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# Notes on Coriolanus

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## Introduction

William Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* stands as one of his most intricate and formidable tragedies, offering English Literature students a unique journey through the fraught intersections of history, character, and political ideology. Written in the first decade of the seventeenth century, *Coriolanus* serves as the dramatist's final exploration of Roman settings and classical sources, yet its concerns are strikingly contemporary, echoing debates over power, social structure, and personal integrity that remain relevant today. The details of its composition and the atmosphere of Jacobean England illuminate the enduring qualities that have made the play a subject of fascination and debate for generations of scholars, performers, and readers.

At its heart, *Coriolanus* is the tragedy of an individual who cannot or will not moderate his identity for the sake of public life. Caius Marcius Coriolanus is a soldier whose valor on the battlefield earns him a name and a legacy, but whose contempt for political compromise and disdain for popular approval set him on a collision course with the very city he serves. Unlike more familiar tragic heroes, Coriolanus is emotionally guarded, sometimes even unsympathetic, which creates distinctive challenges and rewards for those who study him. His story is not only about personal downfall, but a broader meditation on what it means to exist—and resist—within the demands of public and communal life.

The central conflicts of *Coriolanus*—pride versus humility, elite versus common, the warrior's virtues versus civil society's needs—play out in the specific context of early Republican Rome. The political and social anxieties of that ancient world, as well as Shakespeare's own England marked by social unrest and competing visions of authority, fill the play with a sense of urgency. The tensions between patricians and plebeians largely mirror ongoing debates in Shakespeare's society and our own, allowing for discussions that can extend from the nature of democracy to the mechanics of populism and the responsibilities of leadership.

This book is designed to serve English Literature students by making the play accessible without diminishing its complexity. Each chapter offers notes and commentary on thematic concerns, historical background, critical debates, and the language and structure of the play. We will examine the major and minor characters in detail, reflect on the storyline's dramatic structure, and trace the play's rich tapestry of imagery and rhetorical techniques. Discussions of major motifs—honor, loyalty, mother-son relationships, and the burdens of heroism—are matched by practical guidance for academic study.

Above all, *Notes on Coriolanus* seeks to foster both understanding and enjoyment of a

play that is often less familiar than Shakespeare's more famous tragedies, yet just as layered and rewarding. Whether you are encountering *Coriolanus* for an exam, an essay, a classroom discussion, or personal interest, these notes will guide you through the play's formidable challenges and enduring questions. Through careful reading and thoughtful analysis, you will find in *Coriolanus* not just a study of ancient Rome or a tragic hero's downfall, but a searching exploration of ambition, identity, and the engine of history itself.

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## CHAPTER ONE: Understanding Coriolanus in Shakespeare's Oeuvre

To understand *Coriolanus*, it is helpful to place it within the vast landscape of William Shakespeare's complete works. This play, often regarded as one of the Bard's later tragedies, sits among some of his most psychologically complex and politically charged dramas. While it might not possess the immediate, broad appeal of a *Hamlet* or *Romeo and Juliet*, its distinct character and themes offer a fascinating insight into Shakespeare's evolving artistry and his engagement with the world around him.

Scholarly consensus generally places the composition of *Coriolanus* between 1605 and 1608. This situates it firmly in Shakespeare's late period, a time marked by the creation of other significant tragedies like *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, as well as the initial forays into the late romances or tragicomedies such as *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*. The plays from this era often exhibit a certain thematic depth and a sophisticated handling of complex moral and political issues.

As a tragedy, *Coriolanus* shares some fundamental characteristics with others in Shakespeare's tragic canon: a protagonist of high status, a fatal flaw or error in judgment, and a catastrophic downfall leading to death. However, Caius Marcius Coriolanus is a markedly different kind of tragic hero compared to the introspective Hamlet, the tormented Macbeth, or the emotionally volatile Lear. His defining trait is an unyielding, almost severe, integrity rooted in pride and a profound disdain for dissimulation and the common populace. This makes him, for some, a less immediately sympathetic figure, positioning him closer perhaps to classical tragic figures than to Shakespeare's more psychologically transparent creations.

*Coriolanus* is the last of Shakespeare's Roman plays, following *Titus Andronicus*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. These plays demonstrate a sustained interest in Roman history and its enduring relevance, drawing heavily on sources like Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*. While *Titus Andronicus* is an early, bloody revenge tragedy set in the decadent late Roman Empire, and *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* explore the transition from Republic to Empire through political intrigue and passionate relationships, *Coriolanus* delves into an earlier, more foundational period of the Roman Republic.

Set shortly after the expulsion of the kings and the establishment of the Republic, *Coriolanus* focuses on the inherent tension between the patrician aristocracy and the plebeian commoners, a conflict fundamental to Rome's early history. This setting allows Shakespeare to explore themes of class, governance, and the nature of

authority with a sharpness that distinguishes it from the broader historical sweep of *Julius Caesar* or the sweeping romantic and political scope of *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Comparing *Coriolanus* to his other Roman works highlights Shakespeare's varied approaches to classical history. While *Julius Caesar* features a multitude of noble Romans grappling with political philosophy and public duty, and *Antony and Cleopatra* immerses itself in the luxurious and politically fraught world of the Roman and Egyptian empires, *Coriolanus* is more tightly focused on a single, almost monolithic character and the specific political dynamics of early Rome. The play's Rome feels less like a fully realised society and more like a crucible for testing the limits of Coriolanus's character against the demands of the state.

Beyond the Roman plays, *Coriolanus* resonates thematically with other works in the Shakespearean canon. The central theme of overwhelming pride leading to downfall is, of course, a hallmark of many tragedies, but Coriolanus's specific brand of pride – an arrogant refusal to compromise or seek popular approval – finds echoes in characters who struggle with their public image or the need for political adaptability. His disdain for the masses and the political machinations of the tribunes links him to plays that explore social hierarchy and the volatile nature of public opinion.

The intense, arguably unhealthy, mother-son relationship between Coriolanus and Volumnia is another distinctive element that connects to Shakespeare's broader exploration of family dynamics, though the particular ferocity and ambition of Volumnia feel singular. While other plays feature powerful maternal figures or complex parent-child bonds, the way Volumnia has forged her son into a weapon of the state and her subsequent role in his fate adds a unique psychological layer to *Coriolanus*.

The play's language and style also align it with Shakespeare's later work. The verse is often dense and complex, reflecting the sophisticated political arguments and the characters' intense emotions. Coriolanus's own language is notably blunt and contemptuous, a stark contrast to the more poetic or rhetorical styles found in some of Shakespeare's earlier heroes. This linguistic rigidity mirrors his inflexible personality and contributes to the play's overall tone, which some find less lyrical than other tragedies.

Compared to the famous "big four" tragedies (*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*), *Coriolanus* has historically been less frequently performed and is sometimes regarded as less emotionally accessible. Coriolanus's lack of introspection and his refusal to engage in revealing soliloquies make him an opaque figure, challenging audiences to look beyond his surface arrogance to understand his motivations and tragic trajectory. This opacity is a stylistic choice that sets the play apart, demanding a different kind of engagement from the audience.

Despite its relative lack of popularity compared to those titans, *Coriolanus* has long

been admired by critics for its powerful political analysis and its unflinching portrayal of a difficult hero. T. S. Eliot, for instance, saw it as superior to *Hamlet*. While this opinion is far from universal, it highlights the play's intellectual rigor and its capacity to provoke strong reactions and scholarly debate. Its focus on political themes and class conflict has made it particularly relevant in different historical periods, including Shakespeare's own Jacobean era, which was marked by social unrest.

The play's engagement with themes like the nature of leadership, the power of the people, and the conflict between individual integrity and social conformity remains potent. In a time of political upheaval and social division, the issues explored in *Coriolanus* resonate deeply, demonstrating Shakespeare's continued capacity to speak to the human condition across centuries. Studying *Coriolanus* within the context of Shakespeare's full body of work allows us to appreciate its unique position – a late, powerful tragedy that challenges conventional notions of heroism and explores the unforgiving demands of the political world with remarkable intensity.

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