

City University of New York (CUNY)

## CUNY Academic Works

---

Dissertations and Theses

City College of New York

---

2023

### Don't Say Gay: Love Language in Coriolanus

Patrick Lynch  
*CUNY City College*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cc\\_etds\\_theses/1028](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cc_etds_theses/1028)

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

---

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).  
Contact: [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu)

Patrick Lynch  
Professor András Kiséry  
November 29, 2022

Don't Say Gay: Love Language in *Coriolanus*

I ~ Introduction

Know thou first,  
I loved the maid I married; never man  
Sighed truer breath. But that I see thee here,  
Thou noble thing, more dances my rapt heart  
Than when I first my wedded mistress saw  
Bestride my threshold. (IV.v.126-131)<sup>1</sup>

These surprisingly erotic words are spoken by Tullus Aufidius to Caius Martius in Act IV of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* when the two men are brought together following the dramatic political events that have driven Martius out of Rome and into the Volscian Aufidius' welcoming embrace, whose first impulse on recognizing Martius is, "Let me twine my arms about that body ..." (IV.v.119, ellipses mine). Prior to this concupiscent clasp, these men have incessantly recounted their mutual contempt while relishing their memories of many battles fought in hand to hand combat. It is rather remarkable then that beneath their vehement bravado, as Aufidius's

---

<sup>1</sup> All citations by act, scene and line number are from the Folger Shakespeare Library edition of *Coriolanus* edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine

comparison to his wedding night suggests, there beats a pulse of desire that is obviously homosocial but may be homoerotic, and possibly homosexual.

Even more compelling evidence for this argument comes just a few lines later in Aufidius' psychologically labyrinthine monologue where he openly confesses the subconscious desires in his nocturnal dreams expressed as explicit verbal ejaculations filled with double entendre:

Thou hast beat me out  
 Twelve several times, and I have nightly since  
 Dreamt of encounters 'twixt thyself and me;  
 We have been down together in my sleep,  
 Unbuckling helms, fisting each other's throat  
 And waked half dead with nothing. (IV.v.134-139)

This may sound like typical military banter between two well-matched and belligerent enemy warriors whose admiration for each other's capabilities supersedes their mutual animosity, but it may also reveal intersubjective<sup>2</sup> longings that signify something much deeper, something like a love language, both erotic and romantic, between two men. It is the subtext of this language between Martius and Aufidius and their de rigueur homosocial relationship, which may be homosexual, and the gender constructs and contradictions therein, that this paper will explore to

---

<sup>2</sup> This term came to my attention in Jason Edward's essay, "Queer Meditations on *Coriolanus* in the Time of War" in *Shakesqueer: A Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare*, in which he speaks about the body, specifically the anus; I am referring to the intersubjectivity of conscious minds, the ability to communicate telepathically, or at minimum, communicate with subtle body language.

answer the essential question: for what purpose does Shakespeare add a layer of queerness onto these two characters when no such quality was present in any of his source materials.

Close readings of Shakespeare's sources, such as Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* and Livy's *The Roman Historie*, reveal no evidence of homoerotic or homosexual love language between Martius and Aufidius anywhere in the life story of Caius Martius Coriolanus. And, for the sake of due diligence, a close look at Plutarch's source, Dionysius of Halicarnassus' *Roman Antiquities*, also reveals no specific love language in the relationship between Martius and Aufidius. Geoffrey Bullough, editor of *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, acknowledges Dionysius' work and advises:

There was no English version of the history in the sixteenth century, and Shakespeare is unlikely to have known it, but that Plutarch was greatly indebted to it ... the relevant portions will show. (462 elipses mine)

It can be difficult to concede that Shakespeare was not familiar with *Antiquities* as the plot and text of *Coriolanus* so very closely follows that historical work: at moments it feels like one is reading Shakespeare's play. Even Bullough concedes, "Certainly Dionysius more than Livy gave the basis for Plutarch's—and so indirectly Shakespeare's—portrayal of some important personalities" (463). By exploring all three sources—Plutarch, Livy, and Dionysius,—we can unequivocally propose that it was Shakespeare who crafted the homoerotic sexual tension in the Martius-Aufidius relationship. The intensity of feeling which develops between the two men provides the impetus for bringing the drama not only to its climax but also to its tragic end: Martius' desire to be with Aufidius moves the plot forward. Their nonnormative relationship and homoerotic love language, or at minimum the possibility of these, pinpoint an instantiation of male-male desire, historically so often unspoken but given voice in *Coriolanus*, providing evidence for the literary lineage of same-sex love that has been hiding in plain sight throughout

the *longue durée*<sup>3</sup> of queer culture. Shakespeare's version of the long-standing rivalry between Caius Martius Coriolanus and Tullus Aufidius provides us with a lens of intimacy through which we can view these two men as people in love; a couple with all the manifold complexities of being in a long-term relationship.

## II ~ Intersubjectivity and Consciousness

It is essential to our understanding of the relationship between Martius and Aufidius to clarify that the primary means of communicating their desire has been intersubjective—a telepathic alertness—which up until Aufidius' confessional moment has lacked any verbal declaration of love; admiration has been articulated, but not desire or love. It is also essential to remember that same-sex lovers, what today we term homosexuals, have historically used covert means of communication to convey desire and interest in each other so as to protect themselves from social judgement and prejudice as well as from very real threats of danger. In coded communiqués—a look in the eyes, a nod, a hand gesture, or in the case between Martius and Aufidius, a metaphorical language—intersubjective communication is not explicit, it is insinuated. Understood, rather than elucidated.

Their intense intersubjective communication results in the consciousness of each man being dominated by the shadow of the other so completely that they've become intertwined as a pair, an almost mythological couple. This is best expressed by Aufidius in their hand-to-hand combat scene when he says to Martius, "Wert thou the Hector / That was the whip of your bragged progeny, / Thou shouldst not scape me here." (I.viii. 16-19). This reference to Hector is

---

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Longue\\_dur%C3%A9e](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Longue_dur%C3%A9e) - a view of history over extended periods of time to draw conclusions from trends and patterns

layered with two very important associations: first, that Martius is Rome itself, he is connected to the very founding families of Rome, the Trojans, thereby confirming his pedigree as a patrician, an elite noble crafted by Roman society with all its indoctrinations, making Martius the ideal *civis romanus*<sup>4</sup>. Second, that the relationship between Martius and Aufidius is associated with undertones of homoeroticism and male-male love by citing a reference, a tale very familiar to Shakespeare and presented in his 1602 play *Troilus and Cressida*, which describes how Achilles slew Hector in revenge for the killing of Patroclus, Achilles' friend and assumed lover. The allusion to this renowned same-sex love legend from antiquity demonstrates how the shadow of one consciousness can impress upon that of another so fully that the pair become practically inseparable as icons of male-male desire: like Achilles and Patroclus, like Martius and Aufidius; both couples echo the lineage of homosexual presences in literature. Colm Toibín states in his 1999 essay, *Roaming the Greenwood*, "you could find enough traces, or indeed direct evidence, in the work of say, Shakespeare and Marlowe and Bacon to declare them too, part of the gay tradition, the secret dotted line that runs right through Western literature" (1).

The concept of the shadow of an identity upon one's consciousness was examined by Freud in his 1917 essay, *Mourning and Melancholia*, specifically exploring the loss of love objects. He points out that the narcissistic libidinal ego can often bind itself to a love object in which "identification is the expression of there being something in common, which may signify love" (250). Hence, the qualities that make Martius and Aufidius such outstanding warriors are

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://civisromanus.io/> I am a Roman Citizen, an ideology that advocates all free Roman males could travel the world unmolested because the retribution of Rome would be so severe. This philosophy supports the free Roman male belief in domination over all.

the same qualities that attract them to each other: what they have heretofore expressed as hate, may in fact be love.

But in Martius' case, as progeny in Aufidius' allusion to Hector, there is another love object, Rome itself, or rather, the ideal of Rome. It is the loss of that ideal which brings Martius into a state of mourning and spurs him on to Antium towards Aufidius, his greater love object. Mourning manifests as melancholia as Martius conflates the two love objects; he transfers the loss of Rome onto Aufidius because his ego is searching for a Rome replacement. Freud explains:

Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on. In some people the same influences produce melancholia instead of mourning and we consequently suspect them of a pathological disposition. (243)

Martius is processing his loss of Rome when he arrives in Antium. Aufidius, who has always been the antithesis and enemy of Rome, suddenly becomes the perfect replacement and it is reasonable to deduce that the primary love object has always been Aufidius, but on an unexplored subconscious level. So, to suggest that Martius' mourning is turning into a case of melancholia is not far-fetched. Freud explains further:

But the free libido was not displaced on to another object; it was withdrawn into the ego. There, however, it was not employed in any unspecified way, but served to establish an identification of the ego with the abandoned object. Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object. (249)

The forsaken object for Martius is Rome and the shadow of Rome has been ever present on his ego, but that shadow is supplanted by Aufidius as the ego's replacement of the love object because Aufidius' death by Martius' hand would deepen the shadow of Rome on Martius' ego thus increasing his self-perception as the ideal Roman hero. But, with the loss of Rome the ideal, Martius' ego seeks a replacement for his shattered libidinal narcissism and attaches on Aufidius, the enemy of Rome, through whom he can actually focus on Rome and process his mourning. The shadow of Aufidius is now predominant on Martius' mind and we discover that there may be an even more complex reason why Aufidius supplants Rome: desire for the man himself. We begin to wonder if Aufidius was in fact always the shadow on Martius' mind and Rome was the superfluous accommodation to access thoughts of Aufidius.

Both mourning and melancholia expose Martius' vulnerability, perhaps for the very first time, and serve as the catalysts which brings him and Aufidius together in a transformatively new way. These two men desire each other and no longer hide behind defensive masculine armor, demonstrated by the metaphors of love that Aufidius uncharacteristically expresses and to which Martius responds with the positive exclamation, "You bless me, gods!" (IV.v.149) Love has transformed their relationship and quite predictably, as Freud points out: "In melancholia...countless separate struggles are carried on over the object, in which hate and love contend with each other" (256). Martius' loss of Rome, his Romanicholia, and subsequent transference to Aufidius, the enemy of Rome and Martius' ideal warrior mirror image, is better understood when we consider what it means for men like Martius to be Roman.

### III ~ Romanness and Virtus

Aufidius' expressive love language occurs at a critical moment in *Coriolanus* when Martius hits the lowest point of his trajectory, the proverbial rock bottom. Feeling utterly



betrayed by Rome—the state, the senate, his peers, the tribunes and plebs, and even his family who pushed him to betray his own instincts, “Well, I must do’t. / Away, my disposition, and possess me / Some harlot’s spirit!” (III.ii.137-139), fundamentally feminizing him in preparatory submission to meet Aufidius—he travels to Antium. There, to Martius’ great surprise, Aufidius showers him with ardent words of love. An intersubjective response perhaps to Martius’ private confession as he approaches Antium,

My birthplace hate I, And my love’s upon  
This enemy town. I’ll enter. If he slay me,  
He does fair justice; if he give way,  
I’ll do his country service. (IV.iv.29-32)

The profundity of that first line cannot be dismissed. Recalling the earlier association to Hector, we know that everything Martius is, is Roman. His noble and impressive ancestry is further chronologized by the tribune Brutus, whose loathing of Martius is equal only to Martius’ loathing of him, indicating just how ubiquitous, *hic et ubique*, this knowledge is:

How youngly he began to serve his country,  
How long continued, and what stock he springs of,  
The noble house o’ th’ Martians, from whence came  
That Ancus Martius, Numa’s daughter’s son,  
Who after great Hostilius here was king ... (II.iii.263-267)

Martius *is* his birthplace, the very place that now rejects him and all he believed in and accomplished as a *civis romanus*. But his predicament also offers him an escape: he is free to consider everything that Rome may have kept him from becoming which, as we discover, is the pursuit of Aufidius, but not as an enemy of Rome, as a love object that has been a shadow on his consciousness for some time.

Recalling a line from Martius' conversation with Cominius regarding Aufidius, "And, were I anything but what I am, / I would wish me only he." (I.i.257-258), we realize that an opportunity for Martius to explore this wish has finally arrived. But what exactly does he mean by wishing to be Aufidius? Not Roman? Never Roman? Perhaps being Aufidius would mean liberation from Rome's social indoctrinations upon which his entire identity has been curated: he would be free from the restrictions, customs, and expectations that keep him from realizing deeper desires, such as feelings for a man whom he not only admires as a soldier, but might also consider as a lover. Martius' melancholia reflects his longing to be with Aufidius: he obsesses over him and cannot stop asking about him. Martius must keep Aufidius' name on his lips in order to process the effects of Aufidius' shadow on his ego.

Another relationship that has shaped Martius' Romanness—one that has overshadowed him since birth and directly conflicts with his desire to be Aufidius—is the one with his mother, Volumnia. It is she who first presents the Hector reference, establishing the ancient lineage of their family and associating herself with the legendary Hecuba, Hector's mother. When chastising her daughter-in-law Virgilia's concern for Martius in battle and "His bloody brow" (I.iii.41), Volumnia states,

Away, you fool! It more becomes a man  
 Than gilt his trophy. The breasts of Hecuba,  
 When she did suckle Hector, looked not lovelier  
 Than Hector's forehead when it spit forth blood  
 At Grecian sword, contemning. (I.iii.42-46)

According to Roman custom, Martius was considered an orphan as a young boy when his father died. He was raised by his mother who was determined to make him a patrician nobleman to fulfill her need to maintain a male figure as head of the family. However, a Roman mother

was no substitute for a Roman father, who would invest in a young man the qualities that make him a *civis Romanus*. Perhaps Martius' desire to please his overzealous mother created the duality in which he strives to fulfill her wishes while simultaneously yearning to escape from them, to a man he admires, who might replace his missing father. Martius' assumption of the head of the family role in his youth validates Brutus' previous chronology that Martius has served his country from an early age. Volumnia openly declares her strategy with pride:

When yet he was but tender-bodied and the only son of my womb, 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, from whence he returned, his brows bound with oak. (I.iii.5-16 ellipses mine)

To fulfill social doctrine, Volumnia focuses all her energy on Martius to the point of jeopardizing his very life for family honor:

Hear me profess sincerely: had I a dozen sons, each in my love alike and none less dear than thine and my good Martius, I had rather had eleven die nobly for their country than one voluptuously surfeit out of action. (I.iii.22-27)

Martius abides by his mother's demands at a great price: the cost of his self-realization. It is no surprise then that Aufidius should become a love object that allows Martius to process his mourning and melancholia. Aufidius *is* Martius from a military perspective, the non-Roman version, who can speak a love language freely. If only Martius could *be* Aufidius, or at least be like him, then perhaps words of love would come as well. Martius may not have an effective love language, but his love instinct, that intersubjective non-verbal telepathic alertness, trusts Aufidius.

Therefore, in reconsidering the language that Martius uses upon entering Antium, it is plausible that he is speaking about Aufidius. The intensity of his words, acceptable as homosocial military speak, could also be interpreted as homoerotic and homosexual: we know the “enemy town” is Aufidius’ Antium which Martius’ love is “upon.” Martius can “enter” into this town, that is, into a new relationship, a new life free from Romanness. Now he is free to destroy Rome, to eradicate it and his past, and move forward with Aufidius by his side, his chosen family. A cycle of rejection and choice familiar to many homosexuals.

Free Roman men like Martius maintained a world view of masculine domination: their power over all others. It was equally true in their private lives, as Eva Cantarella points out in her book *Bisexuality in the Ancient World*: “In order to become a *civis romanus* worthy of the name, he had to learn from the earliest age never to submit, and to impose his will on everybody—including his sexual will” (98 italics hers). Perhaps Martius, throwing off the chains of indoctrination following his betrayal by Rome, imagines Aufidius taking on that dominant prerogative, as he earlier fantasized, “I would wish me only he.” His desire for Aufidius allows Martius to entertain a new concept of masculinity, different from the Roman ideal which was defined as valiantness or *virtus*<sup>5</sup>. Martius may be a free Roman, but now he is discovering a new freedom.

It is this notion of masculinity that brings the question of gender to the foreground. In abdicating *virtus*, free males enter a broader spectrum of queerness that becomes dangerously

---

<sup>5</sup> Virtus was a specific virtue in Ancient Rome. It carries connotations of valor, manliness, excellence, courage, character, and worth, perceived as masculine strengths. It was thus a frequently stated virtue of Roman emperors and was personified as a deity—Virtus.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtus>

subversive because of its ambiguity. In questioning Martius' sexual desire, what today we call orientation, *Coriolanus* challenges the acceptable behavior of the male sex, the stereotypical conduct permissible in a patriarchal martial culture like Rome's. It presents larger complexities around the nature of desire itself, including non-conforming behaviors and acts that threaten the power of the state, the senate, the ruling class, and the building block of society: the family unit. Interestingly, Martius abandons his.

Desire threatens *virtus*—the cornerstone of Roman society—and challenges the ideology that patriarchal free Roman males must toe the line for the sake of a stable society in which noble families are preserved: procreation is the proper standard of desire supporting the *mos maiorum*<sup>6</sup>, the unwritten Roman code of conduct. Desire becomes subversive and challenges gender behavior norms which can shake the foundation of society. In her book, *Warriors, wounds and women*, Coppélia Kahn expresses the gender tension Shakespeare's play suggests saying, "Like any discursive construction of gender difference, then, *virtus* proves to be at odds with itself, and its contradictions give these texts their complexity and energy" (15).

Considering the intense Romanness of Martius it is possible that this specific quality, this *virtus* which he wears like a protective shield, overshadows his trauma-induced psychological layers brought on by being orphaned so young: there was no father to shape his character. Shakespeare may be cloaking the psychology of Martius under the veil of exaggerated patrician

---

<sup>6</sup> The core concept of Roman traditionalism, distinguished from but in dynamic complement to written law. The *mos maiorum* was collectively the time-honoured principles, behavioural models, and social practices that affected private, political, and military life in ancient Rome.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mos\\_maiorum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mos_maiorum)

masculinity to hide the possibility of homosexual attraction that directs Martius' actions, which today is called repression. In an essay on the construction of masculine identity in *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra* entitled, "Thou Art My Warrior/I Hope To Frame Thee", Frédérique Fouassier states, "Masculinity is not Coriolanus' essence: it is a costume he wears, a part he plays" (53). If that is true, then his queerness is a contradictory counterbalance to his Romanness resulting in a complex character with a much wider spectrum of psychological layers to explore. The tension of homosexual desire as a threat to Roman society, to the ideal of *virtus*, is not dissimilar to the heterosexual desire that leads to the tragic end of a man very much like Martius, a man whom Fouassier conveniently connects for comparison in her above mentioned essay ... Marc Antony.

#### IV ~ Love Language in *Antony and Cleopatra*

Comparing Martius and Antony is enlightening because both men are undone by their love objects, Aufidius and Cleopatra, allowing us to examine desire in both homosexual and heterosexual contexts. (For the sake of this argument, based on Aufidius' dream, we can consider Martius and he as, at minimum, bona fide psychic lovers.) Furthermore, analyzing them through their obsessions with love objects brings into the foreground the complexities of social constructs like gender, a provocation in both plays.

Martius and Antony are similar versions of martial masculinity, perhaps the most extreme that we will find in Shakespeare's Roman<sup>7</sup> plays—aside from Titus Andronicus whose obsession with Tamora and Saturninus is mediated on avenging his daughter and therefore not exactly

---

<sup>7</sup> Kahn points out that Mungo MacCallum "was the first to designate the Roman play as a Shakespearean sub-genre, in *Shakespeare's Roman Plays and their Background* (1910)."

comparable. Both men were also rejected by Rome despite their dutiful allegiance to the state via repeated and successful martial campaigns.

They are even more similar in that they both then reject Rome and side with the enemy. Both are brought to their ruin through their obsession with lovers who are political rivals: Cleopatra as Queen of Egypt and Aufidius as General of Volsci. Incorporating their personal feelings with affairs of state, an almost always unsustainable tension of pleasure and business, their existential need to orbit their lovers like a Ptolemaic sun around its planet earth dominates their consciousness: the lover's gaze becomes their sustenance, ultimately unsexing them both, resulting in mistakes with fatal outcomes.

Their behaviors are motivated by emotion rather than reason thereby degenderizing them, at least by Roman standards, which “supposes the complete negation of qualities identified as female and labelled as weak, such as compassion, tenderness or nurturing” as Fouassier points out (50). Both renege on their martial responsibility to Rome: Antony retreats to Cleopatra at the battle of Actium and Martius runs to Aufidius in Antium. Whereas they should both model the quintessential Roman male behavior—inspiring the younger men of the state to proper action and temperament, preserving the foundational building block of Roman patrician society, the male ideal of manliness demonstrated as valiantness—they transgress that standard, the inexorable quality of *virtus* in which they were indoctrinated since childhood. In the eyes of their peers they willfully and irresponsibly shed the mantle of masculinity.

Both Martius and Antony are unsexed by their desire. Cleopatra exhibits much of the masculine energy of *virtus* in her world: she is brave, cunning, and manipulative. She controls Antony to maintain her own political status and utilizes all the wiles of her womanhood, including bearing children to the great men she conquers, as a conduit to greater power: a power which ultimately undermines Antony's. Likewise, Aufidius maintains all the outward attributes

of the ideal soldier while giving Martius the tenderness he craves. He communicates his desire and love through metaphors normally reserved for a bride or wife and through military expressions that covertly progress from homosocial to homoerotic to essentially feminize himself and Martius. Because of these similarities, the love language between Antony and Cleopatra can unlock the coded language of Martius and Aufidius.

For example, following the failed battle at Actium, Antony and Cleopatra find themselves at their relationship's lowest point, the end of their enterprise, and speak transparently to each other. Antony's honesty is matched by Cleopatra's sincerity as seen in this exchange:

Antony

Egypt, thou knew'st too well  
 My heart was to thy rudder tied by th' strings.  
 And thou shouldst tow me after. O'er my spirit  
 Thy full supremacy thou knew'st, and that  
 Thy beck might from the bidding of the gods  
 Command me.

Cleopatra

O, my pardon!

...

Antony

...You did know  
 How much you were my conqueror, and that  
 My sword, made weak by my affection, would  
 Obey it on all cause.

Cleopatra



Pardon, pardon!

Antony

Fall not a tear, I say; one of them rates

All that is won and lost. Give me a kiss. [They kiss.]

Even this repays me. — (III.xii.60-65, 71-78)<sup>8</sup>

Because they enjoy a heteronormative relationship which has been on full display since the beginning of the play, they can use metaphor and euphemism freely and without self-consciousness, a privilege Martius and Aufidius cannot enjoy. Thus, Antony and Cleopatra's gender-bending love language can serve as a sort of Rosetta stone to help decode the queer meanings hidden in that of Martius and Aufidius.

Antony's use of the words, "conqueror" and "sword" carry queer significance even if it is not perceived as such. As a highly accomplished general in the Roman army, just like Martius, he would neither articulate military expressions lightly nor expect the weight of their meaning to be misunderstood. So, when he calls Cleopatra his conqueror, he is queering not only her identity, but his as well: she becomes the dominant, he the submissive. Within that re-assignment, his sword—the most obviously phallic of all sexual images—becomes ineffective. Weakened through affection, a woman's province, he experiences, perhaps for the first time, emotional erectile dysfunction as well as complete and utter dysfunction as a man, especially as a Roman military man. His commitment to *civis romanus* begins to crack. Metaphorically, Antony is castrated and his sword transplanted onto Cleopatra. It is she who now wields the power of the phallus, foreshadowed by her own words and antics when she insisted, "I would I

---

<sup>8</sup> All citations by act, scene and line number are from the Folger Shakespeare Library edition of *Antony and Cleopatra* edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine.

had thy inches. / Thou shouldst know / There were a heart in Egypt” (I.iii.50-51). In what must have been a stunning performance, she cuts him down emotionally and psychologically when she brags, “I drunk him to his bed, / Then put my tires and mantles on him, whilst / I wore his sword Philippian” (II.v.25-27).

This gender-bending theme culminates in Antony’s final words of their exchange, when he begs Cleopatra for a kiss. Unsexed and emotional, his fulfillment and self-realization no longer come from the adulations of his military peers, the homosocial approval of other men, but in the simple adoration of his beloved, a woman. His narcissistic, libidinal ego and his Roman identity, under the shadow of Cleopatra, are destroyed and his vulnerabilities are exposed. That kiss is the only thing in the world which can make any sense to him now, that can heal his broken spirit, that can repay him for all he has invested in their relationship. For Antony, that single kiss becomes his whole world. As his power and dominion combust and self-destruct, he yearns for nothing more than a kiss from an other, an Egyptian with a “tawny front” and “gypsy’s lust” as Philo describes her in the opening text of the play. Like Martius, Antony breaks free from Roman indoctrination with the help of someone very non-Roman.

Antony’s lexicon helps decode the love language between Martius and Aufidius because all these men speak in military metaphors. We can extend a philological analysis of Antony’s use of “sword” to Aufidius’ homoerotic use of the same word when he says to Martius,

Here I clip  
 The anvil of my sword and do contest  
 As hotly and as nobly with thy love  
 As ever in ambitious strength I did  
 Contend against thy valor. (IV.v.122-125)

The word “clip,” to mean “encompass” or “hold on with a tight grip,”<sup>9</sup> is about as homoerotic a metaphor as one could use as substitutive imagery for the explicit receiver of Aufidius’ “sword.” The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defines clip as “to clasp with the arms, embrace, hug” and conveniently (for this paper and its argument) cites Martius’s words to Cominius as a reference, “O, let me clip you / In arms as sound as when I wooed” (I.vi.39-40). The fact that Martius himself uses this word in as an expression of romantic love, i.e. wooing, foreshadows Aufidius’ use of it and establishes that Martius will understand the unspoken meaning of the word, the telepathic communication. Aufidius further emphasizes his meaning with the words “hotly” and “nobly” to describe how they will “love.” He hides the sub-text within the safe, heteronormative military context of “ambitious strength” and “valor” — two clear parameters of their heterosexual world view — continuing the coding of homoerotic desire: as passionately and aggressively as they fought in the past, they can also love in the future. This brilliantly phrased passage is obvious to Martius, but others might miss its meaning.

Aufidius’ love language is unexpected and neither Martius nor the audience are prepared for it. His conflation of homoerotic desire within heteronormative euphemism and metaphor is both difficult to decipher and easy to gloss over. We begin to see that, for both couples, the objective of love language is to communicate desire and they both achieve this through the context of heteronormative lexicon. In *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, we can see how desire in the former is secretive and coded, in the latter blatant and obvious.

In a particularly pertinent essay entitled *The Anus in Coriolanus*, from his book *Shakespeare’s Hand*, Jonathan Goldberg says regarding Aufidius’ text that it is, “...important to recognize the intense eroticism of their relationship...which is evident not only in the dream that

---

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/clip>

Aufidius reports but also in the comments of the servants who witness their embrace” (184). We see in both *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus* that it is the observer who provides much of the insight into each couple’s intimacy.

For example, one of Antony’s men comments on his queer behavior, how completely submissive Antony already is to Cleopatra, at the very beginning of the play:

Those his goodly eyes,  
That o’er the files and musters of the war  
Have glowed like plated Mars, now bend, now turn  
The office and devotion of their view  
Upon a tawny front. (I.i.2-6)

The eyes of observers bear witness to the lover’s gaze upon the beloved: intersubjective, telepathic, non-verbal communication is taking place through the eyes. Similarly, Aufidius’ Third Servingman comments, “Our general himself makes a mistress of him, sanctifies himself with’s hand, and turns up the white o’th’ eye to his discourse” (IV.v.214-217). This report reveals that there is a queering of roles taking place before their very eyes as indicated with the use of the word “mistress.” The allusion is that Aufidius, like a devoted chivalric knight lovingly gazing upon his lady—anachronistic to ancient Rome but sustainable to the Renaissance—is in a submissive state to Martius, who clearly assumes the feminine heart of the setting, yet also creates a feminizing submissive quality in Aufidius.

These scenes seems to indicate a queer sexual versatility in both couples which is beyond heteronormative. Antony is disarmed and unmanned just as Martius and Aufidius are, and if Antony being unmanned by Cleopatra is clearly an erotic experience, then so is the one between Martius and Aufidius. Plays like *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus* ensure we continually consider queer culture and themes in various iterations of history. This legacy is proclaimed in

yet another Roman play, *Julius Caesar*, when Cassius says, “How many ages hence / Shall this our lofty scene be acted over / In states unborn and accents yet unknown” (III.i.124-126).

When analyzing what purpose Shakespeare had in mind by imposing queer themes over source materials like Plutarch, and any ideologies those themes confront in *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*, Kahn muses, “Whether Shakespeare questions, ignores, or confirms this or other ideologies of gender in his Roman sources is a complex question: the answers differ from text to text and within each text” (20). Martius and Antony are both presented as exemplars who break a code of behavior expected of them and inevitably pay for it with their lives. Desire becomes a fatal flaw, heterosexual and homosexual desire equally fatal. However, homosexual desire has been fraught with social disapprobation and personal shame: a shame that is, it seems, over 2500 years old.

#### V ~ Roman Taboo

It is the culminating meeting between Martius and Aufidius in Act IV, a turning point where two idealized warriors and symbols of masculinity, challenge the parameters of male heteronormativity. Kahn describes this standard as the “...marker of sexual difference crucial to construction of the male subject—the Roman hero,” a criterion which Shakespeare will contradict as he explores the homo essence of these men: he queers them and allows them to navigate their homoerotic feelings, suggesting that the core relationship is based on homosexual desire, even if such categorical terminology was not available in ancient Rome or early modern history. Fouassier argues, “we can only see the past through the eyes of the present” (49). So, the lens which Shakespeare establishes to illustrate this conflict, the surprising Martius-Aufidius meeting, allows for a homosexual challenge where, Fouassier states, “the constructed manliness of the Roman hero is exposed in all its fragility” (48).

The fragility here is the possibility of homoerotic desire exposing itself in a relationship between two free adult males where one or both of them may take on the passive role ... and how that versatility, seen as submissiveness, will impact their arc of power socially and politically. Shakespeare seems to be following poets and philosophers of antiquity who kept homosexuality suppressed, as Cantarella points out, “remaining in the background of the story, to some extent hidden, or at least in shadow” (11). But desire is precisely what Shakespeare is presenting in *Coriolanus*, between Martius and Aufidius, and in a way, as we have seen, that is very similar to Antony and Cleopatra: the plays provide an equivalency between homosexual and heterosexual desire. And as Bruce R. Smith points out in his book *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare’s England*, this is very unusual in the early modern period because in discussions both moral and legal, “Renaissance writers ordinarily *contrasted*, not likened, the friendly ties between man and man with the sexual ties between man and woman” (35 italics his). The plays demonstrate a deep understanding of the mutuality of desire and its affect on human frailty under the strain of a strict patrician society.

The idea of two free adult males alternating active and passive roles, that is, versatility, is counterintuitive to Roman culture and quite revolutionary. We will not see any real time evidence of this behavior in Roman men of power, and more importantly the acceptance and tolerance of it, for some hundreds of years, until the reign of Julius Caesar, when his affair with King Nicomedes of Bithynia, in which the former is renowned for taking on the passive role, is considered palatable. Cantarella echoes the actual chants at Caesar’s Gaulic Triumph when the centurions exclaimed, “*Gallias Caesar subegit, Nicomedes Caesarem*: Caesar got on top of the Gauls, Nicomedes got on top of Caesar” (156 Cantarella’s italics). Noted for his military and personal virility, Caesar’s queerness, his willingness and desire to assume the passive role, does not detract from his attributes of *civis romanus* as either a political leader or as a married man.

The passive role was seen as the feminine role and no free adult male would publicly derogate himself in such a manner, yet Caesar pulls it off by the first century B.C. because he was, as Cantarella puts it, “... a man who remained virile even if he happened to assume the subordinate position now and again—a man who was such a he-man that he could afford to turn passive once in a while” (158).

Martius’ psychological profile, as crafted by Shakespeare, allows for this unconventional attitude some four hundred years earlier than Caesar; it is a provocative challenge to the ideological origins of *civis romanus*. Allowing himself to be a passive partner could result in many dangerous implications for Martius because his Roman indoctrination does not allow for submissiveness. This could explain why Martius is attracted to Aufidius, who is comfortable expressing his desire, albeit metaphorically. Perhaps Volscians found it natural to openly express male-male desire, a natural deductive reasoning based on Cantarella’s observations on Plato’s *Symposium* where she states that in Pausanias’ speech he confirms there were some locations where male-male love was acceptable: “there are some cities, he observes, where love between men poses no problems: either it is always allowed (as happens in Elis and in Boeotia), or else it is always frowned on (as in Ionia)” (20, Cantarella’s parentheses).

The important distinction is that Martius, as a fifth century B.C. Roman, is hinting at a counter-intuitive queerness where one of them, he or Aufidius, at one time or another, might have “made a woman of himself” (46) as Cantarella puts it. She clarifies the struggle Martius’ imagined relationship could present for both men: “Love between two adult males posed some problems—at least for one member of the couple: the one who assumed the passive role of the beloved. He had to bear the heavy weight of social disapproval ... ” (45). We can imagine the social burden then if both men are alternately fulfilling the passive role: it is a revolutionary and subversive attitude as illustrated, Cantarella says, in the plays of Aristophanes who sees male-

male love as “dangerous for the very survival of the city” (45), because “These were the men who, by abdicating their virile role, symbolized the extent to which Athens was no longer capable of ruling Greece” (46). Admittedly, Cantarella is referencing ancient Greece, but sociologically the Romans eventually follow the Hellenic culture regarding male-male love and the one distinction common to both Athens and Rome is the firm belief that no free man accepts the passive role.

Cantarella notes that there are no explicit homosexual love relationships in the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, which could be considered odd for Greek Attic literature. However, she insists there is obvious evidence for it when you look closely at Achilles’ language regarding Patroclus’ death. Even the promptings of Thetis, Achilles’ mother, urging him to move on with his life beyond boyish attachments and to take a wife as any respectable young man of society should do, hints at the existence of homosexual relationships. (One easily thinks of Volumnia pushing Martius in the same direction.) Cantarella says homosexuality in these works, “... seems to emerge ... while remaining in the background of the story, to some extent hidden, or at least in shadow” (11 elipses mine). This is an interesting observation which validates an historical attitude for handling the subject of homosexuality: don’t talk about it. Don’t ask, don’t tell. Don’t say gay.

It seems the pressing issue in early modern minds, just as it was in antiquity, and still is today, is the inevitable stigma of the passive role. People continually seem to be uncomfortable with the receiver in homosexual sex acts and deem it an unsexing of the masculine ideal. Cantarella cites Eva Keuls<sup>10</sup> who makes an observation that, “Anal intercourse ... is an act which

---

<sup>10</sup> Eva C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus. Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens*, New York, 1985. pp.276-7



humiliates the person undergoing it.” (8, ellipses mine). Keuls is referencing a more ritualistic philosophy where an act of submission to authority for the sake of learning or improving, as in pederastic relationships, becomes a means of development from boy to man. Nonetheless, to suggest that the receiver is humiliated seems irresponsible and her comments support the social doctrine that looks to condemn men for sodomy, specifically anal sex. The social psyche does not accept even the penetration of the idea on itself.

The point remains however, that homosexual feelings seem to be brimming in the hearts of Martius and Aufidius in *Coriolanus* and Shakespeare seems to walk a fine line on the subject of active/passive roles. Interestingly, it is Martius who is slain ultimately, not Aufidius, so it seems judgement is conclusively passed: the man who defies Roman indoctrination of *civis romanus* and allows himself to become the submissive love object of another adult male must die. Society demands it: *civis romanus* and *mos maiorum* rule the day.

## VI ~ Greco-Roman Homosocial Culture

It is helpful to remember that society was, from the beginning of time, homosocial: organized by men, run by men, defended by men, rewarded by men and written about by men. Attitudes towards homosexuality vary in time and place historically and geographically and though equality of the sexes may be championed globally today and gender constructions enthusiastically challenged, it is only in the past 50 years that feminism and queer theory have become part and parcel of cultural and political discourse. However, literary history provides ample evidence for homosocial viewpoints and homoerotic and homosexual behaviors and Cantarella’s book reminds us of the queerness of Greco-Roman culture.

The existence of pederasty in antiquity is confirmed by historians and accepted anecdotally by most people. Recognized for its potential as a mutually beneficial relationship

between an older man and an adolescent boy, when carried out properly, it could prove a model of behavior for love that was both educational (mentor) and inspirational (mentee) in its qualities, though it could also be sexual at times. Overall, pederasty was widely tolerated and promoted in Greece and in Rome and Cantarella illustrates how this was viewed as a benefit to a young man:

... the concluding stage in a period of his life which, to be considered definitively and publicly superseded, demanded that he should have a pedagogical-amorous relationship with an adult over a certain period of time, including a sexual relationship ... the sexual relationship was considered necessary on the grounds that it could transfuse the manly virtues into the boy through the sperm of his lover. (7, 8, ellipses mine)

Evidence for this can be found, as mentioned earlier, in Plato's *Symposium*—where Achilles and Patroclus are again discussed—and where both eroticism and friendship are discussed as benefits of male-male relationships: the ideals of friendship could be eventually attained between men even after the sex was gone. Sir Kenneth Dover, in his notes on homosexuality in his 1980 edition of *Plato: Symposium*, sums it up rather neatly:

That is why the homosexual response of a man to the visual stimulus afforded by a handsome boy or youth seemed to Plato a good foundation upon which the first teacher-pupil relationship, and then a cooperative intellectual enterprise, could be built ... and there can be little doubt that homosexual response was the most powerful emotional experience known to most of the people for who he was writing. (5, ellipses mine)

One of the more fascinating elements of the *Symposium* is the strained relationship between two mature men, Socrates and Alcibiades. We learn that the latter's beauty as a youth

was never quite enough to capture the philosopher's stony heart which seemed more consumed with *logos* (logic) than it was with *eros* (love). Cantarella quotes Alcibiades from the *Symposium* to prove this exact point:

But in spite of my efforts ... I swear by all the gods in heaven that for anything that had happened between us when I got up after sleeping with Socrates, I might have been sleeping with my father or elder brother. (24, Cantarella's ellipses )

Many people attribute the focus on *logos* to what has become a common expression, "platonic love," which generally indicates a relationship without any physical component, or at least no erotic component—coital, intercrural, or sodomitic—and is intended to suggest a love that exists on a higher plane, a psychic or rational level. But this is not the case for Alcibiades who is very sexual and very focused on *eros*. Incidentally, this is the same Alcibiades that the historian Plutarch contrasts in *Parallel Lives* with the life of Caius Martius Coriolanus, presenting another subtle queering. Intended by Plutarch to be a contrast of character, can it be that Shakespeare found comparisons instead? As Smith pointed out earlier, Shakespeare's invention was to compare the erotic similarities between hetero and homosexual; perhaps his ideas for *Coriolanus* came from the parallel life of Alcibiades, or the hint of it, the possibility. There is a very strong sense of the Greek Alcibiades' queerness in Bernadotte Perrin's translation of Plutarch:

But all this statecraft and eloquence and lofty purpose and cleverness was attended with great luxuriousness of life, with wanton drunkenness and lewdness with effeminacy in dress – he would trail long purple robes through the market place – and with prodigal expenditures. (41)

These ancient stories and ideals became available to Renaissance readers through historians and writers like Plutarch, and another named Lucian, whose texts illustrated the lives

of many illustrious Greek and Roman men. The myths and tales that blended into these stories could feature queer allusions explicitly, as in the Alcibiades reference above, and Smith points one out specifically: the debate between Charicles and Callicratidas from Lucian's *Erotes*.

The two men argue which is the greater love, that between man and woman or that between man and boy. Callicratidas, representing the latter point of view, wins the day by elevating the argument from man-boy love, or pederasty, to man-man love, or *masculus amor*, where "Only manly love is a thing partaking of both virtue and pleasure" (Smith 40). However, over time things got lost in translation, as Smith points out:

What for Plato and other fourth-century Greek writers had been a question of how to distinguish false love from true has become for Plutarch the altogether simpler question of which is better, the love of boys or the love of a woman. (37)

Smith explains that Philomel Holland, the translator of Plutarch's works, prefaced some texts, such as the dialogue *Of Love*, with warnings that young men might be corrupted reading about the male-male sexual exploits going on in Greece, indicating a Renaissance cultural anxiety over promoting homosexuality or more specifically, sodomy. Not unlike the 1993 "Don't Ask/Don't Tell" policy of Bill Clinton's referenced earlier, which seeks to avoid any discussion about homoerotic desire and the existence of actual homosexuals in the US military forces, Holland strives to cut off any information that might bring up the subject of male-male desire: don't say gay. Holland's philosophy seems to be reaching through time as this very principal is still being advocated in US politics in 2022.

The overall significance of works like Plato's *Symposium* or Lucian's *Erotes* is to highlight how important the quality of love is in human life and the virtues of ideal love which poets and philosophers have been considering since ancient times. Love is a common subject in literature and we can see from the earliest works that it never fell simply into a heteronormative

narrative. It has always been strained, questioned, and challenged in our historically homosocial society.

### VII – Love Language in *Coriolanus*

Love, one of the more transformative experiences in life, will ideally open our hearts to a deeper understanding of the human condition. This is what it seems to be doing for Martius. Bereft of his Roman identity, he runs to Antium into the loving arms of Aufidius, his former enemy, transformed into a potential lover. Aufidius' words of desire give Martius hope and brings us back to the opening text of this argument and the love language in *Coriolanus*:

Know thou first,  
I loved the maid I married; never man  
Sighed truer breath. But that I see thee here,  
Thou noble thing, more dances my rapt heart  
Than when I first my wedded mistress saw  
Bestride my threshold. (IV.v.126-131)

Despite comprehending intersubjective communication and ego shadows of love objects, despite understanding Roman *virtus* and the threat of submissiveness, despite acknowledging the *grands récits* of homosexual culture since Grecian antiquity, despite all this, the love language between Aufidius and Martius remains complex. Much more so than that of those renowned heterosexual lovers from *Antony and Cleopatra*, whose lexicon of desire is obvious and unapologetic, as exemplified in Cleopatra's very first line, "If it be love indeed, tell me how much" (I.i.15).

Aufidius' soliloquy requires translation, a decoding, to understand the meaning of such words as, "Know thou first / I loved the maid I married; never man sighed truer breath." We can

surmise that he needs to establish his standard of desire and behavior, a heteronormative litmus assuring Martius of his heterosexuality, while also establishing a contrast that will reflect his deeper need, that intersubjective communication, perhaps subconscious, to be explicitly clear that his desire for Martius surpasses any heterosexual experience he has had thus far. But it is not explicit, it is insinuated. All the complexities of gender constructs crafted through Roman ideologies of *civis romanus* and *mos maiorum*, as well as the constraints of a patrician military society, deny Martius and Aufidius the freedom of speech that Antony and Cleopatra enjoy.

The structure of the love language in *Coriolanus* presents a curious consideration of sexual attitudes between the context of the play, ancient Rome, and the context of the period in which it is written, the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Shakespeare's manipulation of heterosexual marital metaphor to convey potential homosexual desire is both subversive and orthodox for the early modern period. As Bruce R. Smith points out, "structures of power in early modern England fostered the homosexual potentiality in male bonding, yet society gave official sanction only to matrimony" (73).

When we consider Aufidius' exclamation, "...more dances my rapt heart / Than when I first my wedded mistress saw / Bestride my Threshold." and start to picture the actual moment, we begin to realize his meaning is specifically erotic. His words illustrate the excitement of conjugal sex in which newlyweds participate; it can be expected that he is becoming sexually aroused when he sees his new wife. So, by associative properties, he is equally excited when he sees Martius, or maybe even more. What exactly is Aufidius saying? Is he sending a message, coded in metaphorical language, that he secretly desires Martius and imagines them together sexually like a married couple? And if we take the parallel with the wedding night seriously, this will have further consequences for the Martius-Aufidius relationship especially as those words,

“more dances my rapt heart,” might seem to introduce a romantic element, unnecessary in the Greco-Roman marriage contract.

Martius, as the recipient, the passive voice, substitutively assumes the place of the new wife to Aufidius’ active voice, the speaker of emotions and feelings: desire is being communicated through metaphor, comprehensible and acceptable expressions of heteronormative love behavior. Martius’ succinct and grateful response, “You bless me, gods!” sounds like an exaltation of gratitude from a new bride on a successful marriage. This positive response to Aufidius’ unmistakable meaning can lead us to confidently adduce that it does in fact reveal Martius’ own secret feelings of desire and love. Again, not explicitly, but rather as intersubjective communication in which their male-male desire is hidden within the speaker’s metaphor and the listener’s affirmation. Even heterosexual eroticism is habitually coded, as Smith illustrates by quoting the French Renaissance author and philosopher, Michel de Montaigne, “Why was the acte of generation made so naturall, so necessary and so just, seeing we fear to speak of it without shame, and exclude it from our serious and regular discourses?” (4). If human beings resist talking openly about sexual behaviors, then it comes as no surprise that we “resort to euphemisms” Smith observes, and further clarifies, “When we talk about sex, we talk mostly in metaphors” (5).

Though Martius seems incapable of responding to Aufidius’ love language with equally ecstatic exuberance, he does use love language and metaphor when speaking to Cominius after the bloody encounter in Aufidius’ hometown of Corioli. It is rare for him to do so and hence it is worth examining:

O, let me clip you

In arms as sound as when I wooed, in heart

As merry as when our nuptial day was done

And tapers burnt to bedward. (I.vi.39-42)

These words conflate an acceptable homosocial military bond between men within the metaphor of heterosexual matrimony between man and woman thus queering erotic desire. This is what is so intriguing about the language in *Coriolanus* ... are we hearing what we think we are hearing, or is this intentionally coded? These words could be meant to express a deeper longing, an unquenched desire within Martius, further emphasized by the blood in which he is covered after the Corioli fight. Having gone through the gates of the city, Aufidius' city, he re-emerges practically unscathed but for the blood that covers him. Like the wedding night ceremony of Hymen's torch, behind closed doors, where the blood-stained sheets of the virgin bride prove her purity, the Vestal Virgin standard of Roman women, Martius seems to emerge from Corioli with a newly espoused passion for Aufidius. Conquering Corioli inflames Martius' desire: he is not sated, he needs now be "beard to beard" (I.x.11) with Aufidius. He rushes to the battlefield where Cominius is fighting the Volscian army.

This conflation of Cominius and Aufidius in this scene begs another question: what is, or what was, the relationship between Martius and Cominius? Their relationship suggests that of mentor-mentee, the Athenian archetype of pederasty. Eva Cantarella reminds us that the Romans looked down on "the Greek Vice" (97) which they believe undermined social structures of family and virtue. No free Roman man could ever openly submit himself as a passive receiver in a pederastic affair. It would be contrary to the Roman indoctrination of virtue, manliness, valiantness, which insisted on the will of the Roman free male, a *civis romanus*, being exercised over all other men. Nonetheless, could Cominius have fulfilled the role of *erastes* (the older active partner) to Martius' *eromenos* (the younger passive partner)? This is not meant to imply an erotic or sexual relationship between Cominius and Martius, but it does provoke some questions that may only be resolved in the Martius-Aufidius relationship. Cominius may have



been the replacement for Martius' deceased father, a best practice of the pederastic virtues. And if so, it could have been promoted by Volumnia to help ensure her son's future. These are just speculations, but the context within the queer language allows us to consider broader possibilities in the lives of the characters and may lead to a firmer idea about the queerness of Martius and Aufidius.

Martius' unheard confession as he enters Antium can be reviewed from a specifically queer philology<sup>11</sup> perspective, as proposed by Jeffrey Masten, who advocates for looking at language from a nonnormative perspective for, "the utility of patiently unraveling the connections of even the most initially unlikely words for understanding this culture, which is to say, for understanding how to continue to read this culture" (33). Masten here means queer culture and more specifically an understanding that "advocates explicitly for a more active engagement of editorial practice with philologies of sex, sexuality and gender...concentrating on discourses that have become integral to historical analyses of especially male same-sex relations in early modern England" (32). With a queer philological lens then, a review of Martius' words as he enters Antium can shed more light on hidden meaning:

My birthplace hate I, And my love's upon  
This enemy town. I'll enter. If he slay me,  
He does fair justice; if he give way,  
I'll do his country service." (IV.iv.29-32)

We find such an opportunity in Shakespeare's use of the word "slay." It takes on a quality of queerness in the context of Martius' speech and begs the question if Shakespeare

---

<sup>11</sup> Masten, Jeffrey. *Queer Philologies: Sex, Language and Affect in Shakespeare's Time* in which he argues the need for a specifically queer philology attuned to sex/gender non normativity.

himself could be coding meaning through metaphorical language. Martius may be alluding to that phallic euphemism for sexual acts, the sword, in this case Aufidius', which substitutively implies that the Volscian will have his way with the Roman, that is, slay him/dominate him. In other words, Martius will be penetrated by Aufidius one way or another.

According to the *OED*, the word has been in use since the 9<sup>th</sup> century with the same intention as Martius gives it: to strike or smite (Signification I) and to strike or smite to death (Signification II). However, in the second entry, clarified in the *OED* as from 893-1888, there is an additional descriptive which reads, "to put to death by means of a weapon." The weapon, in this case, the sword, is the phallic euphemism within the word "slay" and is both implied by Shakespeare and inferred by us. The notes to this entry further state, "*slay* is now mainly confined to literary and rhetorical language, the common word being *kill*." Hence, a knight doesn't just *kill* a dragon, he *slays* it. This romanticized idea has carried over through the centuries to modern time: meanings of slay in the Merriam-Webster dictionary indicate a performative quality, "to do something or perform exceptionally well or impressively: to be exceptionally impressive" and uses as an example Beyonce's outfit at the Grammy awards. Arguably, that same intention could be attributed to Martius use of the word "slay," a more romanticized version of "kill," or rather, Shakespeare's use is intentional and the inference of phallic penetration is at least plausible: "slay" becomes the queering of "kill"—it is the flamboyant version, the queer version. "Slay" has even been adapted into queer drag culture contemporaneously, as a compliment for an excellent performance, "he/she/they slayed!" This evolution should give us pause. Why this word? Why not "she killed!" ? Even the *OED* cites the evolution, with the alternate figurative definition, "to overwhelm with delight, to convulse (someone) with laughter" (OED II.5.b). Admittedly, the word kill has the same attributes aligned to it, but anecdotally, most people will hear the preferred slay, pronounced as, at minimum, with

three a's: slaaayed! This consideration, with the above indication of how this word is mostly a literary and rhetoric device, an artsy sort of word, adds to its queerness. The point here being, philologically, that the word "slay" opens up options, considerations and contradictions; discussions which ask us to consider possibilities: the nonbinary.

The queer quality of the word "slay" continues as it fits cleverly into the curious nature of the relationship between these two men. We have every reason to believe that the phallic sword is the means by which the slaying will occur, as evidenced by Aufidius' own words, "True sword to sword, I'll potch at him" (I.x.15). It is interesting to note that in the *OED*, the entry for "sword" details it as an object "adapted for cutting and thrusting" and "used only for thrusting"—thrusting being the very action of penetration—the phallus cutting between the fleshy folds of lips, vagina and buttocks. Furthermore, in the notes to Folger's edition of *Coriolanus*, "potch" is described as "stab, poke (a vulgar word)." Philologically speaking, it is difficult to ignore the overall queerness of the word "slay" or deny its use as a phallic euphemism especially when combined with "potch" as it becomes a very homoerotic way of one man dealing with another man.

It is necessary then to also reconsider that curious line of Martius', "He does fair justice" excusing Aufidius' natural right to slay. Can Shakespeare be reflecting on the fatal treatment that befalls men when they mistake the messaging? It is an historical anxiety not uncommon to gay men: what if I am misreading the signs—a misunderstanding of that intersubjective non-verbal telepathic alertness—what will happen to me? What is the risk? What is the danger? Also, Martius is shaming himself for his desire. Per Roman norms, Aufidius would be in his right to kill—note the difference, there would be no romantic literary rhetoric if there was no accompanying desire, thus not slay—Martius for merely suggesting sexual passivity in any way

between them. Martius is fully cognizant that if he is misreading his instincts, his fantasy may also be his death sentence.

Additional queering of words in Martius' text are implied in the expectation that Aufidius will "give way" to his "hate", that is, his passion, and leaves open an expectation that the Volscian might accept a dominant Roman in his home. This idea constitutes queer thinking, nonbinary options that signify potential changes in sexual power dynamics further queered by Martius saying he will submit himself in "service." Martius seems to anticipate a new kind of homosocial relationship wherein each of them could participate in both active and passive roles: in contemporary queer parlance they would be versatile. If Martius *is* thinking this, and admittedly it could be subconscious, it is a radical departure from the traditional attitude toward the Greco-Roman traditions of male-male love which dictated that the only acceptable role for a free man is the active role, that is, the penetrating role, as Cantarella states, "active behaviour properly belonged to adult males" (51). Perhaps Shakespeare does not agree with this ancient view and challenges these inherited notions of male-male love by giving Martius and Aufidius a provocative love language.

It is very interesting that when Martius leaves Rome, he tells no one where he is going, and yet, we are not very surprised that Antium is his destination; his former vehemence belies his true feelings evidenced by his own words upon arriving there, "A goodly city is this Antium" (IV.iv.1). This is either a complete turnaround from the typical invectives we expect to hear from Martius concerning Aufidius, or we are getting a peek into what may have always been at the core of the relationship between them: desire and love.

If we assume for a moment that in 1608 Shakespeare could have fully comprehended the shifts in social mores between Martius' fifth century and Caesar's first century historical contexts, his choices might be hinting at a conflation of attitudes towards homosexual desire that

question how male-male love might have evolved in ancient times. But even if Shakespeare was unaware of these shifts *Coriolanus* still presents the possibility for the existence of homosexual culture in the nascent Roman Republic where sexual relationships between two free adult males were capable of swapping active and passive roles and suggests it may have been more commonplace than previously thought. If nothing else, from a character point of view within the play, homosocial complexities and contradictions add to the depth of interpretation that can be analyzed as far as psychological motivation and emotional complexity in the love language between Martius and Aufidius.

Shakespeare seems to have devised this complex relationship between Martius and Aufidius to lay a sheen of queerness over these men that challenge the mores of Renaissance England and the many ideals they inherited or were derived from Greco-Roman culture. It seems a deliberately subversive and political maneuver revealing how homosocial relationships within the martial context of the early Roman republic reflect on the changing perceptions of Renaissance readers in the early modern period.

This homoerotic relationship sheds light on the complexity of relationships in a homosocial society overall. This could be representative of the changing social perceptions of male-to-male love that have been simultaneously lauded and condemned throughout history depending on the scrutiny of various time periods. This love language also provokes a deeper dive into the characters' psychological profiles, a sort of post-Plato, pre-Freudian analysis. In Martius' case particularly, this relationship aids in understanding his flaws and helps to understand the tragic qualities which lead to his demise.

Details in the source materials hint at how Shakespeare may have crafted the character of Martius. Early in *The Life of Caius Martius Coriolanus*, in just the second paragraph, Plutarch notes that Caius was “left an orphan by his father,” a fact that is treated as incidental, he explains, “orphanage bringeth many discommodities to a child, but doth not hinder him to become an honest man and to excel in virtue above the common sort” (Spencer 296). That may be generally true, but in this particular young man’s life it seems to have wreaked some havoc and it seems Shakespeare built a queer story upon that very incidental bit of information.

Martius’ need to distinguish himself as a warrior could be driven by a fatherless void motivating him to become a recognizable male figure standing in as head of his noble patrician family. It may also be the very thing that drives him toward a disproportionate obsession with Aufidius, the only man he deems worthy of his attention both on and off the battlefield. It is possible that the imbalance of a missing father, especially in 6th century Rome where valiantness, the highest order of *virtus*—“...in those days valiantness was honoured in Rome above all other virtues; which they call *virtus*, by the name of virtue itself, as including in that general name all other special virtues besides” (Spencer 297)—may be the fatal flaw which Shakespeare exploits in *Coriolanus* to create the psychological disposition that governs Martius’ psyche and actions.

The orphan enigma also becomes a point of contention in *The Roman Antiquities of Dionysius of Halicarnassus* when his mother Veturia, as she is called in the *Antiquities*, says,

When you were left an orphan by your father, I took you as an infant, and for your sake I remained a widow and underwent the labours of rearing you, showing myself not only a mother to you but also a father, a nurse, a sister, and everything that is dearest. (538)

Because the Martius clan produced many significant Roman leaders, including the Roman King Ancus Martius, as was earlier referenced in the chronology offered by the Tribune Brutus—even Bullough notes Dionysius’s description of Martius as, “of patrician rank, of no obscure lineage” (464)—we can easily imagine that the psychological weight of a patrician family with many historical male archetypes could be a heavy burden to bear for a young Roman nobleman without a guiding father figure. Martius’ missing father creates a void which the young man seems to fill with a self-determined martial identity, as Plutarch points out, “But Martius, being more inclined to the wars than any other gentleman of his time, began from his childhood to give himself to handle weapons and daily did exercise himself therein” (Spencer 297).

This socially acceptable behavior of martial combat between two equally matched men like Martius and Aufidius, each at their highest levels of achievement, may be a convenient context hiding more than what appears on the surface. Martius’ obsession with Aufidius could be a replacement for his father and in that transference also fulfils a deeper longing: an independent but repressed homosexual desire at its core. It is as if Aufidius becomes the father figure that Martius longs to impress and from whom he needs approval, while simultaneously fulfilling a deeper repressed need for a romantic love posing under the guise of paternal love, resulting in an extremely complicated psychological effect of father/lover.

The most complex aspect of this psychological profile is that the love language is spoken by Aufidius, not Martius, and the words, like a magnet, draws the Roman to the Volscian. Martius must needs be in the presence of Aufidius, the lover’s gaze shining upon him, the sun to his earth, to receive the expression of his own deepest desire, voiced by his lover, fulfilling the father replacement, to access his feelings. This theory enlightens curious moments in the play, like the opening of Act III, scene one, where Martius’ questioning of Titus Lartius about

Aufidius, “Saw you Aufidius?” “Spoke he of me?” “How? What?”, and “At Antium lives he?” are all pretext to his passionate conclusion, “I wish I had cause to seek him there.” It all seems fraught with a deeper significance than merely “To oppose his hatred fully.” Hatred or love? Those battling passions of the ego upon the love object as demonstrated earlier in Freud’s essay, *Mourning and Melancholia*.

This tragic ambivalence compels Martius to behave in ways that serve the father/lover dynamic, but results in his tragic demise. It could explain why, when forsaken by his own people and homeland, he turns to Aufidius. Finally, he has the excuse he needs to embrace the relationship most desirous to him and which, when finally revealed, showers him with the expressions of desire, an intrapsychic feeling that needs to be spoken to be known, heretofore only communicated intersubjectively.

This queerness may take root in the volatile tension of the orphan enigma, as Shakespeare illustrates it in *Coriolanus*, because Martius’ formative years were further complicated by a mother who understood the quality and necessity of valiantness, “Thy valiantness was mine, thou suck’st it from me” (III.ii.157), but could not supplement that quality with the tender love that children need. Volumnia must unsex herself to be both Father and Mother to Martius, she must herself be queer. Janet Adelman makes this point clearly in her essay, “Feeding, Dependency, and Aggression in *Coriolanus*” when she says, “He certainly has not been fed the milk of human kindness” (130), and notes that Menenius, “... seems to associate Coriolanus’ lack of humanity not only with the absence of any nurturing female element in him but also with the absence of mother’s milk itself” (131). Adelman’s essay is very provocative in that it penetrates the phallic quality of Martius’ life structure, “a phallic adventure that both assures and demonstrates his independence” (134), but avoids any question of a suppressed psychological motivation like this father/lover need that may constitute a homosexual profile.



Since Martius' childhood, his mother has been trying to fill the void of the missing father by molding her son into the family head, like a puppet she can manipulate to meet her own needs and fulfil *her* desire: maintaining a leading place in society as a noble patrician family. Martius is fully aware of his mother's over-involvement in his life, even upon marrying he does not separate from her, and this tension of mother-son-missing father/lover deepens the complexity of Martius' intense psychology. Bullough emphatically makes this same point about the orphan enigma when he says,

For Plutarch, Coriolanus' errors were the result of the early loss of his father which robbed him of the discipline he needed, made him the complete individualist, vehement in his passion, unable to work with others, austere in manners, overbearing and imperious, yet eager for praise, especially from his mother on whom he lavished all his affection and respect. (473)

Martius is coping with a domineering mother who, in her attempt to fulfil the missing father's role, has actually created a void in him which needs to find a meaningful male figure in his life, and for Martius that person is Aufidius. Bullough's understatement is spot on when he says, "Shakespeare's intuition made Coriolanus a more complex person, and in this he was greatly helped by Plutarch" (460). Indeed, that one small reference to his orphan status is the mustard seed of Martius' makeup, growing into a monstrously multibranching man.

If we accept Plutarch as Shakespeare's primary source for *Coriolanus* and agree with Anne Barton that, "North's translation provided him with the dramatic skeleton, and even some of the actual words, of his play" (137), then we must also acknowledge that nowhere in that source is there any indication of the love language or homoerotic rapport with which Shakespeare endows the relationship between Martius and Aufidius as seen in the play's text, like the passages cited in this paper.

Likewise, in Dionysius's annals of Roman history there is no mention of any specific homoerotic connection between Martius and Aufidius. There are however a few indications of their reverence for one another, which may imply deeper feelings, such as this excerpt from Book VIII:

Tullus was greatly delighted with his proposal, and knowing the man's energy and good fortune in battle, yielded to him the command of the army that was to take the field. (507)

This sense of yielding of power may indicate a willingly submissiveness in Aufidius' relationship with Martius that could be loosely interpreted as homoerotic in the dramaturgically crafty hands of Shakespeare, but we can firmly say that there is no blatant homosexual context. However, it could be this very sense of yielding, this kernel of truth, which may have inspired those submissive words Shakespeare gives Martius upon entering Antium, "if he give me way, / I'll do his country service" (IV.iv.31-32). Shakespeare takes Dionysius' implication, through Plutarch's, and redistributes it to Martius, creating a versatility, a balance of active-passive roles interchanged between the two men, which has been hinted at in the text.

Equally, we see no sign of any homoeroticism in Livy's *Romane Historie* as translated by Philomen Holland, also considered a probable source for Shakespeare in writing *Coriolanus*. In Bullough's edited version of Livy's work, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, the only rapport we see established between the two men is a commitment to work together to fulfill their parallel vengeance:

And whiles one of them was provoked with an old cancred grudge, and the other set on and pricked forward upon a fresh quarrell and occasion of anger, they both laid their heads together and complotted to make warre upon the Romanes. (502)

This passage again suggests the queer quality of their relationship: both are used to being the alpha leader, the active partner, but to work closely and effectively they must lay their heads together, reminding us of Shakespeare's own turn of phrase, "beard to beard," a reference suggestive of a close fight, but also of lovers in coitus. To advance their enterprise, both politically and personally, they must redefine their relationship, become more versatile, each one submitting a bit to the other, a queering reorganization requiring less *civis romanus* and more *masculus amor*. Ultimately, homosexual desire is illustrated in *Coriolanus* via Shakespeare's retelling. Aufidius, inspired by Martius and the love they share, secure themselves a place in queer literary history:

Let me twine

Mine arms about that body, whereagainst

My grained ash an hundred times hath broke

And scarred the moon with splinters ... (IV.v.118-121)

[*They embrace.*]

## Works Cited

- Adelman, Janet. ““Anger’s My Meat”: Feeding, Dependency, and Aggression in *Coriolanus*.” *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays*, Schwartz, Murray M. and Khan, Coppélia, editors. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982, pp. 129-149.
- Barton, Anne. “Livy, Machiavelli and Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*.” *Essays, Mainly Shakespeare*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 136-160.
- Bullough, Geoffrey, editor. *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare: Volume V. The Roman Plays: Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra, Coriolanus*. Columbia University Press, 1964.
- Cantarella, Eva. *Bisexuality in the Ancient World*. Yale University Press. 1992.
- Cary, Earnest and Spellman, Edward, translators. *The Roman Antiquities of Dionysius of Halicarnassus*. Books VII and VIII, Aeterna Press, 2015, pp. 432-575.
- Dover, Sir Kenneth, editor. *Plato: Symposium*. Cambridge University Press, 1980.
- Freud, Sigmund. “Mourning and Melancholia.” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Volume XIV. Strachey, James, Freud, Anna, Translators. Hogarth Press, London, 1914-1916, pp. 243-258.
- Fouassier, Frédérique. ““Thou Art My Warrior/I Holp To Frame Thee”: The Construction of Masculine Identity In Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*.” *Culture, Society and Masculinities*, Vol. 4. Issue 1, The Men’s Studies Press, LLC, 2012, pp. 48-62.
- Goldberg, Jonathan. “The Anus in *Coriolanus*.” *Shakespeare’s Hand*, University of Minnesota Press, 2003, pp. 176-185.
- Kahn, Coppélia. *Warriors, wounds and women*. Routledge, 1997.
- Perrin, Bernadotte, translator, *Plutarch’s Lives*. Harvard University Press, 1959.
- Shakespeare, William. *Antony and Cleopatra*. Folger Shakespeare Library, Mowat, Barbara A. and Werstine, Paul, editors, Simon & Schuster, 2020.
- Shakespeare, William. *Coriolanus*. Folger Shakespeare Library, Mowat, Barbara A. and Werstine, Paul, editors, Simon & Schuster, 2020.

Shakespeare, William. *Julius Caesar*. Folger Shakespeare Library, Mowat, Barbara A. and Werstine, Paul, editors, Simon & Schuster, 2020.

Smith, Bruce R. *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England*. The University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Spencer, T.J.B., editor. *Shakespeare's Plutarch*. Penguin Books, 1968

Toibín, Colm. "Roaming the Greenwood. *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition* by Gregory Woods." *The London Review of Books*, Vol 21. No 21,1999