

Notes for Reading Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*

This play from 1608, later in Shakespeare's career, belongs to a group of Roman plays. When Shakespeare wanted to address dangerous issues, he often turned to Rome as a setting rather than risk setting the action in England. Amongst the Roman plays are *Titus Andronicus*, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, and *Timon of Athens*; some critics include *Troilus and Cressida*, a play set during the Trojan War. All except *Tro* are tragedies. Please note the shifts from verse to prose.

Cor explore such themes as these:

a man untrue to his nature cannot succeed

many of us see things as black or white while pretending to see and value grays

few of us value and can balance the importance of both words and deeds

we should never trust the rabble--a few words of demagoguery will easily sway ordinary citizens

it is rarely safe and good to say precisely what one thinks

a mother who breeds her son solely for soldiering may create a monster

Volumnia derives much of her character from Spartan ideals of motherhood

we define *traitor* and *treachery* in more than one way

a great warrior may lack compassion for both cowards and those of only ordinary courage

remember that Britons claimed descent from Brut, a Roman descended from Aeneas, a Trojan

we see parallels between Achilles in *The Iliad*, Turnus in *The Aeneid*, and both C M Coriolanus and Tullus Aufidius in our play; where in this play lie the parallels to Hektor of *The Iliad* and Aeneas of *The Aeneid*?

A Few Study Questions

1. Why does 1.1 begin in prose rather than in verse? As you read Acts 1 and 2, explain the regular shifts between verse and prose depending on who speaks in the scene and to whom.
2. Describe the basic conflicts between the plebeians and patricians.
3. Why do the plebeians blame Caius Martius for the grain shortage and famine?
4. How does Caius Martius treat the plebeians and their complaints?
5. Describe Menenius's parable. Why is it too facile? How do the plebeians respond to him and to his story? How would you describe his values and his character.

6. Describe the character and values of Cominius and Titus Lartius. In what ways do they differ from Caius Martius—and what evidence do you find in the text?
7. How does Shakespeare characterize Volumnia and Virgilia? In what ways are they alike and in what ways similar? What does Volumnia value? Describe how she has reared Coriolanus and what she wants him to be and do. How well does he meet her expectations? What does Virgilia value? Describe her interactions with Coriolanus. How well suited is she to be his wife?
8. Why does Shakespeare include Valeria's story about young Martius and the butterfly?
9. For Volumnia, what is the most important fact of Coriolanus's return from battle? For Virgilia?
10. When he fights at Corioli, how does C M treat his soldiers? Where can you identify an epipoleis (of sorts)? How do Coriolanus and Tullus Aufidius mirror each other? What is the goal of each man? What shame occurs to Aufidius in losing to C M at Corioli?
11. Why does Coriolanus stand for consul? How is this act unsuitable for his nature? How does the Senate treat his bid for consul initially? How do the tribunes treat his bid? How does Coriolanus interact with the plebeians as he asks for their voices?

