The True Nature of Heroism

Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* and *Coriolanus* demonstrate the nature of rivalry between men, holding a mirror to the very ancient principle found in the fable of Cain and Abel. Emulation leads men to limitless lengths, often discounting morality, to protect or further their reputation and honor no matter the cost. This idea can also expand to nations as a whole, with Troy as the prime example, defending its honor until its destruction. Shakespeare illustrates the remarkable parallel between rivalry of men and nations in war. Hector and Achilles of *Troilus and Cressida* and Coriolanus and Aufidius in *Coriolanus* exhibit the violent and competitive nature of man which is often the poisonous embryo of war.

In Shakespeare’s bitter satire *Troilus and Cressida*, the Trojans’ greatest warrior is Hector. Hector is a manifestation of the virtuous and noble warrior prototype fighting valiantly to protect his country. He is very much ruled by morality and reason, but his concern with honor has a stronger pull on his actions. He is the voice of reason when discussing the morality of keeping Helen with Troilus and Paris: “Nature craves / All dues be render'd to their owners: now, / What nearer debt in all humanity / Than wife is to the husband?” (Tro.2.2.178-181). He asserts that natural and moral law dictate Helen be returned to her husband, Menelaus. However, he declares that Helen cannot be returned because it would cause damage to Troy’s honor and reputation by conceding to the enemy.

Hector also holds a great sense of justice and equality on the battlefield which coincides with reputation as a noble and valiant warrior. The respected Nestor, an elder Greek warrior, commends Hector for foregoing easy targets, as if the honorable warrior is dealing life on the battlefield:

I have, thou gallant Trojan, seen thee oft
Labouring for destiny, make cruel way
Through ranks of Greekish youth…
And seen thee scorning forfeits and subduements…

That I have said unto my standers-by,

‘Lo, Jupiter is yonder, dealing life!’ (Tro.4.5.200-206)

While on the battlefield, Hector seeks to maintain an even playing field and also gives opponents time to recover to ensure the fairness of the fight. Hector, like an athlete, plays fair in the game of war, and adheres to the rules of honor in warfare.

However, the blemish of this character lies, Ironically, in his virtues. His inability to grasp that the rules which dictate fair and honest play can and will be broken in war is a fatal flaw. Hector makes the mistake of believing that the enemy holds the same type of morality in battle as he in his adherence to the superfluous idea of honor in warfare. Shakespeare uses this character as a sacrificial lamb to expound the realities of war, often quite absent of honor, to the audience.

Furthermore, Hector is blinded by his sense of honor to the reality of the war. He will not permit himself to believe Ulysses and his sister Cassandra who prophesize that Troy will fall. Cassandra warns of the destruction throughout the play to Hector and his brothers, but they will not hear her. On the day of Hector’s death, his wife Andromache and Cassandra plead with Hector to abstain from fighting that day, but he refuses to listen to their warnings. Hector argues in response to the women, “Mine honour keeps the weather of my fate: / Life every man holds dear, but the dear man / Holds honour far more precious than, dear, life” (Tro.5.3.29-31). Hector’s choice to fight in battle that day seals his fate.

In contrast, fate is instead on Achilles’ side, Hector’s famous rival in the Greek army. Achilles is renowned for his superior, god-like warrior abilities, and this molds his perception of himself and others. The half-immortal is accustomed to being the best warrior in the world, unopposed, without having to work for it as his godly abilities had been bestowed on him. He is primarily motivated by his pride and famous reputation. Achilles is the Greeks’ most valuable asset, but Achilles refuses to bow to any man. On the contrary, Achilles expects people to bow down to him.
As a result, Achilles refuses to participate in the war though he knows the Greeks are depending on him to lead the way to victory. He arrogantly says to his superiors walking by, “What, comes the general to speak with me? / You know my mind: I’ll fight no more gainst Troy” (Tro.3.3.56-57). Achilles’ love for the Trojan princess Polyxena greatly influences his choice to participate in the war due to their opposing origins. He is also far too proud to give in to the demands of Agamemnon and the other Greek officials to partake in the war.

In addition, Achilles’ absence in the war has caused him to lose value as a warrior and has also damaged his reputation. Agamemnon and the other Greek officials must resort to manipulation and other methods to coax Achilles to return to battle. Achilles is acutely aware of the difference in the Greeks’ demeanor towards him when Ulysses bids the top Greek officials to pass by him, greet him rudely, or ignore him completely. In reaction, Achilles is baffled:

Achilles: What mean these fellows? Know they not Achilles?

Patroclus: They pass by strangely: they were used to bend
To send their smiles before them to Achilles,
To come as humbly as they used to creep
To holy altars. (Tro.3.3.71-75)

When Ulysses plants a seed in Achilles’ mind of Ajax outshining him because he will not fight, Achilles comes to realize that his eminence is waning. “I see my reputation is at stake, / My fame is shrewdly gored” (Tro.3.3.233-234). Ajax is not, however, the rival Achilles seems to be concerned about. Achilles is aware that Hector is the better warrior, and Hector will gain quite a bit of honor if he defeats Ajax.

Therefore, Achilles’ reputation is threatened by Hector, whose fame is rapidly increasing as the war drags on. Achilles sees this happening, but is, again, hindered by his pride and his love for Polyxena, and renders himself unable to redeem himself and his reputation as number one on the battlefield. Meeting Hector, observing his personage, and seeing his peers venerating him, Achilles decides to come to battle the following day, struck by his rival’s capability to surpass him in fame and reputation.
Yet Achilles does not keep his word, thwarted by an oath to Polyxena, and does not appear. Achilles says to Patroclus, “I will not break it: / Fall Greeks, fail fame, honour go or stay, / My major vow lies here, this I’ll obey” (Tro.5.1.35-37). Achilles claims his love for Polyxena outweighs his dedication to honor, fame, and Greece. However, when hearing of Patroclus’ death, Achilles is enraged and immediately targets Hector as the one who shall pay. Achilles has gotten the opportunity to eliminate his great adversary and the threat to his reputation. Hector, always maintaining fairness and nobility in battle, offers him a chance to catch his breath before they begin to fight. But the great Achilles instead retreats and orders his Myrmidons to kill Hector.

Hector the Great is executed, not in a glorious battle scenario between the two great warriors, but by the legendary Achilles ordering his Myrmidons to spear him while he is resting from battle. Upon hearing of Hector’s death at Achilles’ hands, Ajax remarks: “If it be so, yet bragless let it be: / Great Hector was a man as good as he” (Tro.5.10.5-6). Achilles ties Hector’s body to his horse and drags his body through the battlefield. The renowned god-like warrior has his underlings savagely assassinate his competition to protect his reputation, and the equally esteemed valiant warrior who would take death before dishonor is dishonorably killed outside of the battlefield.

The concept of death before dishonor, and dying an honorable death defending one’s country, is undercut further in Shakespeare’s Roman tragedy *Coriolanus*. Coriolanus is Rome’s leading warrior, and the government highly values his service. Famous throughout Rome and the surrounding area, he is a fierce fighter and his many scars prove his bravery in battle. He accurately predicts the Volsces’ armament and plan to attack Rome. In response, the Roman army raises a counterstrike, led by Titus Lartius and Cominius, but the victory is rightfully attributed to Coriolanus.

Furthermore, in the counterattack, Coriolanus, disgusted with his fellow soldiers’ fleeing the Volscian troops, ventures into the city gates by himself in a suicidal mission as far as the other soldiers are concerned. But when he returns wounded and still resolute of the conquest, the rest of the army becomes
motivated to continue on. Though Coriolanus is wounded, he continues to fight and pursues Aufidius. On meeting Aufidius, Coriolanus provokes him, saying:

Within these three hours, Tullus,

Alone I fought in your Corioles’ walls,

And made what work I pleased: ‘tis not my blood

Wherein thou see’st me masked: for thy revenge

Wrench up thy power to th’highest (Cor.1.8.9-13)

When the two rival warriors fight, Coriolanus drives Aufidius and the Volscians who came to his aid breathless, and prevails. He brings the Romans, as predicted by Volumnia, a swift and glorious victory, with Coriolanus surpassing all the others in his bravery and skill in battle.

This battle is just one of the many examples of Coriolanus’ contributions to the successful defense of the Roman city. The city would likely be under Volscian authority if not for Coriolanus. His epic heroism, bringing the Volscians to their knees and the Romans swift victory, is widely rejoiced on his return, much to the great warrior’s dismay. As Coriolanus remarks to Cominius when the general praises his heroism,

I have done

As you have done: that’s what I can, induced

As you have been, that’s for my country:

He that has but effected his good will

Hath overta’en mine act (Cor.1.9.17-21)

His aversion to the praise and acknowledgement of his bravery in battle may be attributed to the fact that he thinks he is simply accomplishing the duty he was born to perform.

Additionally, Coriolanus was raised by his mother, Volumnia, to become the absolute embodiment of a perfect warrior. She taught him to welcome violence, pain, and death by honorably defending the city. However, his absolute conformity to the hypermasculine warrior ideal forces
Coriolanus to be completely inadequate in expressing himself to others, and unable to control his emotions, particularly anger and hostility. Furthermore, his nature very much discredits compromise, forbids surrendering to a perceived enemy, dictates him to hold his ground, and directs him to always be swift in defense upon attack. Coriolanus’ fatal flaw as a man is ironically parallel to his perfect virtues as a warrior.

As a result of his uncontrollable aggression, Coriolanus is banished from Rome after wild verbal assaults on the plebeians and the cunning work of two tribunes whom despise him and his glory. The tribunes took from Coriolanus not only his city, but banished him from his life’s purpose, honor, glory, duty, livelihood—all that he holds sacred in his life. Coriolanus, enraged by the tribunes’ attack on him, reacts in the only way he knows: to counterattack, with brutal force. He must destroy the enemy, bring them to their knees, and regain his honor by striking back.

Furthermore, with the tables turned, Coriolanus allies with Aufidius, the Volscian warrior, against their mutual enemy, Rome. Tullus Aufidius has been Coriolanus’ long held enemy, and vice versa. Coriolanus says of Aufidius, “He is a lion / That I am proud to hunt” (Cor.1.1.223-224). The rivals have fought many times before with Coriolanus always emerging the victor. Aufidius offers to Coriolanus command of half of the war effort against Rome, and as a result, Coriolanus finds a way to compensate for his banishment from Rome.

Consequently, the Romans realize Coriolanus’ vengeance means certain conquest of the city. Cominius and Menenius are sent to dissuade him from his plot, but Coriolanus refuses to hear his former superior in the Roman military and his past father-like figure. Volumnia, however, prevails in her attempt to stop Coriolanus:

Thou know’st, great son,
The end of war’s uncertain: but this certain,
That if thou conquer Rome, the benefit
Which thou shalt thereby reap is such a name
Whose repetition will be dogged with curses:
Whose chronicle was thus writ: ‘The man was noble,
But with his last attempt he wiped it out,
Destroyed his country, and his name remains
To th’ensuing age abhorred.’ (Cor.5.3.151-159)

Volumnia, knowing his heart better than anyone one else, as she created it, exclaims that he would become the worst of traitors, the destroyer of Rome, and of his and her own honor. She, who made Coriolanus to be the perfect warrior, now destroys him.

As a result, Coriolanus and his Volscian forces reach the gates of Rome draw up a treaty between the two countries instead of attacking. This gives Aufidius the excuse he needs to justify the removal of Coriolanus, his great competition, to restore his reputation. As Aufidius remarks to his conspirators:

At a few drops of women’s rheum, which are
As cheap as lies, he sold the blood and labour
Of our great action: therefore shall he die,
And I’ll renew me in his fall (Cor.5.6.51-54).

Just as the tribunes of Rome had done, Aufidius shrewdly provokes Coriolanus to let loose his uncontrollable anger.

In the conspired chaos ensuing after Coriolanus’ angry defense against Aufidius’ lies, Coriolanus is killed by the conspirators at Aufidius’ command. A lord says to Aufidius after Coriolanus is slain: “Thou hast done a deed whereat / Valour will weep” (Cor.5.6.153-154). Coriolanus meets his end not through fighting for his country in war or battling his rival, but at the hands of Aufidius’ conspirators striking when he is weak.

Both Troilus and Cressida and Coriolanus depict warriors who are prisoners to the idea of honor. The competitive and emulous nature of man is shown in Hector’s murder by Achilles’ Myrmidons and in Coriolanus’ death by Aufidius’ conspirators. Two great warriors are killed not at the hands of their
envious adversaries, but by their subordinates seizing on the unfair advantage to strike when they are vulnerable. But Achilles and Aufidius will go down in history as the unopposed great warriors of their time, and take the credit for removing a great enemy for their country.

In the end, the idea of fairness and morality in victory becomes unimportant, and Shakespeare’s message is clear: true honor is absent in warfare. The means of acquiring the end result are forgotten or skewed. Wars viciously consume morality, humanity, and society for the superfluous idea of honor, superiority, and glory. Nations, just as individuals do, compete with and emulate each other violently to prove their superiority over the other. Thus the endless cycle of humanity’s needless self-destruction in war ensues.
Works Cited