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CORIOLANUS

William Shakespeare

Edited by John F. Andrews
former editor of the *Shakespeare Quarterly*
Foreword by Charles Dance

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CORIOLANUS



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Edited by
JOHN F. ANDREWS

Foreword by
CHARLES DANCE



EVERYMAN
J. M. DENT · LONDON
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VERMONT

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NOTE ON THE AUTHOR AND EDITOR

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE is held to have been born on St George's Day, 23 April 1564. The eldest son of a prosperous glove-maker in Stratford-upon-Avon, he was probably educated at the town's grammar school.

Tradition holds that between 1585 and 1592, Shakespeare first became a schoolteacher and then set off for London. By 1595 he was a leading member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, helping to direct their business affairs, as well as being a playwright and actor. In 1598 he became a part-owner of the company, which was the most distinguished of its age. However, he maintained his contacts with Stratford, and his family appears to have remained there.

From about 1610 he seems to have grown increasingly involved in the town's affairs, suggesting a withdrawal from London. He died on 23 April 1616, in his 53rd year, and was buried at Holy Trinity church two days later.

JOHN F. ANDREWS has recently completed a 19-volume edition, *The Guild Shakespeare*, for the Doubleday Book and Music Clubs. He is also the editor of a 3-volume reference set, *William Shakespeare: His World, His Work, His Influence*, and the former editor (1974-85) of the journal *Shakespeare Quarterly*. From 1974 to 1984, he was Director of Academic Programs at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington and Chairman of the Folger Institute. He now heads the Shakespeare Guild, which bestows the annual Sir John Gielgud Award for Excellence in the Dramatic Arts.

FOREWORD BY CHARLES DANCE

While *The Tragedy of Coriolanus* has little subtext, it is by no means simple. Its language may be comparatively modern, but its values are not. The central dilemma – that of having to destroy what we don't understand – is the basis of all bigotry and of most conflict, and is the basis of this fascinating play.

I am not a scholar, nor particularly studious. I am an actor and I attempt to discover through rehearsal and performance the nature and purpose of a text. I can only recount my experiences of performing the play in the hope that they will be of some assistance to those studying it, or preparing to perform it.

In 1975 I joined the Royal Shakespeare Company. I had appeared in only one of Shakespeare's plays before that, a touring production of *Twelfth Night*. I had played the much coveted role of Orsino's Page and understudied Orsino. While the business of understudying can be, and often is, a frustrating chore (especially if one's principal is determined, no matter how severe the nature of their 'indisposition', to go on at all costs) it does allow an actor to learn the great roles and observe great actors playing them. The RSC has a tradition of contracting its junior actors to play and understudy 'as cast'. I was more fortunate than others in my first season at Stratford in being offered quite sizeable supporting roles and understudying, among others, the great Alan Howard in *Henry V*. Aside from our both having fair hair, we couldn't be more different, so there was no way that I could ever imitate him, nor would I have tried. Still I could not help being hugely influenced by his ability to speak and 'ride' the most glorious verse in the English language.

In 1977 when the company staged *Coriolanus*, under the direction of Terry Hands, I played Aufidius' Lieutenant and

understudied Alan's Coriolanus. After seasons at Stratford-upon-Avon, Newcastle and London, we took the play to the major European cities for a six-week tour. By this time I had taken over the role of Tullus Aufidius, but was still understudying Coriolanus. Rather like playing Iago and understudying Othello!

Shortly after the opening night in Paris, Alan, who by this time had been performing eight shows a week for the best part of a year, succumbed to a bug of some sort and was unable to continue for the rest of the week. Midway through a pre-show tea in one of Paris's Left-Bank cafés, the stage manager – who must have had a homing device secretly attached to me – paid my bill, uttered the immortal words 'You're on tonight' and rushed me to the Odeon Theatre.

On these occasions sheer panic seems to give way to a strange clear-headedness and overwhelms any fear. Fortunately, I was also eager to play the part and test the validity of ideas that I'd had the opportunity to develop during the previous nine months of my association with the drama. I wanted to explore more fully the almost surrogate father-son nature of the relationship between Coriolanus and Menenius. I also sought answers to some of the questions the text provokes: how does the presence of Volumnia affect Coriolanus' behaviour? Is his 'private' face any different from his 'public' face? And is the often-stressed homoerotic nature of Martius' relationship with Aufidius too easy a solution to the problem of that complex coupling?

There was no point in my even looking at the lines – if I didn't know them now, the hour or so left before the evening's performance was insufficient time to start. From a purely practical point of view, what had to be rehearsed was the fight between Coriolanus and Aufidius. Prior to this night, remember, I was playing Aufidius and understudying Coriolanus. Now I was playing the title role and my understudy was playing Aufidius. We went down to the empty stage and started slowly to 'mark' our way through what was by now, for me at least, a well-choreographed but nevertheless quite intricate and potentially dangerous doubled-handed sword fight. The rehearsal went as

well as could be expected under the circumstances and we returned to our respective dressing rooms to await curtain up.

Probably because of an excess of adrenalin, I have very little memory of that evening other than of the fight scene. At some point we were both suddenly playing Aufidius and I struck what could have been a crippling blow to my understudy's left leg. I felt my sword jar with the impact on his knee joint, heard him howl with pain, heard myself cry, 'My God, are you all right?' and him answer, not altogether convincingly, 'Yes', and we both continued to the point of his rescue by the Volscian army. It was, thankfully, no more than a glancing blow that resulted in a quickly healed bruise. We both went on to play four more performances in our adopted roles but never with the same high as on that first night. At the end of that year I took an extended sabbatical, during which time I worked in other theatres and started to make films. It was not until 1990 that I rejoined the company, this time to play Caius Martius in my own right.

Aside from *King Lear*, *Coriolanus* is probably the most physically demanding of Shakespeare's plays. Even Hamlet has his moments of quiet contemplation, but in this, the last of the Roman Plays to be written, the language is surprisingly modern and the speed at which it has to be played by its principal character makes it a *tour de force*.

The drama's energy and the nature of its principal character are established in the very first scene. It begins with insurrection by the citizens of Rome, who blame their nation's hero for their lack of food. They are temporarily calmed by the wise words of Menenius, but then are immediately inflamed by the arrival of Coriolanus. Caius Martius' contempt for the people is based, as he sees it, on their inability or reluctance to play their part as subservients in society. Their dislike of him bothers him not one iota, but their seeming disregard for the care afforded them by his fellow patricians incenses him to the point where he draws his sword and threatens to make a pile of their dismembered bodies.

Coriolanus has little time for politics, or politicians, or political rhetoric. He has absolute respect for the structure of Roman society, and absolute contempt for those who do not

share that respect. When he speaks, he speaks from the heart, or rather the gut. He calls a spade a spade – always a problem when one is dealing with politicians! Caius Martius is often regarded as a fascist, but I don't believe he is one. He is a pragmatist and a warrior. But first and foremost he is a hero. Strangely, however, he is a hero who wants no reward, no shouts of praise – especially from those he knows to despise him and everything he stands for. A hypocrite he most certainly is not. Statues were erected in his honour. Titles and rewards were heaped on him, mostly to his embarrassment. Or was his reluctance to receive accolades a case of the proud hero's protesting too much? Another of those interesting conundrums!

During the second week of rehearsals, our director Terry Hands, who like me had come to the play for the second time, suggested an experiment whereby we replaced the words *people* and *citizens* with the word *children*. Suddenly the whole nature of Coriolanus' attitude to the citizenry became strikingly apparent. They should be seen but not heard. They have their place and I have mine. I go to war and fight for them and the state. They, as Menenius vividly describes them, are the state's body's members – albeit mutinous ones. We in the upper echelon of society are the head, and we will provide the belly with food from which the body's lesser parts can draw sustenance. In other words, the common people should stop complaining. A very simple way of looking at things, if not one that proves politically correct. But then that is the essence of Coriolanus: a character whose own personality is complex but who views himself and others in the most simplistic way. His inability to 'bend', both metaphorically and physically, and to understand diplomacy, is eventually his undoing.

Hovering over all is the dominant force of the play – the hero's mother. There is no mention of a father, and it is Volumnia and not Virgilia who has assumed responsibility for bringing up Coriolanus' only child. She, and only she, is able to persuade Coriolanus to do anything she wills him to. She talks him into humbling himself to the people, and later, in the extraordinary 'Supplication Scene' (V.iii), she wins him over

again even though he knows that what she is asking him to do will result in his death.

As ever, Shakespeare gives a clear indication of how this critical encounter should be staged:

Behold, the Heavens do ope,
The Gods look down, and this unnatural Scene
They laugh at.

At the juncture when Coriolanus steps outside the action to deliver what is in effect a soliloquy, the word *unnatural* becomes a very useful hook to hang on to. Of course Coriolanus finds the situation unnatural; it is acutely embarrassing, and it emerges as the turning point in his life. Any attempt to play this scene in a naturalistic way is doomed to diminish it. It is also bound to undercut that extraordinary moment when Shakespeare directs that Coriolanus hold his mother's hand in silence. Up to this point the language of the play is hard-edged and brittle, as is Coriolanus. Here, it takes on a peculiar, limbo-like poetry.

In this drama, the relationship between mother and son is open to a variety of interpretations, and every night of performance brought fresh insights. These insights would have continued if the play's run had extended longer, such is the joy of Shakespeare's writing. Certainly Caius Martius is his mother's son. But one thing above all is abundantly clear. From the Supplication Scene on, the audience should see a very different Coriolanus from the one that has gone before.

There are three named women in the play: Volumnia, Virgilia and Valeria. Why do all their names begin with the letter V? Surely not by coincidence. All of Shakespeare's plays are full of seeming coincidences – and repetitions. The most notable repetition in *Coriolanus* is 'What's the matter?' For the actor playing the title character to ignore the frequent reiteration of these words is to miss an opportunity to allow the audience to laugh – and there aren't many such opportunities!

While Caius Martius is certainly one of the most demanding roles, both physically and emotionally, in the entire canon, Tullus Aufidius is, in my opinion, the most difficult part in the play. As with all of Shakespeare's supporting characters,

Aufidius is underwritten, both in the lines the actor is given to say himself, and in the lines others speak about him. Other than what we learn in the first peaceful meeting of the two protagonists at Antium (IV.v) we know nothing of Aufidius' life outside soldiering. He is, or at least has been, married. Any children? We don't know. It seems that his only reason for living is to fight Coriolanus. Even his sleep is filled with dreams of Caius Martius, remembering their past encounters, and anticipating those that are yet to come – with Coriolanus always the victor! At the end of the play, after Coriolanus provokes his own violent death at his enemy's hand, Aufidius says his rage is gone. He appears to be filled with sorrow. It is as if he wonders who he will fight with, and dream about, now.

Shakespeare's plays are replete with ambiguities, and the problem Aufidius confronts at the conclusion of *Coriolanus* recalls a question we have heard several times earlier in the action: 'What's the matter?' Of all the enigmas to be addressed in this extraordinary and puzzling play, that strikes me as the one which calls for the most sustained consideration.

As is usual in the British theatre CHARLES DANCE served his apprenticeship in regional repertory theatres, before joining the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1975. He has appeared in ten of Shakespeare's plays, and performed the title roles in *Henry V* and *Coriolanus*. He now combines his theatre work with an active and varied television and film career that has encompassed everything from romantic leading men to Hollywood villains.

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO *Coriolanus*

In the opening scene of *Coriolanus*, as in Act IV of *King Lear*, Shakespeare invites us to explore a perennial problem: the equitable distribution of a society's goods and resources.

The action begins with Plebeian protests against an oligarchic 'Belly' that has either neglected or declined to provide adequate sustenance for the lower, 'discontented Members' of Rome's Body Politic (I.i.101, 115). We soon learn that in response to 'Complainings' from the poor (I.i.213) the Patrician Senate has reluctantly agreed to appoint five Tribunes as spokesmen for proletarian grievances. For most of the nobility this concession is an undesired but unavoidable compromise, the safest way to avert a revolution and preserve civil concord. The statesmen we see most often, Menenius and Cominius, are inclined to regard with condescension both the commoners and the two Tribunes – Junius Brutus and Sicinius Velutus – who step forward as advocates for the people. Rather than permit Rome to collapse into urban anarchy, however, these Senators are more than willing to amend the young republic's constitution.

As it happens, a hybrid polity proves altogether capable of maintaining order. And for a while, as we observe during the first half of Act IV, Scene vii, the new arrangement functions harmoniously and productively. What disrupts a tenuous equilibrium, not once but twice, is an intractable Patrician who refuses to temper or conceal his opposition to any form of power-sharing.

For Caius Martius Coriolanus, an awesome force upon the field of battle but a firebrand who seems woefully out of context in any forum that depends upon calm deliberation, the 'many-headed Multitude' (II.iv.18) is a ferocious mob, a monster that will devour the Patricians if they don't keep it firmly under foot. By 'soothing' the Plebeians with rewards that encourage unruly

behaviour, Martius insists, Rome's noblemen have committed an error that will 'nourish 'gainst our Senate th' Cockle of / Rebellion' (III.i.67–68). Rather than continuing to heed the 'Yea and No / Of general ignorance', then, Coriolanus implores his fellow aristocrats to restore the government to what it had been before when it was limited to 'the fundamental part of State', a cultivated elite who could be counted upon to rule the metropolis with intelligence and wisdom (III.i.143–44, 149).

Not surprisingly, Sicinius and Brutus view Martius as a threat to their recently created offices, and they mobilize the Plebeians against 'this Viper, / That would depopulate the City, and / Be every Man himself' (III.i.257–59). Thanks in large measure to Martius' 'Choler', which collaborates with his detractors to jeopardize the central character's own neck, they manage to get Rome's most famous defender condemned and exiled as an 'Enemy to the People and his Country' (III.iii.25, 115).

With a haughtiness that is entirely in keeping with his usual carriage, Coriolanus tells his banishers 'I banish you' (III.iii.120). Then, after proclaiming that 'There is a World elsewhere' (III.iii.132), he turns his back upon the land of his birth. In due course, following a brief sojourn in 'th' City of Kites and Crows' (IV.v.38), he makes his way to the residence of his only rival for military kudos, a Volscian general whom Martius has repeatedly defeated on previous occasions.

At first Aufidius is estatic to receive the 'Service' (IV.v.97) of his erstwhile nemesis. He offers Coriolanus half the 'Directitude' of his army (IV.vi.67), and together they 'rudely visit' the Romans 'in parts remote' (IV.v.138). By the time they're ready to besiege the capital itself, however, it has become evident that Martius is too enthusiastically admired by the followers of his adopted ally. The insecure Aufidius detects that he is being 'dark'ned in this Action' (IV.viii.5) and he determines to 'renew' his own standing by engineering the 'Fall' (V.vi.48) of his prepossessing partner. An opportunity arises when Coriolanus makes himself vulnerable through the naïveté that is one of his besetting flaws.

The Martius who emerges at the head of the Volscian assault upon his native country has resorted to such an extremity

because 'Anger's [his] Meat' (IV.ii.50). Bred from infancy as a stout, unbending 'Sword' (I.vii.76), a soldier who is most comfortable when he can position 'himself alone, / To answer all the City' (I.v.22–23), Coriolanus takes pride in a 'Nature' that is 'too Noble' to bow to the constraints that apply to lesser beings (III.i.249).

But now, to his astonishment, the hero is presented with a dilemma that a person of greater acuity would have foreseen from the outset. Volumnia, the woman who has moulded him to be the warrior he is and who epitomizes, both for him and for others, the very 'Life' of the Rome he has left behind (V.v.1), appears at his tent in the company of his wife Virgilia, his son Martius, and the chaste maiden Valeria. The same matron who has led Coriolanus, against his own instincts, to try crowning his martial achievements with a consulship, the same mentor who has advised him to 'dissemble' with his disposition (III.ii.61) in an effort to wheedle support from the impressionable Plebeians, begs her vengeful offspring to forswear the mission that has brought him back to the gates he'd exited to the jeers of his tormentors. She pleads with him to spare the lives of his friends, his loved ones and, yes, his enemies, and she reminds him that if he executes his announced intention he'll be trampling on his mother's 'Womb' (V.iii.123–24).

For an interval that can seem like an eternity when *Coriolanus* is sensitively produced in the modern theatre, Martius attempts to 'stand / As if a Man were Author of himself, / And knew no other Kin' (V.iii.35–37). He endeavours to purge his heart of any bonds that acknowledge 'Affection'; he seeks to convince himself that it is 'Virtuous to be Obstinate' (V.iii.24–26). But eventually he feels his resolution 'melt' as 'Hardness' gives way to 'a Woman's Tenderness' (V.iii.28, 91, 129). At Volumnia's urging, he consents to 'imitate the Graces of the Gods' (V.iii.150) and negotiate a treaty that will reconcile two warring states – both externally, as the Romans and the Volscians halt another round of hostilities, and internally, as the protagonist essays to mediate the 'difference' between the dictates of his 'Honour' and the demands of 'Mercy' (V.iii.200–1).

As Martius accedes to his mother's request, he senses that

what he terms an 'unnatural Scene' will prove 'mortal to him' (V.iii.184, 189). But with a resignation that harks back to Edgar's 'Ripeness is all come on' in *King Lear* (V.ii.11) and the Prince of Denmark's 'the Readiness is all' in *Hamlet* (V.ii.235-37), he eventually says 'let it come'. For the present, at any rate, he dismisses any thought of returning with Volumnia and her entourage to his former home – although the suggestion, in V.v.4-5, that a 'Repeal' of Coriolanus' banishment may be proposed to the Senate renders such an option remotely conceivable for the future – because he realizes that the only way he can live up to the pledge he has made is by going back to the Volscian Lords who've commissioned him and inducing them to ratify a truce that will be much less welcome than the 'happy Victory' (V.iii.186) they'd been expecting to celebrate, with the annihilation of a citadel their rechristened conqueror (see V.i.13-15 and V.iii.140-48) has put to the torch.

The Martius who parades into Volscian streets, attended by 'great Shouts of the People', in the play's final scene is a more irenic figure than the 'Traitor' who'd been hooted out of Rome during an earlier manifestation of public sentiment (see III.iii.132-34, and compare IV.vii.119-21). This Martius has progressed from a 'Grub' to a fledgling 'Butterfly'; he 'has Wings, he's more than a creeping thing' (V.iv.12-16). But he remains a far cry from the kind of prodigy who could ascend from the maze into which he's foolishly cast himself. He's on his own in unfamiliar territory, and he will soon discover that in this arena 'to be Tender-minded / Does not become a Sword' (*King Lear*, V.iii.31-32).

Owing to the ministrations of Volumnia, Coriolanus is suddenly defenceless in a way that a more primitive Martius had not been when he was last compelled to 'answer' all the Volscians (I.v.20-23). For even if he is starting to learn that he can no longer conduct his affairs as 'a lonely Dragon' (IV.i.30), Martius has had little time to acquire the aptitude he lacks for a part he must now discharge as solo diplomat. Ill equipped to comprehend the full import of his predicament, he resembles the soul a bewildered Matthew Arnold was to evoke in one of the most poignant lyrics of the nineteenth century, 'Wandering

between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born, / With nowhere yet to rest [his] head.'

As Martius launches into what will turn out to be the crucial performance of his career, his words are harshly interrupted by an adversary who knows that his intended victim has yet to slough the remnants of an irascible past. Aufidius perceives that, for all the restraint that appears to mark his current bearing, Martius is still an overgrown 'Boy', a high-strung brawler whose 'Tears' in V.iii have merely initiated the process that will be required to prepare him for emotional and intellectual maturity (V.vi.99). Like the Tribunes who have stage-managed the protagonist's fury in Rome, Aufidius provokes Martius to one last seizure of 'Impatience' (V.vi.145). Whether Coriolanus reverts completely to his prior self at this juncture is a matter of interpretation. But it is clear that in his defiant rebuttal he offers a treacherous Volscian the pretext he'd sought for a deed that will display anything but the 'Valour' (V.vi.133) Aufidius exhibited in I.ix.15, when he cursed his 'condemned Seconds' for assisting him during an earlier confrontation with the hero.

Ironically, though Coriolanus is hacked and trodden as if he were a lump of offal, his unvanquished honour gets 'the Best of it' (V.vi.147) in yet another encounter with his emulous competitor. In the brutal circumstances of his demise, then, if not in every step of the course that brought him to this bloody consummation, Martius garners 'a Noble Memory' (V.vi.154).

Shakespeare appears to have written his fourth and final Roman tragedy in 1607-8, during a period when England itself was divided over economic, social and political issues with striking similarities to those that introduce *Coriolanus*. Just how the author's own involvement in contemporary affairs may have affected his treatment of such topics has been, and will no doubt continue to be, vigorously debated. But it may well be that he designed his portrayal of the title character as a cautionary tale which could be read with profit by many of his fellow Jacobean, not least among them the absolutist who was publicly identified as patron of a company that billed itself as 'His Majesty's Servants'. By this time in its history that troupe of

actors was acclaimed for a dramatist who'd devised such royal entertainments as *Measure for Measure* and *Macbeth*.

For the main outlines of *Coriolanus* the playwright drew upon a 1595 revision of Sir Thomas North's 1579 translation of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, the same volume he had perused so fruitfully when he composed *Julius Caesar* (c. 1599) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (c. 1607). For Menenius' Fable of the Belly in I.i, Shakespeare took details from Sir Philip Sidney's *Apology for Poetry* (1595) and from William Camden's *Remains of a Greater Work Concerning Britain* (1605). He probably also found material he could use in Philemon Holland's 1600 translation of Livy's *Roman History* and in George Chapman's Englishing of Homer's *Iliad*, the first instalment of which had been published in 1598.

Shakespeare's Martius resembles Homer's Achilles in his conviction that 'brave Death out-weighs bad Life' (I.vii.71) and in his assumption that a true worthy will always 'prefer / A Noble Life before a Long' (III.i.150-51). His Aufidius departs from that classic ideal, of course, but in his deployment of 'Conspirators' to dispatch a foe he'd been unable to excel in single combat he recalls the Achilles that Shakespeare had depicted in *Troilus and Cressida*, V.viii.1-22. There a crafty cutthroat directs his Myrmidons to butcher a Hector who, like the Coriolanus of V.vi, is valiant but somewhat deficient in prudence, too securely preoccupied with his own purposes to suspect that an unscrupulous antagonist might be so unfair as to take advantage of him while he has temporarily relaxed his guard.

The emotions we experience at the end of *Coriolanus* are not totally distinguishable from the ones we feel during the closing moments of *King Lear*. Here, too, we regret that a noble protagonist, a man whose wrath has 'marr'd his Fortune' (III.i.248) but who appears to have gained some insight into the price that he and others have paid for his excesses, is 'cut off' (V.vi.139) before he can fulfil the promise afforded by a fresh perspective. We lament that a character who is finally emerging as a sympathetic personality, a man for whom the audience can

genuinely care, should be fated to 'end / Where he was to begin' (V.vi.63-64).

That we should react in this fashion is, of course, fitting, because here as elsewhere the effect a brilliant artist has upon our minds and hearts is 'a purpos'd thing' that 'grows by Plot' (III.i.36).