

CORIOLOANUS

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Coriolanus by William Shakespeare

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WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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INTRODUCTION.

SHAKESPEARE'S *Coriolanus* was first printed in the folio of 1623, and is usually regarded as one of Shakespeare's latest plays. Edmond Malone ascribed it conjecturally to the year 1610. There is no evidence of a preceding play on the same subject by any other dramatist, and as *Coriolanus* was entered at Stationers' Hall on the 8th of November, 1623, to Isaac Jaggard and Edward Blount, printers of the first folio, as one of the copies that had not previously been "entered to other men," we know for certain that there had been no issue of this play in quarto. Shakespeare drew the story from no other source than Pintarch's Life of Coriolanus in Sir Thomas North's translation.

The shaping of the play is so contrived as to set forth most vividly the strength of our home ties. The bowing of the spirit of a proud, unconquerable warrior, impelled by the strongest of all other passions, to the love of wife, mother, and child, was the essential part of the old story. Shakespeare, who looked always for the soul of his play in that one of the elements of life which was especially concerned in its main action, made *Coriolanus*, like King Lear, an image of the transcendent power of those ties of nature by which God binds us together. In *Lear* the ties are broken: that way madness lies. In *Coriolanus* the ties hold: they are stronger than the strong man in

his wrath—stronger than death. The pride and passion of the mighty man of war are not the foremost features of the tale. The more Coriolanus is represented as the proud patrician, the fierce warrior whom nothing daunts, the more clearly is shown the power of that love which is strongest of all, as wholesome to us and familiar as the air we breathe. Shakespeare's first introduction of this power allies it to the daily life in all our homes: "Enter Volumnia and Virgilia, mother and wife to Martius: They set them down on two low stools and sowe."

| The First Act of the play opens with mutiny in Rome, and Caius Marcius regarded as chief enemy to the people. The voice of the Second Citizen represents a kindlier tone of consideration for his public service, but it is from the First Citizen, who loves him least, that there comes change of recognition of his home affection. "He pays himself with being proud . . . what he hath done famously, he did it to that end: though soft-conscienced men can be content to say it was for his country, he did it to please his mother, and to be partly proud." After this opening sketch of the character of Coriolanus as seen through the distance between him and the people, whom he scorns, Menenius Agrippa, who is known for a peacemaker, enters upon the scene, with the good word of the Second Citizen, to which even the First Citizen assents. In the folios the numbering of the citizens, after the entrance of Menenius Agrippa, is reversed by an obvious error that was first corrected by Malone.

| Menenius Agrippa represents in the life of Coriolanus the man most beloved of all who are not bound to him by the domestic tie. He is the old family friend, who takes, as nearly as friend can, a father's place; with pride in

his son's successes, zeal to maintain his honour and prosperity, and joy in all signs of a love returned. Menenius Agrippa is, like Gonzalo in the *Tempest*, a good old statesman full of genial kindness, who believes in his friend, his dinner, and his joke, and has a generous fidelity that gives him influence and wins him trust. But these two kindly elders are well distinguished from each other. Menenius had more vigour to lead in service of the state, and a nature more lively in utterance. Gonzalo could not in a moment of delight cry "Hoo!" and throw his cap into the air. Menenius is a patrician with as much contempt of the populace as Coriolanus, but his contempt is mingled with the spirit of good-fellowship; he has no bitterness of scorn, but to citizens and tribunes speaks his ill-opinion of them with so much whimsical playfulness that they do not hold him for an enemy, however free the plainness of his speech. There is good-humour even in his wrath, and when he is sent back with a cracked heart to Rome, the old gleams of a kindly fancy play like household fire upon the ruin that shuts in his life. Menenius, when he comes among the mutinous plebeians, addresses them at once as his countrymen, as his good friends, his honest neighbours, wins their attention with a shrewdly applied fable, and then comes down with all his weight upon the leading malcontent as the great toe of the assembly, yet with a good-humour that can win friendly attention to the plainest speaking. Then Caius Marcius enters, and, in a tone sharpened by contrast with the manner of Menenius, pours his contempt upon the people with the bitter scorn that turns their hearts against him. In doing so he carries on the tale by reporting to Menenius the concession made to the other troop of mutineers who will have tribunes of their own choice "to defend their vulgar

wisdoms." The excess of his proud scorn is strongly marked—

"Would the nobility lay aside their ruth
 And let me use my sword, I'd make a quarry
 With thousands of these quartered slaves, as high
 As I could pick" (i.e. pitch) "my lance."

Here "quarry" is not derived from the word *quadratus*, squared, which gives its name to the place whence stones are cut, or to the square bolt shot from a crossbow; but it is from the French *cuir*, skin—a term of the chase. When the game was run down and killed, there was a regular form of distribution of the parts. The beast was skinned, and upon its thick skin—*cuir*—the meaner entrails were heaped up as the share of the dogs, who were let loose upon it. This was called in French the *curée*—in English adaptation of the word to English mouths, the "quarry." It was a *curée chaude* when given on the spot; a *curée froide* when prepared with bread and given in the kennel. There is uttermost contempt, therefore, in the comparison of quartered plebeians to this food for the dogs, the meanest entrails of the deer. Heart, liver, and kidneys were the umbles of the deer, which with the skin, head, chine, and shoulders were given to the keeper and his men. The venison pasty was served at the daïs, the umble pie or humble pie at the servants' table, whence "eating humble pie" meant having taken a place at the servants' table. Caius Marcius did not look so high as the umbles for a parallel to the best flesh of the plebeians.

Let it be said here that the Coriolanus legend is ascribed to the year B.C. 490, about which time a temple is said to have been founded to "Fortuna Muliebris," Fortune of Women's Bringing. But there was a famine in the year

B.C. 470, and there were terms like those of Coriolanus between Romans and Volscians, B.C. 458. In the demands for tribunes and for corn at the beginning of the play, Shakespeare unites the story of the secession to the Sacred Mount provoked by the law of debts, with a later outbreak caused by the opposition of Coriolanus to the distribution of the contents of Sicilian corn-ships. In this way the poet gets a larger expression of the need of the great hungry mass—bread, and a voice to represent their claims on the attention of the rich. The action of the legend from which Shakespeare takes his play extends over six years. In the play all its events follow close on one another as parts of a single thought.

After the contempt poured by Caius Marcius upon the common people follows at once, through senators who enter with the generals Cominius and Titus Lartius, the knowledge that the Volscians are in arms, and that there is old rivalry in war between Caius Marcius and Aufidius, the Volscian leader. Caius Marcius goes to the war under the command of Cominius, leaving the sting behind him of his insolent contempt, resented by the tribunes of the people.

The scene changes to Corioli, showing the plans of the Volscians; on the side of Aufidius, also the rivalry between him and Marcius; and the resolve to give battle to the Romans in the open field while also defending the city against siege.

Now follows the scene with the women in the home of Marcius. Enter Volumnia and Virgilia. They sit down on two low stools and sew. Volumnia is the high-hearted Roman mother, Virgilia the tender-hearted Roman wife. The thoughts of both are on their absent warrior, the mother glorying in his glory, the wife overwrought with

cares about his safety. The talk is home talk. The lady Valeria enters as a friend and gossip; talk is of the child, of needlework, of visiting. Volumnia goes with Valeria to pay visits, but Virgilia is too anxious to go abroad. It would need little change to translate all into a home scene of this year 1892 among the ladies in the drawing-room. And simple and quiet as it all looks, here, in the heart of home, the power lies that saves a state, and is to that end stronger than armies or the shrewdest schemes of politicians.

Again Shakespeare uses the effect of contrast by passing from this picture of the women in the home to the most vivid painting of the men upon the field of battle. Marcius, in the attack upon Corioli, is shown, after battling single-handed within the gates suddenly closed on him, re-entering covered with blood, and, after the taking of Corioli, eager to rush at once into the other battle which is being fought, not far off, in the open field. Without rest, his brow covered with blood, he hurries to the fight in which Cominius, engaged with Aufidius, has withdrawn his force for rest. His eager question is: "Am I too late?" He leads chosen followers against Aufidius himself, and is victor in two battles, before, wounded and covered with the blood of enemies, he thinks of rest. Among these incidents the rivalry between Caius Marcius and Aufidius is shown with a fresh emphasis, and the nobler side of the proud spirit of Marcius appears in his impatience of the praise and the rewards that precede the conferring on him of the name of Coriolanus for what he did before Corioli. His generosity of nature also is associated with the incident that shows him at last faint from the long toil and loss of blood. And still the more the poet magnifies the