language of the island after several hundred years of displacement at court and in writing to Norman French. Future English writers would look upon Chaucer and his contemporaries as spiritual fathers and deeply talented predecessors, the founders of an English tradition to which they sought to contribute something of their own. In the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer’s longest and most influential work, this fathomlessly witty mind constructed an ingenious frame narrative — thirty-two pilgrims traveling to Canterbury to

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 576. Petrarch’s use of the butterfly is by no means limited to this sonnet alone — in *Canzoniere* 89, another sonnet, Petrarch describes himself as “unlocking” himself from the prison of Love, just as a butterfly emerges gloriously from a constraining chrysalis, in a demonstration of the “soul liberating itself from the body.” Here, as before, Petrarch employs the butterfly as a surrogate for his soul’s innocent pain, whether of liberation or death, tightening the connection between the butterfly’s pristine beauty and ominous destiny. This paradoxical dialectic pervaded usage of the butterfly heading into the early modern period.

visit the tomb of the uniquely English martyr Thomas Beckett, killed in 1170 upon bastardized orders from Henry II. Within this narrative, Chaucer built from the work of Italian writers like Giovanni Boccaccio to present a series of disperse tales as told by each pilgrim, separated from one another only by brief interludes between the assorted travelers. In one of these stories, the Nun's Priest's Tale, Chaucer uses the butterfly to simple but incisive effect.

The Nun's Priest's Tale, a beast-fable that anticipated works like Edmund Spenser's later "Muiopotmos" which also prominently feature the butterfly, chronicles the physical endangerment of the swaggering chicken Chanticleer due to the wiles of a treacherous fox. At the exact moment these characters first meet, Chaucer uses the butterfly as a transitional intermediary between the carefree world of Chanticleer's past and the perilous one of his future:

And so it bifel that, as he caste his yë,  
 Among the wortes, on a boterflye,  
 He was war of this fox that lay full lowe.  
 No-thing ne liste him thanne to for to crowe,  
 But cryde anon, "cok, cok," and up he sterte,  
 As man that was affrayed in his herte.<sup>13</sup>

Upon identifying the innocently reclining butterfly, Chanticleer then notices the threatening fox, a seamless transition from cheer to fear for which the butterfly operates as metamorphic talisman. However, Chaucer's fascinating choice of employing the butterfly as the ostensibly incidental means by which Chanticleer notices the fox also reinforces the association of the

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<sup>13</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales*. Translated by Peter Tuttle. Edited by Robert W. Hanning and George Stade. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2006, pg. 563, l. 501-15.

butterfly with mortal danger and youthful innocence — the parallel between butterfly and fox, enhanced by the butterfly's introduction of the protagonist to danger, builds upon the symbolism of Chaucer's older contemporary Petrarch to compound the relationship between the butterfly and endangered innocence.

### **Spenser, Sidney, Jonson, and Donne: Elizabethan Literary Culture and the Butterfly**

In the early months of 1591, less than two years after a young William Shakespeare traveled from Stratford-upon-Avon to London for a career in the theater, newly published works by a pair of England's preeminent poets began circulating through literary circles: Spenser's *Complaints*, and Sidney's *New Arcadia*. Although *Complaints* soon fell prey to government censorship for its unflattering portrayal of Elizabeth's chief advisor William Cecil, and Sidney's *New Arcadia* appeared both posthumously and unfinished, each still received broad readership. These two publications diverge from one another in several meaningful ways. Spenser's *Complaints* contains nine poems of varying lengths and structures, each cast as a poetic emblem for one of the nine muses of Greco-Roman mythology. Sidney's *New Arcadia*, contrastingly, offers a massive prose narrative of interconnected eclogues, or pastoral romances, drawing chiefly from Medieval sources. However, both *Complaints* and the *New Arcadia* mention the butterfly, and these connections (Spenser especially) provide valuable examples of how Elizabethans symbolically conceptualized the butterfly in both their poetry and prose.

Sir Philip Sidney turned his attention in the late 1570s and through the 1580s to an enormous prose romance, the *Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*; unfinished but extant in two

versions, an Old and New text, Sidney's ambitious work captures an epic drama within ornate effusions of prose rather than the typical codified permutations of verse. Inside this sprawling effort, Sidney mentions the butterfly just once and in a context meant to recall the symbolic innocence and fragility of the butterfly, presented here as analogous to the intimate feelings of newfound lovers.<sup>14</sup> In the chaos of the Old Arcadia's intricate web of deceptions, identify crises, and chain-reaction outrage, the prince Pyrocles masquerades as a female Amazonian warrior named Zelmane, exploiting his disguise to endear himself in private to Duke Basilius' daughter Philoclea. Upon being discovered, the Duke's mortified attendants express their incredulity at the fraud committed against them:

The noise he made, being a man of no few words, joined to the yelping sound of Miso, and his unpleasant inheretrix, brought together some number of the shepherds, to whom he without any regard of reserving it for the king's knowledge, spattered out the bottom of his stomach, swearing by him that he never knew that Zelmane, whom they had taken all the while to be a woman, was as arrant a man as himself was, whereof he had seen sufficient signs and tokens, and that he was as close as a butterfly with the lady Philoclea.<sup>15</sup>

The essence of this labyrinthine passage describes the evolving revelation experienced by Dametas, Basilius' head servant, after he stumbles upon the lovers Philoclea and Pyrocles, whom Dametas previously believed to be a man. The butterfly both begins and punctuates Dametas' terror; just before he perceives Zelmane's actual identity, he gazes upon the enshrouded lovers with all the attention of Psyche, the Greek butterfly-soul: "But Dametas

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<sup>14</sup> This romantic allusion recalls the love of Cupid and Psyche, and that of Petrarch for Laura.

<sup>15</sup> Sidney, Philip. *The Works of Philip Sidney in Prose and Verse: In Three Volumes*. London, 1724, pg. 732-3.

looking...neither with such a face nor mind upon these excellent features, as Psyche did upon her unknown lover..."<sup>16</sup> Sidney, well-trained in classical languages, would have known this connection, framing Dametas' discovery as witnessing something fragile, young, and soon endangered — Psyche's love for Cupid, and Pyrocles' love for Philoclea. Although this invocation is extremely subtle, and tucked away within a behemoth-sized text replete with all manners of figurative devices, Sidney's use of the butterfly still follows precisely in the English tradition set by writers like Chaucer and soon elaborated by Spenser, Donne and Shakespeare.

Edmund Spenser, in his *Complaints*, ventures considerably further than Sidney in employing the butterfly as a living metaphor. One of the collection's nine poems, "Muiopotmos: or, the Fate of the Butterflie," takes for its subject an anthropomorphized prince of the butterflies, Clarion, chronicling his misadventures through the "Empire of the aire."<sup>17</sup> The first poem in English featuring a butterfly for its subject (and protagonist, for that matter), "Muiopotmos" weaves a tragic tale of naïve innocence snuffed out by fatal treachery. Its structure resembles the "epyllion," or mini-epic — a narrative poem written in the grand manner of epic but markedly shorter; it also functions as a beast fable, echoing Chaucer's "Nun's Priest's Tale," perhaps not coincidentally the only tale of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to mention a butterfly. In this poem Spenser establishes head-on, with considerable evident premeditation, the enshrinement of the butterfly as a literary symbol, no longer a peripheral item of occasional use but the main subject of a serious poem. Within the work, Spenser collects and eloquently presents the multifaceted dimensions of the butterfly in literary

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Spenser, Edmund. *Edmund Spenser: The Shorter Poems*. Edited by Richard A. McCabe. London: Penguin Books, 1999, pg. 630.



discourse: youth, beauty, innocence, metamorphosis, vulnerability and tragedy. Preceding Shakespeare's employment of the term in *Coriolanus* by over a decade, Spenser's shadow from "Muiopotmos" almost undoubtedly loomed above Shakespeare as he wrote his three butterflies into *Coriolanus* fifteen years later.

The plot of "Muiopotmos" can be distilled into the following story: Clarion, the sky's silver-winged heir, decides to wander throughout his father's kingdom, eventually falling prey to a spider who ends the poem by butchering the woe-befallen prince. Spenser interrupts this relatively sparse narrative with frequent and lengthy pastoral-mythological digressions, adapting Ovidian materials to his own purposes and placing an emphasis on the moralizing metamorphoses taking place within the beast-fable's world. Among these transformations is that of Astery, a favorite handmaiden of Venus whose envious peers accuse her of amorous relations with Venus' son Cupid. The nymphs' false testimony incites Venus to transform Astery into a butterfly as punishment, tragically ending the promising career of Venus' most loyal youth.<sup>18</sup> Spenser relates Astery's tragic fate in mellifluous *ottava rima*:

Eftsoones that Damzell by her heauenly might,  
She turn'd into a winged Butterflie,  
In the wide aire to make her wandring flight;

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<sup>18</sup> In "Muiopotmos", the jealous nymphs claim Cupid lent aid to Astery in her flower-gathering duties, re-awakening Venus' jealousies from Cupid's past relationship with Psyche – a myth famously related in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (translated into English by William Golding, 1575). In an innovation on the myth, Spenser's Venus turns Astery into a butterfly so the flowers on her wings will remind her of her alleged crime. It should be once again noted that the word "psyche" in Greek meant both "butterfly" and "the soul," a fascinating duality that Spenser exploits in condemning a 'second Psyche' to transformation from an airy, soulful nymph to a butterfly.

And all those flowres, with which so plenteouslie  
 Her lap she filled had, that bred her spright,  
 She placed in her wings, for memorie  
 Of her pretended crime, though crime none were:  
 Since which that flie them in her wings doth beare. (137-44)

In telling the butterfly's origin story, Spenser characterizes the butterfly as winged, possessed with "wandering" flight and flowery wings. By Aphrodite's punitive viewpoint, the butterfly's beauty serves to forever recall its bearer's crime and eternal shame, that of perfidiously obtaining flowers by divine assistance — although, as Spenser takes care to remind us, Astery's alleged crime was "pretended," nonexistent, rendering her punishment injurious and casting a grimly ironic pallor on the butterfly's genesis. Victimhood, or the fragility of youth and sensibility in a menacing world, becomes the butterfly's primary association in Spenser's poem, a theme amply advanced by the second butterfly of Spenser's piece, the protagonist Clarion.

Spenser's creates his own patchwork mythos from Astery's downfall, transferring elements from Arachne and Athena's weaving contest in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Athena turns Arachne into a spider, Arachne weaves Ovid's "Asteria" into her tapestry) into this new setting in which Aphrodite turns Astery, not Arachne, into a butterfly.<sup>19</sup> Spenser's poetic imagination performs remarkable wordplay with *psyche*, the Greek word for both "soul" and "butterfly," recalling the loaded duality in meaning used by Madaurensis and Petrarch. "Underlying [this] whole narrative," writes Richard McCabe, "lies a learned pun...and the

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<sup>19</sup> Asteria, in Ovid's myth, was a nymph pursued by Zeus — reinforcing the butterfly-victim association constructed by Spenser in *Muiopotmos*.

mock-heroic style of Spenser's epillion (or little epic) is brilliantly designed to exploit this ambiguity."<sup>20</sup> In Madaurensis' original fable, Psyche undergoes a series of grueling, near-Herculean tasks to acquire Cupid's love and administered by Aphrodite, Cupid's outraged mother, who seeks to invalidate Psyche's claims by discouraging the mortal maid's pretensions — but Psyche's perseverance, beyond all the onerous labors Cupid's jealous mother devises, compels Aphrodite to relinquish her son, a humiliation not likely endearing Cupid's future favorites to the goddess. Spenser cleverly utilizes this myth to connect the butterfly's origin story with Aphrodite's lingering resentment at Psyche's triumph:

Wherof the Goddesse gathering iealous feare,  
 Not yet vnmindfull how not long agoe  
 Her sonne to *Psyche* secrete loue did beare,  
 And long it close conceal'd, till mickle woe  
 Thereof arose, and manie a ruffull teare;  
 Reason with sudden rage did ouergoe,  
 And giuing hastie credit to th'accuser,  
 Was led away of them that did abuse her. (129-136)

Spenser explicitly identifies Psyche as a source for Aphrodite's anger at Astery's accused assistance from Cupid, which channels the goddess' wrath into vindictive territory. In transforming Astery into a butterfly, Aphrodite — perhaps deliberately, perhaps inadvertently — revenges herself in vain on Psyche, a name that evokes both the woman who stole her son and the winged creature she is near to fashioning out from hatred. In the original myth of Psyche, strongly present in the background of *Muiopotmos*, Psyche won Cupid's heart

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<sup>20</sup> Spenser, 630.

without the need of his eponymous arrows, being overwhelmed by her innate beauty alone — thus depriving Aphrodite, the goddess of love, of both her parental sovereignty and preeminence in the purported divine realm of romantic love. Spenser brilliantly recapitulates Aphrodite’s fears of displacement, speaking breathlessly of her “iealous feare” of Cupid’s “secrete loue” for Psyche (italicized for emphasis by Spenser), causing her to abandon rationality by giving “hastie credit” to Astery’s traitorous accusers. Astery suffers for Psyche’s crime of aspiring to divinity — making the nymph’s butterfly transformation an ingenious blend of several linked myths into an innovative tale of betrayed youth gently enfolded into the larger epillion of Clarion’s fatal wanderings.

The life of Clarion, Spenser’s butterfly prince and the titular wanderer of the poem, provides the strongest parallel to *Coriolanus* of any previous source for butterfly symbolism. Clarion effectively embodies many of the symbolic properties that feature strongly in the narrative background of *Coriolanus*, particularly the threats to innocence in a world of duplicity, as realized by Clarion’s fatal trust in the spider Aragnoll. The primary source for *Coriolanus*, Plutarch’s *Lives*, places the historical events roughly corresponding to Shakespeare’s play around 493 BCE, approximately fifteen years after Rome’s final king Tarquinius Superbus was expelled for his son’s brutal rape of Lucrecia, an event rendered poetically by Shakespeare early on in his career. After two hundred years of monarchical rule, Rome’s fledgling Republic remained four centuries from the internecine civic brawls of *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*; Republican politics, now in their infancy, receive significant attention from Shakespeare in his last tragedy. Inside Caius Martius’ Rome, the people possess a ceremonial but increasingly forceful influence in Roman politics, formerly dominated by a single ruler but now dispersing power among an aristocratic class supported

by military leaders. However, Shakespeare begins his play with grain riots that intimidate the anxious patricians into pacifying the plebeian masses by awarding them five tribunes, representatives of the people's voices — a massive, and permanent, change to Roman Republican politics. Now, at the play's onset, pleasing the Roman people becomes an inevitable necessity of those pursuing Governmental authority, particularly the high office of Consul, formerly awarded on pure martial merit as determined by the patricians. In this sense, *Coriolanus* chronicles the gradual absorption of a non-political nation into intense democratic politics, with all its appeals to the common people and mass persuasions. Viewing the tragedy in this light, as the baptizing of a post-political Rome, Martius' vehement refusal to engage in political action represents an exemplary figure fighting against the tide of history, and ultimately becoming engulfed beneath the rushing torrent of political calculation swirling around him: Brutus and Sicinius, Menenius and Aufidius, and even Volumnia, all whose various machinations contribute to Martius' downfall and destruction. Martius stands still in a world ineluctably moving; this dark birth of political life stalks the shadows of *Coriolanus*.

Similarly, critical interpretations of Spenser's *Muiopotmos* have long sought to find and apply a moral to the poem, which resists the obvious political subtexts of many others of Spenser's works. However, a small scholarly consensus has risen around the idea that Spenser's epillion offers grim advice to prospective courtiers, a poetic participant in the late Medieval tradition of the self-fashioning treatise initiated by Castiglione's *The Courtier* (1528; English, 1561). Richard McCabe encapsulates this school of thought in his preface to *Muiopotmos*: "[Spenser comments] obliquely upon the fraught relationship between artistic liberty and political control, the poet finding safe haven — figured here in the branches of the peaceful olive tree (326-36) — only within the aesthetic constraints of political patronage,

flourishing or perishing within the politician's web."<sup>21</sup> In this allegorical framework of social critique, Clarion functions as the Poet, who flies boldly into the world armed with imagination and creativity but unaware of the potential dangers of pursuing a public existence. Aragnoll, the cunning and murderous spider, represents the "politician's web," or the collected pressures of participation within a political system in which poets are used as pawns, capital, and scapegoats. Spenser himself discovered the dangers of public poetry under Elizabeth's censorious regime: following the publication of *Mother Hubbard's Tale*, jointly published in 1590 alongside *Muiopotmos* in *Complaints*, an outraged Lord Burghley procured Spenser's banishment from Elizabeth's court, even after Spenser's fastidiously near-hagiographic portrayal of the Queen in the first few books of the *Faerie Queene*. Spenser models the poet's fall from grace as a matter of political expediency, echoing the demise of the shimmering butterfly Clarion amid webs of deceit.

This reading, which this author finds highly persuasive, enables fertile cross-textual analysis between *Muiopotmos* and *Coriolanus*, especially in following the butterfly connection between them. Spenser's opening dedication to his muse characterizes the proceeding poem as theatrical in nature:

The rote whereof and tragicall effect,  
 Vouchsafe, O thou the mournfulst Muse of nyne,  
 That wontst the tragick stage for to direct,  
 In funerall complaints and waylfull tyne,  
 Reueale to me, and all the meanes detect,  
 Through which sad *Clarion* did at last declyne

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<sup>21</sup> Spenser, 631.

To lowest wretchednes; And is there then

Such rancor in the harts of mightie men? (9-16)

Spenser saturates his rhetoric with unequivocally dramatic language. He aspires to create a “tragicall effect,” to take place on a “tragick stage for to direct” — not unlike the metatheatrical grandness of Shakespeare’s initial invocations for *Romeo and Juliet* (1599) and *Henry V* (1599). Spenser establishes Clarion as his tragic protagonist, a figure whose fall produces an emotional reaction and instills moral lessons within the observer; in immediately identifying Clarion as a figure of great lost promise, he echoes the famous opening to Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus* (1588) only recently premiered on the London stage. *Muiopotmos* is framed from the onset as a work with specifically dramatic resonance and effects, shifting its genre closer to *Coriolanus* while addressing many of the same themes, both centered upon their symbolically redolent butterflies.

A third butterfly exists in Spenser’s *Muiopotmos*, painted by Athena in the speaker’s mythological digression into the origins of the spider upon Arachne’s defeat in an art contest. After five stanzas describing Athena’s work, Spenser concludes with Athena’s radiant image of a single butterfly:

Emongst these leaues she made a Butterflie,

With excellent deuice and wondrous flight,

Fluttring among the Oliues wantonly,

That seem'd to liue, so like it was in sight:

The veluet nap which on his wings doth lie,

The siken downe with which his backe is dight,

His broad outstretched hornes, his hayrie thies,

His glorious colours, and his glittering eies. (339-6)

In most variations of the Arachne myth, she is judged the winner and condemned to a spider's life because of Athena's wounded pride; in *Muiopotmos*, however, Spenser permits Athena to triumph, punishing Arachne instead for her pretensions to aesthetic dominance of a goddess — eerily familiar to the lingering resentment of Aphrodite at Psyche's improper aspirations which inspired her to rashly condemn the faithful Astery to life as a butterfly. In concluding his admiring catalog of Athena's artistry, Spenser focuses on her image of the butterfly, described with "glorious colours", possessed by "wondrous flight" and "glittering eies" as something entirely and perfectly beautiful. Although less complex than other mentions of the butterfly in a poem entirely constructed around multiple forms of butterfly symbolism, this painted butterfly contributes to the sense of the butterfly as related to beauty and artistry, a theme advanced in Shakespeare's work.

Ben Jonson, in his *Epigrams* (published in his First Folio, 1616), briefly turns his wit towards a frequent endeavor in his output, the cruel mockery of human foibles. In a sharp yet short poem titled "On Court-Worm," Jonson makes a curious contribution to the early modern English butterfly discourse:

All men are worms: but this is no man. In silk

'Twas brought to court first wrapped, and white as milk;

Where, afterwards, it grew a butterfly,

Which was a caterpillar: so 'twill die.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Greene, Robert, Christopher Marlowe, and Ben Jonson. *The Poems of Robert Greene, Christopher Marlowe, and Ben Jonson*. Edited by Robert Bell. London: Bell & Sons, 1876.



This poem bears a startling resemblance to Menenius' commentary in act 5 of *Coriolanus*, as both draw a difference between ordinary human beings (grubs) and extraordinary human beings (butterflies); in Jonson's rhetoric, however, the extraordinary figure embodying the butterfly is an object of ridicule, an obscenely obsequious and shallow hanger-on at court. Describing the inflated pride and ambition of this new member of society as "brought to court first wrapped, then white as milk," this political novice possesses youth ("white as milk") and groomed entitlement ("first wrapped"), but like anyone else, they will eventually die irrespectively of privileges or achievements. In his corner of observational derision, Jonson deflates the aspirational youth's pretensions by comparing them to a fragile butterfly, exceptional in appearance but equally doomed to the same fate as all other living creatures. Jonson's solitary epigram doubles down on the butterfly's purchase as a conveyor of literary youth and fragility, taking a cynical approach to a theme elaborated at great length by Shakespeare.

During his early career, John Donne illustrated with an almost eerie intellectual preciseness a marked desire for intimacy with numerous unidentified female love interests. Among these poems numbers "To a Painted Lady," a persuasion piece capturing the reckless abandon of Donne's speaker amid his fiery passions. After excessively detailing their amorous encounter, the speaker launches an indulgent metaphysical conceit:

Much like a painter that upon some wall,  
 On which the cadent sunbeams use to fall,  
 Paints with such gilded art a butterfly,  
 That silly maids with slow-moved fingers try  
 To catch at it, and blush at their mistake,

Yet of this painted fly more reckoning make.<sup>23</sup>

“Gilded art” — this word, denoting a thin golden sheen, will appear consistently paired with “butterfly” in Shakespeare’s plays, from *Troilus and Cressida* to *King Lear* and finally, Valeria’s butterfly in *Coriolanus*. Donne uses this metaphor to demonstrate the extent to which his speaker’s love’s beauty beguiles him — much as a talented painter’s works carry such apparent verity they might delude unknowing viewers into believing the art as real, so too does the woman’s makeup produce a sense of reality from which the speaker, however aware of the illusion, cannot escape. The butterfly, figuratively paralleled to the woman’s makeup in the context of Donne’s metaphor, represents something constructed by the world around it, attracting the interest of others for its compelling hues and charm. This idea of the butterfly as both indebted to, and affected by, the world around it — more appearance than reality — eloquently precedes Shakespeare’s use of the term in Jacobean plays like *King Lear* and *Coriolanus*.

### **Shakespeare’s Earlier Plays and the Butterfly**

William Shakespeare features the butterfly first in his *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1595), during an elegant speech by Titania to her fairies commanding them to care for her lover, the hapless weaver Bottom. The butterfly features figuratively, as one poetic device among others in a glistening demonstration of care and affection, but its individual presence is particularly strong:

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<sup>23</sup> Donne, John. *Poems of John Donne*. Edited by E. K. Chambers. London: G. Routledge, 1904, pg. 261-2.

Be kind and courteous to this gentleman;  
 Hop in his walks and gambol in his eyes;  
 Feed him with apricocks and dewberries,  
 With purple grapes, green figs, and mulberries;  
 The honey-bags steal from the humble-bees,  
 And for night-tapers crop their waxen thighs  
 And light them at the fiery glow-worm's eyes,  
 To have my love to bed and to arise;  
 And pluck the wings from Painted butterflies  
 To fan the moonbeams from his sleeping eyes:

Nod to him, elves, and do him courtesies. (Act 3, scene 1 – use Arden for lines)

Titania's belied love for Bottom, fittingly metamorphosed into an ass, inspires her to compel her fairies to provide constant favors for this object of her attention. Metamorphosis pervades this linguistically ornate comedy, from the lovers' transformations in and out of love with one another to the hapless eloquence of the rude mechanicals' staged moon, wall, and lion — but the play's primary physical metamorphosis resides in Bottom's humorous alteration.<sup>24</sup>

Titania's speech, spoken in iambic pentameter couplets punctuated with more end-stops than usually appear in Shakespeare's verse, offers an archetypal instance of Shakespeare's highly versified language in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, adopting an almost intentionally archaic poetic style that shuns enjambment, Marlowe's reality-emulating blank verse, and other

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<sup>24</sup> In Golding's 1567 translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, used by Shakespeare in his adaptations of Greco-Roman mythology, the crucial word "metamorphoses" is read as "translated," a fascinating remark on the power of a translator to "metamorphose" language, and perhaps its meaning as well, from one civilization into another.

characteristic Shakespearean innovations. In substance, therefore, the overdrawn, euphuistic excesses of Titania's speech humiliate herself with each honey-laced word emerging from her star-struck mind, her elegantly regal affections underscored with an undignified self-abasement consistent with dramatic irony. For the butterfly, Titania reaches back to Spenser — critically reproducing the idea of the butterfly's resplendent wings as somehow painted onto them. Spenser's *Muiopotmos* contains two examples of the butterfly's wings being painted: Aphrodite's vengeful placing of Astery's nonexistent crimes on her guilty wings, and Athena's triumphant construction of a butterfly as a final note of artistic dominance over the soon-metamorphosed Arachne. In both cases, a goddess endows the butterfly with meaning separate from its own actions or travels within the world; this meaning marches forward into *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as Titania, a powerful fairy Queen existing in the Greek mythological world, carries a similar power to apply the painted wings of butterflies for another aim, in this case to ease the sleep of her beloved. In *Midsummer*, the butterfly represents metamorphosis, blissful innocence, and youth, a quality further advanced nearly ten years later in *Troilus and Cressida*.

Likely written in 1603, *Troilus and Cressida*, like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, explores the theme of change or metamorphosis in its instance of the butterfly, but with a darker result than *Midsummer*. *Troilus and Cressida* is derived from Homeric sources, but feels more like a travesty of Homer than an honorable retelling; much scholarship has been invested into the play's genre-bending qualities, including its apparent theatrical mock-epic, mock-heroic style. In keeping with the play's consistent deflation of Homeric grandiosity by means of highlighting the ubiquity of human pettiness, Shakespeare's Achilles finds himself resentfully wondering why the Greek soldiers who formerly revered him for unsurpassed

martial prowess now avoid him assiduously. His speech is rife with quasi-misanthropy, remarking contemptuously on the hypocrisy of his fellow Greeks in ignoring him:

What, am I poor of late?

'Tis certain, greatness, once fall'n out with fortune,

Must fall out with men too: what the declined is

He shall as soon read in the eyes of others

As feel in his own fall; for men, like butterflies,

Show not their mealy wings but to the summer,

And not a man, for being simply man,

Hath any honour, but honour for those honours

That are without him, as place, riches, favour,

Prizes of accident as oft as merit. (3.3, use Arden for lines)

Here, the butterfly becomes an emblem for Achilles' central simile, dismissing men for honoring only those who benefit them. Fascinatingly, Shakespeare refuses to allow the butterfly to function as a symbol without an accompanying adjective enhancing its figurative potency, in *Troilus* as in *Midsummer*; the butterfly's value in Achilles' speech, however, lies primarily in its social critique of human frailty, expanding the boundaries of its poetic usage beyond the somewhat peripheral, ornamental quality of its inclusion in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Instead of being one image among many, the butterfly appears in *Troilus* as the prominent image of a longer speech, and placed in a divisive context entirely alien to the wondrous innocence of comedy. The word "mealy" deserves precise attention: the OED cites *Troilus and Cressida* in its second definition of mealy in adjective form: "Covered or

appearing to be covered with a fine dust or powder.”<sup>25</sup> The men of Greece, therefore, resemble butterflies in their appearance only during the pleasant times of the year, when flashing their finely powdered wings as a mark of favor.

In *King Lear*, written four years before *Coriolanus*, the butterfly receives mention within one of the play’s most resonant speeches, as Lear prepares to be dragged to prison alongside his faithful daughter Cordelia. This is Shakespeare’s most prominent use of the butterfly yet, using it as more than an incidental detail (*Midsummer Night’s Dream*) or isolated metaphor (*Troilus and Cressida*) but instead as a key image at a moment of climactic dramatism, branding its image into the minds of viewers and readers. Recalling his earlier wish of the first act that Cordelia take care of him in his ebbing years, Lear envisions an imaginative alternative to his hoped-for nursery in a way that prefigures the prison-defying bluster of Lovelace’s 1642 poem “To Althea, from Prison”:

No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison.  
 We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage.  
 When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down  
 And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live,  
 And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh  
 At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues  
 Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too-  
 Who loses and who wins...<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> "mealy, adj." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2017, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/115431](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/115431). Accessed 18 December 2017.

<sup>26</sup> *King Lear*, OSS TLN 5.3. 3131-8.

“Gilded” echoes Shakespeare’s pairing of the butterfly with a qualifying adjective in each of his plays — Titania’s “silver wings,” Achilles’ “mealy wings,” Lear’s “gilded” butterflies, and Valeria and Young Martius’ “gilded” butterfly in *Coriolanus*. The turn towards “gilded” as the primary descriptor for the butterfly used in the latter half of the first decade of the seventeenth century indicates an emphasis on the word “gilded” as a marker of façade-like delicacy, of outward pristineness that can easily dissipate if pressed. Just as Lear’s wishful thinking carries all no force against reality, so too does the gilded butterfly reflect the metamorphosis of Lear from King to prisoner, and from gilded butterfly of his own court to an observer laughing from without at the gilded butterflies who hold him hostage. The other dominant symbolic function of the butterfly also appears, more obviously — when imagining a state of innocence, of sanctuary, for his daughter and himself, Lear uses the butterfly to epitomize what that place would be like. However, that butterfly does not exist, and it never will exist, because the world around him is cruel and murderous and fatal — for the same reason, the missing breaths he sees in Cordelia, a resurgent rosiness in her face, is the final image that transfixes his agonized mind before being cast out into final unknown heath of lifelessness. The butterfly follows him.

This survey of the butterfly’s role in major works of Western literature, from Ovid to Jacobean England, sought to loosely catalogue instances of butterfly usage and if possible identify common figurative threads of butterfly symbolization. Aiming not to exhaustively recount the full legacy of the butterfly in a “Western” tradition (a term requiring more comprehensive definition), nor to focus exclusively on the life of the butterfly as a literary symbol irrespective of Shakespeare’s eventual individual use of the insect as a mode of metaphorical figuration, this chapter merely posits that in the long expanse of the literatures of

western Europe there were many ways the butterfly was regarded and used, with two central strands of meaning shining through most clearly: metamorphosis, and endangered (usually youthful) innocence. Building from Greco-Roman myth and into the love poetry of the Renaissance, the butterfly came to embody in the beast fables of the English Middle Ages and early modern era a signifier of goodness under threat, of fragility in the face of manipulation, and the profound consequences of change on a subject and those affected by that subject. In Shakespeare's plays, we see a sparing and infrequent but insightful use of the butterfly to accomplish precisely these ends in plays spanning the entirety of Shakespeare's dramatic career, from the early *Midsummer Night's Dream* to the late Elizabethan *Troilus and Cressida* and Jacobean *King Lear*. Arriving now at *Coriolanus*, the relevance of the butterfly as a literary symbol should be taken as evidence that Shakespeare's conspicuous and unprecedented three-fold use of the butterfly in *Coriolanus* marks a significant reflection and adaptation of the butterfly's literary resonance into the specific dramatic context of Caius Martius Coriolanus' struggles against himself, his mother, and his city, and that this series of metaphors in *Coriolanus* are not due to chance or coincidence, but play a vital role in analysis of the play's complex familiar structures. This subject is the focus of the following chapter.



## Chapter II: The Butterfly in Coriolanus

### Introduction to Analysis of *Coriolanus*, 1.3 — Who is Right about the Killed Butterfly?

In Act I.3 of *Coriolanus* (1608), the gregarious Roman socialite Valeria relates a curious anecdote to Martius' wife and mother concerning his son, young Martius. Valeria recalls how she saw the boy toying playfully with a courtyard butterfly for nearly a half-hour before falling, becoming enraged, and tearing the sometime playfellow to pieces:

O' my word, the father's son: I'll swear 'tis a very  
 pretty boy. O' my troth, I looked upon him o' Wednesday half  
 an hour together. He has such a confirmed countenance. I  
 saw him run after a gilded butterfly: and when he caught it,  
 he let it go again; and after it again; and over and over he  
 comes, and again; caught it again; or whether his fall  
 enraged him, or how 'twas, he did so set his teeth and tear  
 it; O, I warrant it, how he mammocked it!<sup>27</sup>

Upon the completion of this enigmatic tale, the three women immediately give a flurry of interpretations for the boy's actions:

Volumnia. One on's father's moods.

Valeria. Indeed, la, 'tis a noble child.

Virgilia. A crack, madam.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Shakespeare, William. *Coriolanus*. Edited by Peter Holland. Vol. 3. London: Arden Shakespeare, 2013. Pg. 181-2, 1.3. 60-7.

<sup>28</sup> Arden, pg. 182, 1.3.68-70.

Speaking first, Volumnia firmly characterizes young Martius' aggression as naturally following in his father's example, affirming her belief that the boy will grow up to emulate the military and civic successes of the elder Martius in both deed and character. Valeria takes a complimentary middle ground, delivering a general claim of the boy's nobility to gratify Volumnia yet also avoiding the attribution of said nobility to his cruel temper, to evade causing offense to his more sensitive mother. Virgilia, somewhat embarrassed, dismisses her child as a "crack," or roguish lad, his behavior mischievous but nothing more consequential than that. However, Volumnia's position, the first and most clearly stated, lingers most powerfully; Valeria's comment merely reinforces it, and Virgilia eschews contradicting or disagreement with her domineering mother-in-law. As proves usually the case, Volumnia's view triumphs, affecting our own perceptions of Valeria's strange story of the butterfly's fatal dalliance with young Martius.

But how should we interpret this peripheral anecdote, which theatrically resembles a rather trivial instance of antecedent action? If we accept Volumnia's knee-jerk response that young Martius' behavior echoes the ruthless wrath of his father, then Valeria's anecdote adds little to our understanding of young Martius. Both before and after the butterfly tale, Volumnia and others provide ample evidence of young Martius' worthiness to succeed his father in militaristic fervor; just immediately prior, Volumnia proudly claims that young Martius "had rather see the swords and hear a drum than look upon his schoolmaster."

However, Volumnia's understanding of reality does not parallel our own, and her values, actions, and priorities do not warrant her much trust from a rational reader of the play. Volumnia's warped pronouncements, if anything, provide us with an indication of what we should believe otherwise.

### **The Butterfly in *Coriolanus* — Victim, Dragon, Victim**

The women's dispute over the significance of Valeria's butterfly tale reflects the story's deeper ambiguities, its implications permeating the play's textual fabric: is young Martius uncommonly brutal, or merely childish; an inevitable recreation of his father, or an altogether gentler kind of being; a child primarily of Volumnia, or of Virgilia? The immediate and confident attribution of young Martius' behavior by Volumnia as an irrefutable instance of his inborn warlike instincts leaves a strong impression, only challenged by Virgilia, who protests softly in mortification: "A crack, madam."<sup>29</sup> Her colloquial diction underscores her palpable maternal anxiety and social embarrassment. Early modern England denoted "crack" as a young and playful lad — so by employing the word to describe young Martius, Virgilia carefully downplays her son's actions as youthful mischief rather than adult violence, the characterization Volumnia gladly embraces.<sup>30</sup> Virgilia resists imputations of similitude between her son and his father, but this opposition cannot be attributed solely to Virgilia's position as young Martius' mother, nor to any hatred of her husband — Volumnia and Valeria offer emphatic counter-examples of women and mothers that take no issue with sending dearest male companions off to life-threatening war, and the sincere tenderness between Virgilia and her husband represents one of the play's few, if relatively unexamined, loving relationships.

The real catalyst of Virgilia's protection for young Martius is her peaceful disposition, which rejects the very thought of war or death, whether friend or foe, husband or son: "His

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<sup>29</sup> Arden, pg. 182, 1.3.70.

<sup>30</sup> "crack, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, January 2018, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/43630](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/43630). Accessed 11 March 2018.

bloody brow? O Jupiter, no blood!”<sup>31</sup> The only character in *Coriolanus* to frown on violence and disdain Italy’s seemingly ubiquitous martial virtue ethics, Virgilia’s vision of her son as harmlessly mischievous in playing with the butterfly constitutes more than merely motherly misdirection, but also a philosophical statement that her son *is*, and must continue to be, gentle at heart.

Given this battle of wills between two parental figures over a child’s development — Volumnia’s regimen of soldierly discipline cast against Virgilia’s more nurturing doctrine of protection — Valeria’s butterfly serves as a symbolic crux for the debate over young Martius’ inchoate individual spirit. The interpretation of young Martius’ engagement with the butterfly effectively serves as a litmus test for each observer regarding which “mother” figure they believe holds the correct understanding of the boy’s foundational character. Volumnia stakes her claim for authority on young Martius’ apparent and voluntary embrace of her militaristic lifestyle: “He had rather see the swords and hear a drum than look upon his schoolmaster.”<sup>32</sup> Shakespeare offers little textual evidence to judge young Martius’ character either way, nor the means to precisely ascertain the validity of Volumnia’s declarations — young Martius possesses a single pair of lines in Act 5, ironically derived in all likelihood from his grandmother’s prepared emotional manipulations for her own recalcitrant son: “A shall not tread on me. / I’ll run away till I’m bigger, but then I’ll fight.”<sup>33</sup> The youthful naiveté of the child’s challenge belies its bellicosity, rendering young Martius’ evidently rehearsed defiance to be hollow. He claims willingness to fight and depose a ruthless despot (his father), but first needs to “run away till I’m bigger” — an incubation period which Volumnia did not need for

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<sup>31</sup> Arden, Pg. 179, 1.3.40.

<sup>32</sup> Arden, pg. 181, 1.3.57-8.

<sup>33</sup> Arden, pg. 388-9, 5.3.128-9. Shakespeare withholds young Martius’ age from us as well.

his father, whom she sent straight into war still “tender-bodied.”<sup>34</sup> Shakespeare almost methodically effaces young Martius’ presence in *Coriolanus* to the point of enigmatic irrelevance, making the son less of an individual being and more of a cypher for his elusive, recalcitrant father, the play’s unwilling protagonist.<sup>35</sup> For this reason, the battle over young Martius’ fate represents a battle over the elder Martius as well, and the clichéd paradigm reverses in the play’s hermeneutic: like son, like father.

An analysis of Young Martius should first consider the presence of children more broadly in Shakespeare, particularly the role played by children in tragically-constructed works. If Young Martius can provide any insight into the person of his father, such a project stands to profit from ascertaining the archetypal dramatic function, to the extent one may be located, of children throughout Shakespeare’s body of work. From a brief survey, the case for an archetype is strong. Even early in his career, a link between young characters and tragedy emerges: Adonis, whose youth serves as an explicit component of his character, suffers death from a wild boar as he flees Venus’ passion in the 1593 epillion *Venus and Adonis*. Other notable children occur in comedies, like Moth in *Love’s Labor’s Lost* and the Pages in *As You Like It*, as instruments of ridicule of the play’s central and more adult figures. However, characters like Young Lucius in *Titus Andronicus*, Brutus’ page in *Julius Caesar*, and Mamillius in *The Winter’s Tale* not only serve important dramatic functions in tragic

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<sup>34</sup> Arden, 1.3.6-14. Volumnia to Virgilia: “...when youth with comeliness plucked all gaze his way, when for a day of kings’ entreaties a mother should not sell him an hour from her beholding, I, considering how honor would become such a person...was pleased to let him seek danger where he was like to find fame. To a cruel war I sent him...”

<sup>35</sup> Shakespeare frequently avoided extensive roles for young children, although several of his most famous younger roles (Mamillius in *The Winter’s Tale*, young Macduff and Fleance in *Macbeth*) fall as victims to the tragic whims of adults surrounding them. It is this author’s view that Shakespeare employs children as dramatic signifiers for the crimes of standard society, and young Martius functions precisely in the same manner.

structures, but they also owe their existence to Shakespeare's invention, as the source materials do not include those characters.<sup>36</sup> In the history plays, children die as pawns in the political games of the adults around them, from Arthur (*King John*) to Edward V and his brother (*Richard III*). Finally, in the high tragedies and beyond, several prominent children perish as victims in the evils of the play's action: Macduff's unsettlingly precocious son, Mamillius in *The Winter's Tale*, and as sometimes played, Lear's Fool as well.<sup>37</sup> Young Martius comes from this same period, but his unique mix of proximity to the play's dramatic epicenter (the son of Coriolanus, the play's protagonist) and near-invisibility within the play's actual linguistic fabric (few lines or scenes) is without equal in Shakespeare's work. No child is simultaneously so critical to the narrative, yet so thoroughly relegated to insignificance — as a person more spoken of than speaking (Valeria's speech concerning Young Martius runs over ten lines, while Young Martius himself receives a paltry two in act 5), Coriolanus' child seems to exist more within the realm of possibility, of becoming, than the realm of being.

The singularity of Young Martius' character grows starker if paired alongside the scholarly consensus on Shakespeare's children, an area of study beginning in the early twentieth century but remaining somewhat under-assessed since. At the turn of the twentieth century, critics like Bradley and Ethel Moore turned their attention to Shakespeare's unusual employment of children as dramatic devices. In other drama of the period, children almost never appeared as characters, making Shakespeare's rather minor inclusion of children

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<sup>36</sup> Blake, Ann. "Children and Suffering in Shakespeare's Plays." *The Yearbook of English Studies* 23 (1993): 293-304.

<sup>37</sup> Also in *Macbeth*, Banquo's son Fleance is not killed but narrowly escapes the murderous intentions of Macbeth's assassins, later prophesized to one day become King of Scotland, a position filled at the play's end by the dynastically separated Malcolm — a lingering premonition for future bloodshed, for which the vanished Fleance serves as a potent symbol.

relative to his total number of characters and the early modern England's child-filled population more divergent from the norm.<sup>38</sup> From provisional, subjective analyses of the scale of Shakespeare's use of children, and the overall scarcity of children in early modern English drama, scholars have determined that Shakespeare expressed an unusually potent interest in children. Almost nobody used them, so Shakespeare's use of children remains an intentional anomaly.

With regards to dramatic function, most scholars agree that Shakespeare's children generally follow two principal characteristics: precocity and proxies for the emotions of the adult figures of their plays. Jadwiga Krupski expresses a unifying theory of the child in Shakespeare by tying its value in with symbolic representation:

Admittedly, these children function as causes or as ancillary factors which explain the emotions, passions and behavior of adult protagonists. Yet in [Shakespeare's] hands the used and abused child is vouchsafed an underlying importance; as the pawn in various power plays, it becomes the object of pity and admiration, the source of love and sacrifice, and often the agent of renewal.<sup>39</sup>

According to this reading, a near consensus among scholars, Shakespeare's precocious children act as agents for the inner selves of the adult characters alongside them, and

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<sup>38</sup> Radmila, Nastić. "The Child as Other in Shakespeare's Plays." *Gender Studies* 11, no. Supplement (2012): 1-11. According to Henry Partee, "of the roughly one thousand characters that Shakespeare creates, only about thirty are children, and only thirteen of these have fairly significant roles." This designation is to some degree arbitrary — depending on the criteria, some young characters count as children or not, and the evaluation of a "significant" child presence is inherently subjective — but it provides a solid demonstration of the paucity of children's roles in Shakespeare, despite his comparative affinity for the dramatic representation of children in early modern England, where children were often entirely omitted from literary production.

<sup>39</sup> Krupski, Jadwiga Karolina. *Shakespeare's Children*. Proquest Dissertations Publishing, 1993, pg. 15.

especially in tragedy, serving as symbolic embodiments of the crimes that these more mature characters commit. In *Macbeth*, the murder of Macduff's son becomes the most abominable, unnecessary act of barbarity committed by Macbeth as king; in death, Macduff's son incites the father to the bloody quest for vengeance culminating in Macbeth's overthrow and battlefield execution. Mamillius, whose heart cannot bear the strain of his father's jealous accusations against his mother Herminone, passes away offstage as Leontes deals with the repercussions of his unjust paranoia. Hermione returns to Leontes, but young Mamillius remains dead, a symbol of the permanent damage caused by Leontes' intemperate madness, and a physical sign of an ultimately reunited but deeply wounded family. In these tragic episodes, children serve as keys for accessing the complex psychology of central characters.

Specifically, however, the scholarship on children in Shakespeare has failed to adequately account for the particularity of Young Martius, blandly or curtly categorize him within a pre-established systemic framework for studying Shakespearian children rather than approaching him as an individual character unique to his dramatic source. Young Martius is held by scholars — in practice, if not always in theory — as an uninteresting nonentity, whose dramatic potential is only barely exploited by the playwright outside of his few lines in the intercession scene. We see this dissatisfying evaluation in Moore's brief evaluation of Young Martius, a single sentence: "In *Coriolanus*, Young Martius kneeling before Coriolanus, tests his father's depth of feeling and his failure to carry out evil intents when in the presence of innocence."<sup>40</sup> Writing eighty years later, Jadwiga Krupski offers a similarly dismissive interpretation of Young Martius' dramatic utility in an otherwise excellent exhaustive study of Shakespeare's child characters:

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<sup>40</sup> Moore, 38.



In the whole canon, there is none other to be found of a child painted in such repulsive colors. Coupled with Volumnia's proud and gratified acknowledgement that here her grandson echoes 'On's father's moods', it still places this vicious little boy among the other helpless child victims.<sup>41</sup>

Krupski, like virtually every other commentator on the play from its inception to the present, reads Valeria's story of the butterfly at face-value, accepting Volumnia's narrative without hesitation. In doing so, Krupski regards the butterfly solely as a material being, an innocent creature killed by a "vicious" young man likely to abuse other small animals as well. By disregarding the butterfly's potency as a symbol both within *Coriolanus* and outside the play in broader early modern literary culture by focusing entirely on its physical presence, we lose an important opportunity to read the butterfly scene as a figurative enactment for the struggle over Young Martius' soul between his kind mother and indomitable grandmother, trapped between native innocence and socialized malevolence. This reading also neglects to account for the strong connection between the adult Martius and the butterflies of acts 4 and 5; compared separately to a grub metamorphosing into a butterfly, and then a boy chasing a butterfly, *Coriolanus* cannot be properly conceived outside of the play's preoccupation with associating its protagonist with this literary symbol.

Young Martius has traditionally received attention from scholars only in a broad context, which deprives us of any focused attempt to reckon with his dramatic purpose as a child character without a role in Shakespeare's source material, Plutarch, and thus an original presence in the play's theatrical structure. Plutarch only mentions *Coriolanus'* children once, and early in his *Life*: "It was his mother's will and choice which dictated his marriage, and he

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<sup>41</sup> Krupski, 218.

continued to live in the same house with her, even after his wife had borne his children.”<sup>42</sup>

When his sources stipulated children, Shakespeare was not beyond cutting them from his adaptations, even in significant cases like Iago’s child in Cinthio’s proto-*Othello*, which Shakespeare cut to leave Iago and Emelia conveniently childless. The same option existed for *Coriolanus*; if Shakespeare eliminated Plutarch’s prescribed children from his play, the difficulties of representing Coriolanus’ family would be significantly lessened, freeing the playwright (as in *Othello*) to explore the more fully adult nature of the drama. *Othello*, then as now, is no place for children, either on or off the stage; *Coriolanus*, however, evidently warranted a child’s presence.

If we accept young Martius’ primary dramatic role in *Coriolanus* as being a crucial touchstone for accessing the past and person of his near-inscrutable father, then that butterfly he kills becomes far more meaningful than just a symbolic nexus for a family debate over child-rearing. In this light, the butterfly emerges as the key for understanding how its killer’s father grew into a uniquely challenging turbulent, obstinate rigidity. The butterfly’s proximity to Coriolanus is no accident; not once but twice more, in Act 4 and Act 5, characters make an explicit analogy between the general and the insect, in metaphors pregnant with the collected butterfly symbolism of the western literary tradition.

In Act 4, Cominius returns from an ill-fated attempt to achieve peace with the advancing Volscians, armed with disturbing news for the erstwhile disconcerted tribunes. When pressed for information by Menenius, Cominius gives full rein to his massed anger over Coriolanus’ prior disgrace and banishment:

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<sup>42</sup> Kilvert, Ian Scott, trans. *Makers of Rome: Nine Lives by Plutarch ... Translated with an Introduction by Ian Scott-Kilvert*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965, pg. 18.

Menenius: Pray, your news. / If Martius should be joined wi' th' Volscians —

Cominius: If? / He is their God. He leads them like a thing / Made by some other deity  
 than nature / That shapes man better, and they follow him / Against us brats with no  
 less confidence / Than boys pursuing summer butterflies, / Or butchers killing flies.<sup>43</sup>

For Cominius, a polytheistic Roman pagan of the sixth century B.C.E, referring to Martius as a God unto himself is no meager statement. In the Greco-Roman pantheon, communicated effectively to Shakespeare and his contemporaries via Golding's 1567 translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in addition to other classical sources, the union of Oranos (the sky) and Gaia (the earth) produced Titans and subsequently, the Olympian gods.<sup>44</sup> Cominius' claim that Coriolanus stands as a god before the Volscians emphasizes the extent of the banished general's authority, also revealing a near-religious fear that Coriolanus comes not of mother nature, but independently from the same primordial substance that formed the deities of earth and sky — in the Ovidian framework, pure chaos. Martius, reborn as Coriolanus within the bloodied and chaotic walls of Corioles — and christened as such by Cominius himself — metamorphoses from Roman to Volscian, man to god, and from god to “thing,” something even beyond classification or deification — such is the extent of Cominius' searching terror.

Had he ended there, Cominius would have accomplished his objective, that of striking fear of Coriolanus into Rome's Tribunes, but he continues, revealing an impulse more cathartic than altruistic of further describing the transformations Martius has undergone as Coriolanus. He relates urgently to the growing crowd, “they follow him / Against us brats with no less confidence / Than boys pursuing summer butterflies, / Or butchers killing flies.”

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<sup>43</sup> Arden, 4.6.88-96.

<sup>44</sup> See Golding's *Ovid* for a more precise rendering.

This represents a moment of profound intertextual dialogue, calling back almost explicitly to two prior tragedies of Shakespeare's career: *Titus Andronicus* and *King Lear*. Before arriving at the connections between the three tragedies, and what their relationship says about the butterfly's role in the play as symbolic agent for metamorphosis, the immediate valence of Cominius' doom-laden similes should be fully unpacked. First, he describes himself and his fellow Romans as "brats," a word clearly denoting children in a pejorative, near-contemptuous manner dating from the early sixteenth century.<sup>45</sup> Just as the adult Volscians loom ready to massacre Rome's brat-like inhabitants — the great destroying the small — so also do young boys (essentially, brats, enfolding his metaphor like a matryoshka doll) pursue butterflies, and butchers kill flies, with commensurate indiscrimination.<sup>46</sup> The first and immediate resonance of the butterfly in Cominius' speech is the recollection of Valeria's Act 1 tale of young Martius, playfully chasing a butterfly; secondary remembrances rise of Achilles' lament towards his fellow Greeks as opportunistic butterflies turning their mealy wings towards the summer, and Lear's dream of idyllic youthful eternity with Cordelia surrounded by gilded butterflies. In several indirect ways, Cominius' speech builds upon a larger trend in *Coriolanus* of children, death, and the butterfly existing in close, perturbing proximity.

A more cogent explanation is required for the final clause in Cominius' sequence of analogues for the impending destruction of Rome, the "butcher killing flies." What role does

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<sup>45</sup> "brat, n.2." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, January 2018, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/22756](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/22756). Accessed 22 March 2018.

<sup>46</sup> It should be noted the word "butcher" exists only once elsewhere in *Coriolanus*, and of all people and contexts, used by Cominius in speaking of his son's death: "O, well begged! / Were he the butcher of my son, he should / Be free as the wind. Deliver him..." (Arden, 1.9.87-9). Between these instances, "Butcher" tellingly functions primarily in relationship to Cominius (speaker), children (targets), and death (consequence).

this clause play in Cominius' rhetoric of destruction, if truly necessary for his message and not just hyperbolic redundancy? The answer lies in worlds elsewhere: the Rome of *Titus Andronicus* and elemental Britain of *King Lear*. Butterflies rarely appear in Shakespeare, but the fly as general concept occurs exceedingly more often, almost fifty times in the plural and over twice that in the singular across Shakespeare's body of work.<sup>47</sup> However, a "real" fly enters onto Shakespeare's stage only once, during Act 3 of *Titus* — a memorable scene where Titus castigates his brother for killing a fly upon his meat, like butchers would kill flies landing upon their wares.<sup>48</sup> Titus' deteriorating sanity seizes upon the fly as a proxy for innocent human life (here, his recently murdered sons and brutally assaulted daughter Lavinia), and Titus' sympathy towards this otherwise entirely expendable creature departs as capriciously as granted. In a brief flash of lucidity amid his madness, Titus realizes, as if for the first time, life's inviolable dignity — just as future "mad" characters in Shakespeare, from Malvolio to Lear, glimpse in their mental distress the previously obscured plight of others.<sup>49</sup> Here the fly operates as a collected proxy for innocent life, analogous to the butterfly's role in Spenser's *Muiopotmos* and *King Lear*.

Cominius' metaphor of "butchers killing flies" also powerfully evokes *Lear*, as Edgar begins the morbid ritual of leading his blinded father to his intended suicide; Gloucester, reflecting bitterly on Lear's banishment, Edmund's treachery, and Edgar's disappearance, grows eloquently anti-theistic: "As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods. / They kill us for

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<sup>47</sup> Refer for more details to Open Source Shakespeare:  
<https://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/search/search-results.php>.

<sup>48</sup> *Titus Andronicus*, OSS TLN 3.2.1513-4.

<sup>49</sup> Lear, on the heath: "Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are, / That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm, / How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides, / Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you / From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en / Too little care of this!" Open Source Shakespeare, TLN *King Lear* 3.4. 1831-6.

their sport.”<sup>50</sup> Fascinatingly, Gloucester blends three distinct components of what eventually becomes the substance of Cominius’ later speech, both men speaking in a state of rancorous despair: Gloucester’s cruel gods invoke Cominius’ belief that Coriolanus has ascended beyond divinity to smite the Romans; the gods killing for sport prefigures Cominius’ boys pursuing summer butterflies; and Gloucester’s use of “flies” (not butterflies) connects the gods with Cominius’ butchers in multiple senses — both by vocation and disposition. As Cominius compares Coriolanus to a boy chasing a butterfly, and thus in turn comparing him to his own son, he unconsciously reinforces an association initiated in Act 1 by Valeria, further affirmed by the conspicuous preoccupation of *Coriolanus* with classifying its protagonist, Rome’s most formidable adult warrior, as a “boy.”

One of the chief roles the word “butterfly” plays in *Coriolanus*, as previously demonstrated, is in establishing a link between young Martius and his father. This link becomes more meaningful when assessed alongside another issue of endangered youth in the play, the systemic labeling of Coriolanus as a boy; from Volumnia to the tribunes and finally, fatally, Aufidius, Coriolanus cannot escape the insult, which pierces him more deeply than any other excepting the allegation of “traitor” in Act 3. The label first occurs in Act 2, as Coriolanus triumphantly approaches Rome after his victory at Corioles; his mother, urging Menenius to proceed more quickly, speaks with characteristic forcefulness: “Honourable Menenius, / my boy Coriolanus approaches; for / the love of Juno, let's go.”<sup>51</sup> Although here meant in what appears an affectionate gesture from mother to son, Volumnia nevertheless treats Coriolanus not as an independent human being but as her progeny, always as “her son”

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<sup>50</sup> *King Lear*, OSS TLN 4.1. 2289-90.

<sup>51</sup> *Arden*, 2.1.99-100.

or “her boy” with the possessive always prominently featured in her discourse with him. When Coriolanus refuses to appear before the people in Act 3 as an apologetic supplicant, Volumnia reacts with the indignation of a pet owner upset at the perceived ingratitude of their animal’s misbehaviors:

At thy choice then!  
 To beg of thee it is my more dishonor  
 Than thou of them. Come all to ruin. Let  
 Thy mother rather feel thy pride than fear  
 Thy dangerous stoutness, for I mock at death  
 With as big a heart as thou. Do as thou list.  
 Thy valiantness was mine, thou suck’st from me,  
 But owe thy pride thyself.<sup>52</sup>

Volumnia takes ownership of Coriolanus’ “valiantness,” attributing his martial aggression and strength to her maternal milk — echoing her earlier assertion in Act 1 that “the breasts of Hecuba / When she did suckle Hector looked not lovelier / Than Hector’s forehead when it spit forth blood...”<sup>53</sup> When read beside Volumnia’s claim of “[mocking] at death with as big a heart as thou,” her dismissive reduction of her son’s achievements as mere physical derivations from herself represents something slightly more than vicarious living through her son, but a distinct sense of total ownership. Hence the paradox: the “good” qualities of Coriolanus he owes not to himself but his mother, and biologically, not socially — yet his faults, like pride, innately result from nobody but himself. Volumnia vigorously denies her

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<sup>52</sup> Arden, 3.2.124-31.

<sup>53</sup> Arden, 1.3.42-4.

son the independence he desires of being “author of himself, [knowing] no other kin,” constantly reminding him that she, and no one else, is the author of his person and his fate.

The other significant moment when Coriolanus confronts the depiction of himself as “boy” occurs in the play’s final scene, as Aufidius seeks to obliterate his rival with wounds physical and verbal. Aufidius draws his rhetorical knives first: “Name not the God, thou boy of tears.”<sup>54</sup> Aufidius strips Coriolanus first of his name, then of his manhood, reducing him to a child clinging to a stolen name. Coriolanus, infuriated, unleashes:

Measureless liar, thou hast made my heart  
 Too great for what contains it. ‘Boy’? O slave! —  
 Pardon me, lords, ’tis the first time that ever  
 I was forced to scold. Your judgments, my grave lords,  
 Must give this cur the lie and his own notion —  
 Who wears my stripes impressed upon him, that  
 Must bear my beating to his grave — shall join  
 To thrust the lie unto him.  
 ...  
 Cut me to pieces, Volsces men and lads;  
 Stain all your edges on me. ‘Boy’, false hound!  
 If you have writ your annals true, ’tis there,  
 That, like an eagle in a dovecote, I

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<sup>54</sup> Arden, 5.6.104.



Fluttered your Volscians in Corioles:

Alone I did it. 'Boy'! <sup>55</sup>

Note how Coriolanus obsessively quotes and returns Aufidius' charge three separate times, disbelievingly, each time spitting back the insult with pure incredulous contempt, as if rolling it over in his mouth like an exotic gustatory sensation, unsure if it really exists or the world is just deceiving him.<sup>56</sup> This moment of Aristotelian *anagnorisis* or of tragic self-recognition, analogous in Shakespearian tragedy to Macbeth's realization that his mortal foe Macduff was not born of woman or Othello's delayed understanding that "Honest Iago" was anything but, unravels the inner spirit of the protagonist, stripping away their fragile self-conceptions and ushering in a chaotic self-negation which heralds imminent death. In Macbeth's case, *anagnorisis* removes his prophesy-endowed invulnerability, the one item remaining in his slipping power, twisted in an instant from his salvation to fate's irrevocable death sentence, imbued within Macduff's avenging sword; Othello, in the same vein, newly sees with new eyes as his keen sense of wounded, vengeful heroism evaporates as he contemplates the wife he murdered, and reputation he destroyed. Coriolanus, the greatest warrior of the Italian

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<sup>55</sup> Arden, 5.6.104-117

<sup>56</sup> Martius calls Aufidius a "slave", which Peter Holland suggests represents a reciprocated class insult responding to Aufidius' dismissal of Martius as a "boy" (slave, servant). Concurrently, the OED cites Aufidius for defining "boy" as "a male person of low birth or status" — some productions read the exchange through this class lens, but I disagree with that assessment. For Aufidius to call Martius "low-born" would properly resonate if Martius indeed came from the lower classes of Rome, which Volumnia's early monologues refute; in returning "slave", Martius is more likely to have been attacking Aufidius' autonomy and control of his own fate, implying that Martius had always held Aufidius in his power; this reading coincides with the OED definition of slave as "used as a term of contempt, now archaic", a use of the term employed elsewhere by Martius (and cited by the OED) when he states "Where is that slave which told me they had beat you to your trenches?" "slave, n.1 (and adj)." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, January 2018, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/181477](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/181477). Accessed 28 March 2018.

peninsula, derives his self-worth from merit-awarded manhood gained from battles fought, deeds achieved, and wounds endured. The Roman society around him acknowledges manhood with respect to martial prowess; by this standard, Coriolanus reigns supreme, the warrior among warriors, adult among adults, the man among men. Aufidius, in stripping from him first his cognomen and second his manhood with the poisonous insult, “boy of tears,” removes the final critical pillar of Coriolanus’ self-worth: the understanding that the world recognizes him as an independent adult, captain of his own fate, author of himself. A child is author of nothing. Why do the characters of *Coriolanus* continually associate Martius with a child? Aside from the remarkable influence of his mother, the strongest connection emerges in relation to his own child, the rarely present “Young Martius.”

The final occurrence of “butterfly” in *Coriolanus* belongs to Menenius, who returns from his failed embassy to the Volscian camp with his spirit in ruins and pessimism emanating from his every orifice. Sicinius consults with the disgraced ambassador, hoping for signs of mercy from Coriolanus that Menenius doubts even his family can release:

Menenius Agrippa: See you yond coign o' the Capitol, yond  
corner-stone?

Sicinius Velutus: Why, what of that?

Menenius Agrippa: If it be possible for you to displace it with your  
little finger, there is some hope the ladies of  
Rome, especially his mother, may prevail with him.

But I say there is no hope in't: our throats are  
sentenced and stay upon execution.

Sicinius Velutus: Is't possible that so short a time can alter the condition of a man!

Menenius Agrippa: There is differency between a grub and a butterfly; yet your butterfly was a grub. This Coriolanus is grown from man to dragon: he has wings; he's more than a creeping thing.<sup>57</sup>

In the context of the play's drama, this scene occurs immediately after Volumnia procures Coriolanus' agreement to avert the wrath of his Volscian armies from Rome, as well as securing his intent for peace between their two nations. The audience knows, from the previous intercession scene, that Rome is saved — and in forty lines, Rome too will know of its salvation — but before any celebration of obstructed destruction may commence, Shakespeare places this grim conversation, one based on a no-longer-factual premise (Coriolanus' lack of mercy, the city's imminent inevitable annihilation) directly following the intercession scene in a way that invites dialogue between Menenius' disillusioned view of Coriolanus' nature and the contradicting reality of the preceding contest of wills between the general and his mother.

Spurned and rejected, Menenius responds to Sicinius' urgent offstage queries with dripping irony. He compares the remaining chances of persuading Coriolanus to relent as equivalent to the possibility of Sicinius ripping a “quoin,” or cornerstone, from Rome's Capitol building with his little finger. This jab reflects several bleak psychological currents coursing through the Senator's mind: A desire to equivocate rather than directly answer the tribune; distant echoes of his stated belief in Act 2 that the tribunes could “do nothing alone”;

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<sup>57</sup> OSS, TLN 5.4.3730-3743

and subliminally, a charge that the tribunes' success strips the Capitol of its foundation, identifying them as civic parasites of the lowest order, analogous to subterranean sappers during an urban siege. Terrified and perplexed by Coriolanus' rigid forbearance, Sicinius' reply appears innocuous makes little sense given his prior views of Coriolanus' personality: "Is't possible that so short a time can alter the condition of a man?" Sicinius' cry raises an important question: in what sense has Coriolanus' condition considerably changed since his departure from Rome? In almost every respect, Coriolanus' actions make complete sense given the tribunes' unflattering opinions of the general. In act 2, Sicinius denigrates Coriolanus as peerlessly proud, ambitious, and spiteful — all specific qualities, taken together, which easily predict the outcome now facing him: imminent doom before a foreign army headed by the proud leader he had exiled.

Perhaps Sicinius refers primarily to changes in the aspect of Coriolanus' personality pertaining to his love for those close to him in Rome: Cominius, Menenius, his family, and his mother. Even here, Sicinius fails to accurately assess Coriolanus' character — when Cominius and Menenius previously endeavored most strenuously to influence Coriolanus' actions, their counsel fell on deaf, unwilling, ears. Only Volumnia proved at all capable of bending her recalcitrant son's will to something beyond his quasi-instinctual drive towards incessant self-enacting, and unknown to Sicinius or Menenius, she had just demonstrated this unique ability outside Rome for a final — and fatal — occasion. Sicinius' comment further betrays his consistent failure to comprehend the character of the man he worked to undermine, thwart and banish, but it also functions textually as a prompt for Menenius' deeply resonant invocation of the butterfly.

Awed into terrified abjection, Menenius' only possible response to Sicinius is to describe what he sees, like Cominius before him, as a mythically non-human antagonist. Agreeing with Sicinius' mistaken premise that Coriolanus' current actions are inconsistent with his natural disposition, he utters with onerous dread: "There is differency between a grub and a butterfly; / yet your butterfly was a grub. This Coriolanus is grown / from man to dragon: he has wings; he's more than a / creeping thing."<sup>58</sup> Metamorphosis again drives the butterfly's valence — here Coriolanus, formerly a grub, becomes a butterfly; formerly a man, he morphs into a dragon. The differences between the butterfly and dragon in the early modern imagination assist in picking apart Menenius' series of metaphors. The dragon, a fabled beast-like creature dating as far back in English literature as *Beowulf* and redolent in the western tradition dating past the Greeks and even biblical times, became known by the early seventeenth century to most usually denote a monstrous reptile "combining ophidian and crocodilian structure, with strong claws, like a beast or bird of prey, and a scaly skin; it is generally represented with wings, and sometimes as breathing out fire."<sup>59</sup> Notably, Menenius specifically describes the Coriolanus-dragon as with wings, negating the only other relevant possibility for a "dragon" in English literature, an uncommonly large snake. The details used by Menenius physically envision Coriolanus as a winged, fire-breathing reptilian creature — not as an ovidian serpent, which carries different symbolic properties. However, there emerges an inescapable potential third association for the dragon, paralleled with this last butterfly of the play — Satan. Dating back to the Bible, and later exploited by Christian poets like John Milton in *Paradise Lost*, dragons held an always-peripheral threat in Christian

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<sup>58</sup> Arden, 5.4.11-14.

<sup>59</sup> "dragon, n.1." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2018, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/57429](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/57429). Accessed 10 April 2018.

storytelling of demonic intervention, a resonance that Shakespeare's early modern audiences would have found inescapably present when hearing Menenius' comparison.<sup>60</sup>

A brief note on the dragon's place in Shakespeare's canon of extant work revealingly ties the creature closer to the butterfly in Shakespearian etymology. The word's usage, in basic or variant form, transpires twenty-two occasions across the plays and poems; like the butterfly, for which five of its seven instances occur in tragedies, the dragon appears most frequently in the tragedies, at eleven times (not counting the late Romances such as *Pericles*, *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*, which bear keenly tragic qualities of their own) and only twice in comedy; the most common symbolic role of "dragon" is as a description for darkness, of the night, and herald of doom. In *King Lear*, a source for one of the butterfly's appearances as Lear's imagined courtiers in act 5, the first scene features the King taking an unprecedented step by comparing a human being to a dragon — himself — when warning Kent to cease his efforts to pacify Lear from persecuting his daughter: "Come not between the dragon and his wrath."<sup>61</sup> This is the first time, aside from a brief peripheral detail in *Henry IV Pt I*, that "dragon" is used to describe a human being. The dichotomous role of the dragon and butterfly emerges here in *King Lear* — when threatening his daughter, Lear becomes the dragon, and when he later embraces her, the butterfly steals into his mind and illumines his imagination with the shimmering gold of an avaricious dragon's sweetest dreams. In both cases, a vulnerable child, Cordelia, serves as the imaginative spur for these flying animals' entryway into her father's mercurial mind.

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<sup>60</sup> See the OED entry under "Dragon" as cited previously for more information on this definition; refer to term 4a.

<sup>61</sup> *King Lear*, OSS TLN 1.1.127.

In *Coriolanus*, “dragon” appears three times, with Menenius’ dragon-butterfly pairing coming last, and in each case, the dragon is compared to Coriolanus. Curiously, each case follows his banishment from Rome, beginning with the departure scene at the initiation of act 4:

...though I go alone,  
 Like to a lonely dragon, that his fen  
 Makes fear'd and talk'd of more than seen — your son  
 Will or exceed the common or be caught  
 With cautelous baits and practice.<sup>62</sup>

To calm the frayed nerves and apprehension of his family, Coriolanus assures them of his will to exceed commonality in exile, intimidating others by his notoriety but rarely being seen in the manner of a “lonely dragon.” *I will be safe, I will thrive*, this statement affirms. As Lear emphasizes the ferocity of the dragon, Coriolanus highlights the dragon’s solitude; however, it bears pointing out that Lear and Coriolanus each share the sharp temper and inclination towards self-isolation that they mutually identify as dragon-like characteristics.

Upon joining Aufidius’ forces at Antium, Coriolanus soon proves his value to the Volscian state in charismatic leadership and fearsome martial prowess, especially in his uncompromising violence directed against his former countrymen. Hopelessly overshadowed and broodingly jealous, Tullus Aufidius draws an independent comparison between the fighting skill of his rival and the primal winged beast Menenius would soon find Coriolanus to be:

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<sup>62</sup> Arden, 4.1.35-9.

Although it seems,  
 And so he thinks, and is no less apparent  
 To the vulgar eye, that he bears all things fairly.  
 And shows good husbandry for the Volscian state,  
 Fights dragon-like, and does achieve as soon  
 As draw his sword; yet he hath left undone  
 That which shall break his neck or hazard mine,  
 Whene'er we come to our account.<sup>63</sup>

Aufidius begrudgingly admits Coriolanus' sincerity, industry, and potency, describing his fighting as "dragon-like...[achieving] as soon / As [drawing] his sword," chillingly echoing Volumnia's act 2 comparison of her son to an engine of death whose nervy arm, "being advanced, declines, and then men die."<sup>64</sup> This duo of associations between Coriolanus and a dragon, the first delivered by Coriolanus himself and the second by his enemy, culminates in the most physical, visceral and powerful of these, Menenius' dual butterfly-dragon metaphors following the intercession scene, when the "lonely dragon" of such warlike strength mortally accedes in a moment of weakness to the full-bore emotional manipulations of his mother. The word "dragon" is very much in dialogue with "butterfly" in *Coriolanus*, a dialectic drawing ambiguously yet meaningfully upon *King Lear*'s fraught generational relationship between Lear and Cordelia.

In possession of non-human, bestial, and even Satanic properties, Menenius' dragon depicts Coriolanus as a materialized, proto-Christian version of Cominius' far less

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 4.7.29-36.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 2.1.156.



anachronistic Hellenistic deity born out of primordial Chaos.<sup>65</sup> Menenius pairs this unnatural metamorphosis from man to dragon alongside the biologically legitimate, naturally occurring transformation of a grub into a butterfly, with the “man” corresponding to “grub” and “dragon” corresponding to “butterfly.” He does so to provide a material analogue for his disturbing suggestion of Coriolanus’ trans-species alteration — or, perhaps, to enhance the enormous chasm between Coriolanus’ power and that of Sicinius, comparing the tribunes to grubs as a starting point for his figurative explorations of Martius’ supra-human metamorphosis. “There is a difference between a grub and a butterfly,” Menenius intones — implying that Coriolanus is the latter — “yet your butterfly was a grub.” Two connotations emerge for this final phrase, equally venomous towards his interlocutor: first, that Coriolanus used to be a grub, but upon his exile into the ‘world elsewhere,’ grew wings and became a butterfly; and consequently, more simply put, Sicinius fits into the metaphor not as a butterfly but as a grub. A corrupt and treacherous tribune representing the people for his own gain alone, he, unlike Coriolanus, is a lowly and debased “creeping thing.”

Menenius’ lingering discord towards the tribune only encompasses one aspect of his speech, although it remains a significant thread that permeates his discourse through the play. Its primary function remains the description of Coriolanus as something altogether greater than something bounded with mere humanity, common personhood, or mortal vulnerability; selecting the dragon and butterfly as metaphorical vehicles seems an odd juxtaposition of the innocent with the fearsome, the childlike with the demonic. Why does Menenius frame his reflections of Coriolanus’ metamorphosis using two similar figurative statements that each draw from radically divergent symbolic traditions, the villainous dragon and naïve butterfly?

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In this moment, Menenius inadvertently captures a critical issue in the interpretation of Coriolanus' persona. Coriolanus offers a difficult evaluative test, framed by his seeming control of all events around him, evident external power, and authority to enact his will — but at every turn except on the battlefield, encountering opposition and relenting, even to his detriment. Is Coriolanus responsible for his deeds, a true war machine without compunction, or does he suffer from a paradoxical lack of power over his surroundings, a victim of his fate or upbringing? Menenius holds firmly to the first view — he would never doubt for a moment that Coriolanus could accomplish something if opposed by another — and yet he compares Coriolanus to a butterfly, an agent of endangered youth and the fragile caprice of nature, previously used by Shakespeare to that effect in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *King Lear*.

How does the butterfly work to unify these ostensibly disparate strands of thought? To reprise what we know — the butterfly appears three times in *Coriolanus*, once in association with Young Martius, and twice as a figurative description for the child's warlike father. In the first case, "butterfly" operates as one of only two "scenes" for Coriolanus' son, who only physically appears onstage during the act 5 intercession scene; in the following two cases, the "butterfly" depicts a symbolic transformation of Coriolanus from grub to butterfly, and a young boy chasing butterflies. Coriolanus' son, Young Martius, is traditionally pigeonholed by scholars into a reductive framework imported from broader claims, with his dramatic role judged entirely either by his single lines in opposition to his father, or by Valeria's butterfly story, which is uniformly interpreted alongside Volumnia as proof of the child's innate barbarity. However, a closer analysis of Young Martius as a unique example of a sustained phenomenon — Shakespeare's unusual, thoughtful selective employment of children for

dramatic purposes — reveals a layer of complexity previously untapped by scholars, especially in Young Martius' relationship with the butterfly he kills and by extension, with his imposing father. Examining this symbolic relationship, and what it contributes to the play's dialectic of nature and nurture, comprises the main thrust of the concluding discussion to follow.

### Concluding Remarks: Who is Caius Martius Coriolanus? Who is Young Martius?

Interpretation of *Coriolanus* has rested for centuries almost entirely on assessing the qualities of its protagonist to a greater extent than any other Shakespearian tragedy excepting *Hamlet*. The specter of Coriolanus haunts every discussion, scene, and debate held on stage during the play, and scholars followed suit. Most discussions of the play begin and end with a routine analysis, or a reckoning, rather, with the character of the protagonist. These analyses operate almost uniformly under the basic assumption that Coriolanus was born a soldier — and if he grew into a war machine through the heavy-handed influence of his mother, then this intervention only exacerbated something already present, an inherent component of the character's persona. In her introduction to the play for the 2016 Norton Shakespeare, Katherine Eisaman Maus admirably outlines this doctrinal consensus: "Coriolanus does not merely happen to be inflexible and narrow-minded; too much tolerance, too much sensitivity, would endanger him to the core. So too would introspection, which might reveal an unwelcome complexity within."<sup>66</sup> Ironically enough, scholars often display this same inflexibility and narrow-mindedness in their evaluations of Coriolanus' character or the play. Because the tragedy does not conform to Shakespeare's archetypal tragic structure with its many deaths, explicit interiority via soliloquies, and an easily traceable emotional trajectory for the protagonist, the play and its central figure have historically been found lacking.

The solitary living Shakespearean butterfly of act 1, scene 3 disproves this shallow reading of *Coriolanus*, because it connects Young Martius — and by extension his father —

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<sup>66</sup> Shakespeare, William. *The Norton Shakespeare*. Edited by Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Katherine Eisaman Maus, and Jean Elizabeth Howard. Vol. 3. 3 vols. Norton, 2016, pg. 2937.

to a rich history of butterfly symbolism in western European literature. The following reading of Shakespeare's use of the butterfly in *Coriolanus* places the three butterflies of the play in the context of the butterfly's historical meanings. In chasing a butterfly, Young Martius courts the death of innocence, something innate and beautiful but threatened by the cruel world around it, which seeks to use, abuse, or stifle its naïve virtue. By chasing it and catching it again, Young Martius subliminally enacts the dueling influences of Virgilia and Volumnia over his upbringing and concurrently the kind of person he is to become; ultimately falling (incurring pain) and lashing out, projecting this anger outwards, Young Martius "mammocks" the butterfly, foreshadowing the eventual triumph of Volumnia's martial philosophy over Virgilia's protective gentility and a consequently premature loss of his childhood innocence, inciting a gnawing insecurity at the boy's soul which will fuel his obstinacy and violence. The result, ultimately, is another Coriolanus — a man who would, in Volumnia's words, rather see a sword than look upon a schoolmaster.

Young Martius functions dramatically in *Coriolanus* as a cypher for his father at the same age, more than merely a tool for Volumnia to parade around as a source for guilt during the intercession scene as commonly assumed. This link is established via Cominius' and Menenius' comparisons of Coriolanus in acts 4 and 5 to both a "boy chasing butterflies," forging a direct parallel between father and son, and he himself as a butterfly, reversing roles and placing the adult Coriolanus in a position of danger as the butterfly being chased by his own son. Young Martius and Coriolanus are the only two characters in the play associated in any way, literal or figurative, with the butterfly; this link is indelible, persistent and undeniable. Coriolanus is described in the first case as a transformed god from man, who without mercy destroys the guilty and the innocent like a boy chasing summer butterflies.

Metamorphosis, a strong symbolic current of the butterfly dating from Ovid and before is invoked here — but butterflies do not thrive, but perish, in Cominius' series of similes. The symbolic agent of metamorphosis dies by metamorphosis, an allusion to the death of Coriolanus' childhood and the psychologically traumatic transition between his boyhood and becoming Volumnia's adult warrior, a transition his son is currently in the process of making despite Virgilia's opposing influence. In the second case, Menenius depicts Coriolanus as growing from grub, common mankind, to a butterfly, a winged creature Menenius then compares with the demonic, fearsome dragon of apocryphal lore; this duality in the elder Coriolanus, undeniably exceptional but torn between two natures, butterfly and dragon, both winged but diametrically opposed in all else, embodies the dilemma faced by Coriolanus' son as his mother (innocent butterfly) and grandmother (severe dragon) battle over his development into adulthood.

These connections between Young Martius and Coriolanus demonstrate their extreme similitude in a way previously unaddressed within studies of the play. Perceiving Young Martius as a vision of his father and vice-versa is not necessarily new nor particularly controversial. For decades, scholars have claimed if not exact duplicacy, a radically intertwined spiritual disposition shared by Young Martius and his father, positing that Young Martius is destined to become another Coriolanus after his father's death. However, Volumnia's narrative of Young Martius' encounter with the butterfly has become scholarly consensus — to my knowledge, not one commentator on the play has read this puzzling anecdote as evidence for Young Martius' gentleness and tranquility; instead, scholars trot out Valeria's story as brief procedural proof for the clichéd assertion that Young Martius is an un-self-knowing brute, like his father.

The play's familial structure of Coriolanus at the center surrounded by Volumnia, Virgilia and Young Martius has received some attention, but rarely in ways that account for any potential complexities in the relationship between Young Martius and his father. By analyzing the impact of the butterfly on the father-son relationship in Coriolanus, and bearing in mind that Shakespeare's inclusion of Young Martius represents a deliberate extension of his source material from Plutarch, a rich field of additional insight becomes available into this late tragedy. The intention of this project is not to arrive at any grand conclusions regarding the link between Young Martius and Coriolanus, but it does assert this link's inextricable existence and its necessary inclusion in any truly accurate analysis of Coriolanus' character, actions, and fate. Past scholars have not identified the subliminal significance of the butterfly in the play's dramatic fabric, or in the relationship dynamics between Coriolanus and his family; perhaps if future scholars took greater account of the butterfly as symbolic link between Young Martius and his father, a symbol with one foot in Coriolanus and the other in a long and full tradition of literary utilization, then a more just understanding may be reached of the fundamentally complex nature of Shakespeare's final tragic protagonist, long dismissed as opaque and thus inconsequential.

This project is a protest directed against this complacent reading of Valeria's butterfly tale, which neglects to place this living butterfly with the figurative butterflies later in the play, or with western literary treatment of the butterfly from Ovid to others of Shakespeare's plays. If we read the butterfly story of act 1 in context, it becomes far more than merely rote proof of the son's barbarity. The butterfly chased by Young Martius is many things, including his father (Volumnia will cast her son aside at the end of the play, with Young Martius set to become his father's replacement), his own childhood innocence, threatened by Volumnia's

desire to mold him into a male version of herself, and the very notion of self-determination, Coriolanus' most noble wish, suffocated by his rigorous and uncompromising education. To accomplish this goal, my methodology has been less theoretical than textual — to perform my research and evaluate these texts in new ways, I have focused on close-reading and deep-reading disparate texts using both time-honored linguistic comparisons and newer methods like digital concordances and online databases. My central goal has been highly trained on illuminating the recurring instance of a single word in a single play, and any future work on this connection can bring more theoretical considerations to bear on the connections arrived at in this project if they so wish.

I do not mean to suggest Valeria's butterfly tale reveals that Young Martius is a gentle and kind person — his few lines, actions and reported behavior obviously do not accord with such a claim — but it may support the idea that Young Martius is caught between two identities, his natural disposition and the warrior Volumnia directs him towards, a struggle reflected both in the debate between Volumnia and Virgilia and the half-an-hour playful chase between Young Martius and the butterfly. For thirty minutes, Young Martius existed harmoniously with the flying insect, catching it and letting it go again, bestowing a child's curiosity and mercy — but upon falling to the ground, Volumnia's vision for Young Martius' future wins out over Virgilia's more passively advocated path, and Young Martius maimed the butterfly, symbolically rending his childhood innocence. This story represents an allegorical re-enactment of Coriolanus' own childhood, a childhood now repeated with the same consequences by his young son. As a result, the butterfly Coriolanus was became the dragon Volumnia wanted him to be, a perfect war machine encasing an individual human being who may have become something different if not compelled to extinguish his childhood



innocence for a sinister metamorphosis from man to butterfly, and butterfly to dragon. As a Menenius' mighty dragon, and Cominius' inscrutable god, Coriolanus' expresses his noblest wish while surrounded by legions of tirelessly loyal soldiers, to be the author of himself, and know no other kin. However, the dragon who speaks vocalizes his wish using a borrowed forked tongue and borrowed scales, forged in the fires of his mother's frustrated aspirations and enforced upon himself. His wish is that of Spenser's Clarion, another butterfly who meets a treacherous end — the simple desire to be free.

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