

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***Coriolanus*, Presented by The Public Theatre, New York, July 16 to August 11,  
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Directed by Daniel Sullivan for The Public Theatre, New York. With Teagle F. Bougere (Menenius Agrippa), Kate Burton (Volumnia), Jonathan Cake (Caius Martius Coriolanus), Louis Cancelmi (Tullus Aufidius), Chris Ghaffari (Titus Lartius), Enid Graham (Junius Brutus), Emeka Guindo (Young Martius), Jonathan Hadary (Sicinius Veletus), Tom Nelis (Cominius), Nneka Okafar (Virgilia), Amelia Workman (Valeria).

*Coriolanus* enjoys a notorious reputation as Shakespeare's most political play. It inspired riots in interwar Paris and was presented with an overtly Nazi message in a German school edition. Nevertheless, the production at the Delacorte Theatre in New York's Central Park resisted the temptation to present a clear political argument.

In contrast with the infamous 2017 production of *Julius Caesar* by the same company in which the title character resembled Donald Trump, this production eschewed contemporary reference. Like everything presented by Shakespeare in the Park, *Coriolanus* was staged against the background of Belvedere Castle, and punctuated by street noise and passing aircraft, but it referred to neither the archaic castle nor the contemporary city. Instead, the flotsam of our apparently now destroyed civilization fringed the stage: sheets of metal and plywood, an overturned shopping cart, a burned-out car. The program notes described the setting as 'the turn of the twenty-first century, marked out by the ravages of climate change and with numerous city-states once again at war'. Martius was presented with the treasure taken at Coriole in the form of two small boxes and a trash can. The largest feature of the set, replacing the Elizabethan tiring house, consisted in a large flexible structure covered in corrugated sheet metal. In

the opening scene, it stood for the senate house against which the plebeians protested. The opening of a few doors revealed flags adorned with stylized suns, transforming the structure into Corioles, then it split apart to become a street of Antium, reversed to become the interior of the home of the Martians, and so forth. Martius claimed to seek out a 'world elsewhere' (3.3.136),<sup>1</sup> in his last words before leaving Rome for exile and the stage for the intermission, but here the structure formed every scene's setting. This left the impression of a world consisting in nothing but one giant and post-apocalyptic junkyard, and quite distinct from our world.

The central conflicts between the two cities of Rome and Antium and between two social classes in Rome could hardly be evaded, of course, and James Shapiro explained them in his synopsis for the playbill. Nevertheless, audiences to this production were not permitted to forget that the belligerents shared a great deal in common. The patricians were not, at least at first, dressed in very different or even much cleaner clothes than the plebeians. In the first scene, young Martius threw a stone, perhaps at the rioters, but instead hitting the building against which they protest. Martius, on entering, took one of their clubs – a baseball bat, it looked like – from a rioter and handed it to his son, who later used it to beat a teddy bear in the first scene with his grandmother. Different classes and individuals shared this instrument of violence, just as they shared the predilection to violence itself.

In their first scene, masks distinguished the Volscian soldiers. These had the effect of making the Volscians resemble a gang of bank robbers or perhaps Mexican wrestlers, but the masks were soon abandoned and with them the most visible distinction between the two armies. The tribunes and Menenius apparently patronized the same speak-easy, where the customers sat on wooden boxes and drank moonshine from a still. Though the playbill described him as a 'U.S.-based, Cambridge-educated Englishman', Jonathan Cake played the title character with an American accent, which is to say that he sounded like everyone else on stage. The 'vesture of humility' (2.1.230) was here a boxing robe, reminding me of *Rocky*. Like American cinema's most famous prize-fighter, Martius seemed a member of a poor community, albeit a leading and admired member. The play took place in a post-racial society. Actors of colour included Nneka Okafor (a pregnant Virgilia, whose descent unto her knees to beg was touchingly awkward) and Teagle F. Bougere (Menenius). This might have suggested that Menenius was to be understood as Martius's father-in-law, but the relationship remained implicit, and in any case the production made no attempt to separate different parties or even cities by race.

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<sup>1</sup> References are to *Coriolanus*, ed. by R.B. Parker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

The absence of clear markers for political divisions in the form of race, accent or costuming worked to, if not universalize, at least generalize the play's political discussion. The audience was not obviously called upon to map onto the production its own political preoccupations. At the performance I saw, it happily laughed at Martius's spectacular insults towards the popular party and the plebeians' inconsistency in denying their responsibility for Martius's banishment. On the other hand, the tribunes (played by Jonathan Hadary and Enid Graham) seemed to discover their own plan as they explained it to each other. Brutus emphasized the word 'shall' in submitting Martius to judgement (3.3.106), playing upon vocabulary to which Coriolanus objected a couple of scenes earlier. The tribunes did not appear to be scheming politicians executing a well-rehearsed plan, but resentful rivals responding to events.

The flattening of the political context simultaneously widened it. Martius was banished, we were not allowed to forget, by Rome, not just by a single class or party. His mother's promise to go 'home to Rome, / And die among our neighbours' (5.3.173-4) became surprisingly touching, showing a self-sacrificial solidarity, and forcing us in the audience to reflect with greater sympathy on Coriolanus's self-sacrifice in war. Volumnia's triumphant return probably represented the play's one moment of complete civic unity. In the final scene, the production emphasized Martius's need to make a case by having him read from cue-cards when asking a hearing of the Volscians, still awkward in his use of political rhetoric. Of course his rhetoric proved futile, but contrary to any indication in the text, nobody was willing to help Aufidius bear Coriolanus's body away in this production; giving up on finding pallbearers, Aufidius also abandoned the dead protagonist on stage as the lights went out. (When I attended on the opening night, the lights went out slightly late, so that we could see Cake, a physical actor to the very end, rise to leave the stage with a pushup).

Rather than identifying Coriolanus's tragic flaw with his insistent individualism or hatred of the popular party, the Public Theatre production made the failure of human connection into his tragedy. Cake embraced the senators and other generals, and fell into Aufidius's arms in death. (Aufidius dropped him to the ground, denying a final moment of fraternity.) In the course of asking for popular support, Martius came to sound sincere and unguarded. Cake played Martius's sudden memory of his host in Corioles as a false exit, stopping himself suddenly on the way off stage, and Martius's forgetting of the name appeared not so much callous as vulnerable, betraying a weakness. The bathos of his responses such as 'I will go wash' (1.10.68) elicited laughter, but also showed him deflating grandiloquence in favour of a more pedestrian and therefore authentic communication. Before his mother he was neither angry nor frightened, but sheepish and anxious to please. For her part, Kate Burton's Volumnia

told him to 'Do your will' (3.2.139) with a note of exasperation, as though dealing with a recalcitrant teenager. Indeed, this is the first production which made me realize how much Volumnia persisted in thinking of her son in terms of his childhood.

Readings which emphasize Coriolanus's failed essay of an extreme individualism are common. This production, surprisingly, emphasized his vulnerability and desire for other people. The playbill quoted Oskar Eustis, the artistic director of the Public Theater, saying that 'I feel as if every one of us is in this position these days – trying to figure out democracy and then, if we believe in it, having to decide how to honor the vast number of people we don't respect'. This is a contemporary issue of democracy, of course, but it is also a general issue with any sort of society. If politics grows from the social – as Aristotle, among others, taught – then this production was political, not in the sense of being partisan, nor even in the sense of engaging with contemporary events, but in the more radical sense of considering our being together in the world.