

List of characters

Romans

Patricians

CAIUS MARTIUS later CORIOLANUS
 VOLUMNIA his mother
 VIRGILIA his wife
 YOUNG MARTIUS his son
 MENENIUS AGRIPPA his friend
 VALERIA a noble lady
 COMINIUS Consul and
 Commander-in-Chief of
 the Army
 TITUS LARTIUS a general
 SENATORS
 NOBLES

Plebeians

SICINIUS VELUTUS } Tribunes of
 JUNIUS BRUTUS } the people
 CITIZENS
 AEDILES
 SOLDIERS

Other Romans

GENTLEWOMAN to Volumnia
 NICANOR a traitor to Rome
 OFFICERS
 HERALD
 MESSENGERS

Usher, Drummer, Trumpeter, Scout,
 Captains, Lictors, Attendants

Volsces

TULLUS AUFIDIUS general of the Volscce army
 LIEUTENANT to Aufidius
 ADRIAN a spy
 GUARDS
 CITIZENS
 SOLDIERS
 LORDS
 SENATORS
 CONSPIRATORS
 Attendants

The action of the play takes place in or near Rome,
 Corioles and Antium

Before the play begins

The story of *Coriolanus* is Shakespeare's version of events in the early days of the Roman republic, long before Rome became a great military empire. According to legend, Rome was founded in 753 BC by Romulus who, with his brother Remus, was supposed to have been suckled by a she-wolf. It was ruled by Etruscan kings, the Tarquins, until 510 BC when the last Tarquin king was driven out, and Rome became a republic.

Shakespeare's play is set around 490 BC, shortly after the republic was established. Rome was still a small city, just one of many in Italy where warring tribes fought each other. But it was a divided city. The patricians (aristocrats) and the plebeians (citizens) had united to drive out the Tarquins, but were now locked in a bitter struggle for power.

The patricians were the ruling class of Rome. They owned most of the property, and wielded all the power. They alone held the right to become senators and make laws. From their ranks came the consuls, two of whom served for one year only with full executive powers as joint heads of the civil state and the army. Plebeians were the workers: servants, artisans, small traders and farmers, beggars. In the evolving republic, there was always smouldering resentment between the haves and the have-nots.

Republican Rome claimed that all the people had a part in affairs of state: making laws, declaring war, electing magistrates. But in practice the plebeians had little or no influence over political decisions, and they were economically exploited by the patrician class. Hard labour and military service were their daily conditions of life. Famine was an ever-present threat.

The play opens with the plebeians focussing their anger on Caius Martius, the patrician war-lord who later, because of his bravery in battle at the city of Corioles, becomes known as Coriolanus. The plebeians accuse him of hoarding corn, causing them to starve.

Coriolanus' Rome was neither a monarchy nor a democracy, but a republic ruled by an aristocracy – the patricians. Some brief definitions follow, and you will find further help with the political structure of Rome throughout the play and on pages 242–3.

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Excerpt

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Patricians the ruling elite; wealthy aristocrats; the law-makers.

Plebeians citizens and workers; neither patricians nor slaves.

Tribunes spokesmen of the plebeians, defenders of their rights.

Aediles officers of the tribunes, carrying out their orders.

The senate: the law-making body; Rome's seat of government.

Senators patricians who sat in the senate.

The Capitol the meeting house of the senate.

Consul each year the senate nominated two consuls, to serve jointly for one year only, as commanders-in-chief of the army and heads of state. The plebeians were expected to ratify the appointment in a show of general assent. Their rejection of Coriolanus as consul leads to his banishment.



Roman and Volscian territory about 490 BC, the time of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. Corioles was a small city, 25 miles to the south-east of Rome. Its exact location is now lost, but it was near the modern town of Velletri. Antium was the modern Anzio. After the defeat of the Volscians it became a Roman colony, a favoured retreat for Roman patricians.

Coriolanus

The Citizens resolve to rebel, and to kill Caius Martius. The First Citizen claims that the patricians' greed causes the plebeians to starve. The Second Citizen seems to defend Caius Martius.

1 Stage the opening (in large groups)

The play explodes into action with the threat of a food riot. Talk together about the following questions, then stage the opening moments to greatest dramatic effect:

- a Do the citizens enter all together, or does the stage gradually fill?
- b How are they dressed? How do they handle their weapons?
- c How does the First Citizen gain the attention of the crowd?
- d How can you help the audience to understand the citizens' main grievance that the patricians have hoarded corn, causing starvation among the common people? (One production began with the citizens angrily watching a golden shower of corn fall into a pit on stage).

2 First impressions of Coriolanus

Caius Martius will be given the name Coriolanus at the end of Act 1. Identify the three descriptions of him in lines 5–6, 21 and 25. You will find many more views of his character as you read on.

3 Conflict: poverty versus wealth

Coriolanus is a play of conflicts, and Shakespeare's language style expresses those conflicts. For example, the First Citizen's lines 12–19 are full of antitheses (words or phrases set against each other, see page 238): 'poor'/'good', 'citizens'/'patricians' and so on. Speak the lines using physical actions to bring out the oppositions.

staves wooden staffs
 famish go hungry
 accounted reckoned
 authority the patricians
 surfeits over-feeds, gluttons
 superfluity surplus (of corn)
 humanely compassionately

leanness starvation
 an inventory ... abundance a list
 giving a detailed reminder of their
 wealth
 pikes pitch-forks
 commonalty common people,
 plebeians

The Tragedy of Coriolanus

ACT I SCENE I Rome: a public place

Enter a company of mutinous citizens with staves, clubs, and other weapons

- FIRST CITIZEN Before we proceed any further, hear me speak.
 ALL Speak, speak.
 FIRST CITIZEN You are all resolved rather to die than to famish?
 ALL Resolved, resolved.
 FIRST CITIZEN First, you know Caius Martius is chief enemy to the people. 5
 ALL We know't, we know't.
 FIRST CITIZEN Let us kill him, and we'll have corn at our own price.
 Is't a verdict?
 ALL No more talking on't. Let it be done. Away, away! 10
 SECOND CITIZEN One word, good citizens.
 FIRST CITIZEN We are accounted poor citizens, the patricians good.
 What authority surfeits on would relieve us. If they would yield us
 but the superfluity while it were wholesome, we might guess they
 relieved us humanely. But they think we are too dear. The leanness 15
 that afflicts us, the object of our misery, is as an inventory to
 particularise their abundance; our sufferance is a gain to them. Let
 us revenge this with our pikes, ere we become rakes; for the gods
 know, I speak this in hunger for bread, not in thirst for revenge.
 SECOND CITIZEN Would you proceed especially against Caius Martius? 20
 ALL Against him first. He's a very dog to the commonalty.
 SECOND CITIZEN Consider you what services he has done for his
 country?
 FIRST CITIZEN Very well, and could be content to give him good report
 for't, but that he pays himself with being proud. 25
 SECOND CITIZEN Nay, but speak not maliciously.

Coriolanus

The First Citizen makes more criticisms of Caius Martius. Menenius attempts to calm the mob, and claims that the patricians care for the people and that the gods have caused the famine.

1 More impressions of Coriolanus

The First Citizen claims that Caius Martius (Coriolanus) seeks fame out of pride and a desire to please his mother. His pride is as great as his valour ('virtue'). The Second Citizen seems to defend Coriolanus, saying that he is not greedy for wealth ('covetous'). You may find it helpful to compile a 'character book' as you read on, noting down what other characters say about Coriolanus.

2 Iron hand in a velvet glove? (in pairs)

When the First Citizen cries 'To th'Capitol', he may be trying to incite the citizens to storm the senate. So Menenius, the first patrician to appear in the play, faces a mob of mutinous plebeians.

a Pick out the descriptions of the citizens in lines 42, 48 and 51.

Why do you think Menenius uses such terms?

b Match the following summary to the appropriate lines:

- the patricians love you;
- you are powerless against the Roman state;
- the famine is caused by the gods, so pray to them;
- there's danger ahead ('transported by calamity' = made frantic by disaster);
- you wrongly criticise the patricians, who love you ('helms' = helmsmen who steer the ship of state).

c Step into role as Menenius and speak lines 51–64 as persuasively as you can. Explore different tones for each of his four sentences: for example, kindly and friendly, or coldly and threatening.

soft-conscienced unthinking,
 easy-going
even to the altitude ... virtue
 to match his valour
prating foolishly talking
Soft wait a moment
bats cudgels

inkling suspicion, hint
suitors beggars
dearth famine
curbs restraints
asunder apart
impediment attempt to stop
 progress

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Act I Scene I

FIRST CITIZEN I say unto you, 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, which he is, even to the altitude of his virtue. 30

SECOND CITIZEN What he cannot help in his nature you account a vice in him. You must in no way say he is covetous.

FIRST CITIZEN If I must not, I need not be barren of accusations. He hath faults, with surplus, to tire in repetition.

Shouts within

What shouts are these? The other side o'th'city is risen. Why stay we prating here? To th'Capitol! 35

ALL Come, come!

FIRST CITIZEN Soft, who comes here?

Enter MENENIUS AGRIPPA

SECOND CITIZEN Worthy Menenius Agrippa, one that hath always loved the people. 40

FIRST CITIZEN He's one honest enough. Would all the rest were so!

MENENIUS What work's, my countrymen, in hand? Where go you With bats and clubs? The matter, speak, I pray you.

SECOND CITIZEN Our business is not unknown to th'senate. They have had inkling this fortnight what we intend to do, which now we'll show 'em in deeds. They say poor suitors have strong breaths; they shall know we have strong arms too. 45

MENENIUS Why, masters, my good friends, mine honest neighbours, Will you undo yourselves?

SECOND CITIZEN We cannot, sir; we are undone already. 50

MENENIUS I tell you, friends, most charitable care Have the patricians of you. For your wants, Your suffering in this dearth, you may as well Strike at the heaven with your staves as lift them Against the Roman state, whose course will on The way it takes, cracking ten thousand curbs Of more strong link asunder than can ever Appear in your impediment. For the dearth, The gods, not the patricians, make it, and Your knees to them, not arms, must help. Alack, 55 You are transported by calamity Thither where more attends you, and you slander The helms o'th'state, who care for you like fathers, When you curse them as enemies. 60

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Coriolanus

The Second Citizen details how the working people of Rome are exploited. Menenius criticises him, then begins to tell a parable which compares the stomach in the body to the patricians in the state.

1 The Citizen's complaints (in pairs)

In lines 65–70, the Second Citizen denies Menenius' claim that the patricians care for Rome's ordinary people. Instead, they cause starvation by hoarding corn, supporting moneylenders ('usurers') who charge high rates of interest ('usury'), and using the law to aid the rich and oppress the poor.

Take turns to speak the lines, and invent a sequence of gestures the Second Citizen might use to emphasise the grievances he lists.

2 The tale of the belly (in pairs)

In response to the Second Citizen's list of injustices, Menenius proposes to tell a 'pretty tale' (apt story or fable). Take parts as Menenius and the Second Citizen and speak lines 71–146, using the activities below and on pages 10 and 12 to help you.

- a Menenius says that the parable of the belly 'serves my purpose' (line 75), but the Second Citizen suspects that Menenius might be using the fable to 'fob off our disgrace' (dismiss with a trick our suffering and grievances). What do you think is Menenius' purpose in telling the fable of the belly?
- b Try different story-telling styles for Menenius: as a fairy story to a group of children; or patronising and contemptuously; or as a seriously spoken parable, and so on. Is Menenius confident, or is he desperate and anxious, not sure if he will succeed?
- c In some productions, the actor belches at 'even thus' (line 91). How does your Menenius behave here?

edicts laws, orders
piercing statutes harsh laws
scale't attempt it
gulf whirlpool, bottomless pit
Still always
cupboarding the viand hoarding
 the food

instruments body parts
mutually participate working
 together
his receipt what it received
muniments defences
petty small
fabric body

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Act 1 Scene 1

- SECOND CITIZEN Care for us? True indeed, they ne'er cared for us yet. 65
Suffer us to famish, and their storehouses crammed with grain;
make edicts for usury, to support usurers; repeal daily any
wholesome act established against the rich, and provide more
piercing statutes daily to chain up and restrain the poor. If the
wars eat us not up, they will; and there's all the love they bear us. 70
- MENENIUS Either you must
Confess yourselves wondrous malicious,
Or be accused of folly. I shall tell you
A pretty tale. It may be you have heard it,
But since it serves my purpose, I will venture 75
To scale't a little more.
- SECOND CITIZEN Well, I'll hear it, sir; yet you must not think to fob off
our disgrace with a tale. But, and't please you, deliver.
- MENENIUS There was a time when all the body's members
Rebelled against the belly, thus accused it: 80
That only like a gulf it did remain
I'th'midst o'th'body, idle and unactive,
Still cupboarding the viand, never bearing
Like labour with the rest, where th'other instruments
Did see and hear, devise, instruct, walk, feel, 85
And, mutually participate, did minister
Unto the appetite and affection common
Of the whole body. The belly answered –
- SECOND CITIZEN Well, sir, what answer made the belly?
- MENENIUS Sir, I shall tell you. With a kind of smile, 90
Which ne'er came from the lungs, but even thus –
For look you, I may make the belly smile
As well as speak – it tauntingly replied
To th'discontented members, the mutinous parts
That envied his receipt; even so most fitly 95
As you malign our senators for that
They are not such as you.
- SECOND CITIZEN Your belly's answer – What?
The kingly crownèd head, the vigilant eye,
The counsellor heart, the arm our soldier,
Our steed the leg, the tongue our trumpeter, 100
With other muniments and petty helps
In this our fabric, if that they –

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Coriolanus

Menenius explains how the belly sends food to all parts of the body, and is left only with waste. He claims that the senators represent the belly, and the plebeians are the other body parts.

1 True or false? (in small groups)

Menenius' tale of the belly uses a comparison familiar to Shakespeare's audience – society as a human body. Such comparisons were intended to show that society is naturally hierarchical, with aristocrats deserving their elite status at the top. For Menenius the belly is the patrician class, the source of all 'public benefit' in the state.

Tell each other what you think about the truth or otherwise of Menenius' claim that rich rulers serve the poor and get nothing for their pains. Is it just propaganda? If you were staging the play, would the plebeians be calmed by Menenius' fable, or more enraged?

2 Keep them interested (in pairs)

Politicians know that style (how something is said) is just as important as substance (what is said). In Shakespeare's time, as in ancient Rome, public speakers learned the rules of rhetoric (the art of speaking well, so as to persuade the hearers). The plebeians listening to Menenius' fable of the belly have empty bellies, and they are angry that the patricians are hoarding corn. But Menenius intends his tale to defuse the riot.

One quality of successful story-telling is how the narrator uses all kinds of delaying devices (pauses, distractions, added detail, and so on) to stretch out the tale and make the listeners keen to hear more. Identify several ways in which Menenius avoids telling his fable simply and directly, in order to keep the interest of the plebeians. For example, in line 138 Menenius uses humour ('the great toe') to deflect attention from the truth of his story.

'Fore me upon my word
cormorant greedy, ravenous
sink sewer
incorporate united in one body
cranks and offices winding passages and workrooms (arteries and organs)

natural competency proper resources
audit balance sheet, account
digest understand
Touching relating to
weal o'th'common commonwealth, welfare of everyone