

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***Coriolanus*, presented by the Shakespeare Theatre Company at Sidney Harmon  
Hall, Washington, DC, March 28 - June 2, 2013.**

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Directed by David Muse. Set design by Blythe R.D. Quinlan. Costume design by Murell Horton. Lighting design by Mark McCullough. Musical composition and sound design by Mark Bennett. With Patrick Page (Coriolanus), Diane D'Aquila (Volumnia), Aaryn Kopp (Virgilia), Hunter Zane (Young Martius), Robert Sicular (Menenius), Steve Pickering (Cominius), Nick Dillenberg (Lartius), Reginald Andre Jackson (Aufidius), Derrick Lee Weeden (Sicinius), Philip Goodwin (Brutus), and others.

The towering concrete surfaces of Blythe R.D. Quinlan's industrial set reached over three stories high, and they perfectly suited the rough, intimidating exterior of this late tragedy's eponymous center: Caius Martius (later Coriolanus). Director David Muse has described the Roman general as 'Shakespeare's least sympathetic tragic protagonist'<sup>1</sup> and, while Patrick Page imbued the character with considerable complexity, his initial appearance reflected the director's severe vision. When Martius first took the stage, alongside his family, he was positioned up-center, one level above the plebeians, looking down with a sneer at the dirty, swirling rabble who cried for corn and protested their mistreatment at the hands of the patricians. Page had a powerful but supercilious mien that conveyed a great deal about his character before he uttered a line. However, imperfections in the façade of this modern-looking Rome hinted that the privileged position of Martius, along with the political system that made it possible, would not be sustainable.

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<sup>1</sup> David Muse, 'Director's Note', *Asides* 4 (2012-13), p. 5.

<[http://www.shakespearetheatre.org/pdf/asides/hero\\_reps\\_Asides.pdf](http://www.shakespearetheatre.org/pdf/asides/hero_reps_Asides.pdf)> [accessed 13 August 2013].

Almost as imposing as the set was the figure of Volumnia, vigorously embodied by Diane D'Aquila, an established presence at the Stratford Festival. Like her son, Volumnia was strong, passionate, and imperious. Indeed, when Martius at one point growled in response to her criticisms, she growled right back. Volumnia regularly insisted on taking center-stage, driving other characters, such as her daughter-in-law, to the periphery. Her domineering manner was particularly notable during her interactions with Young Martius (Hunter Zane); she took a proprietary interest in him, implying that she had similarly cloyed his father with such attention. When she first appeared with her grandson, she wielded a wooden sword and engaged in war-games. It was obvious that she endeavored to cast him in the same mold she had employed in raising Martius. The scene also foreshadowed her confrontation with her son near the end of the play: early on, she pretended to be killed by a little boy, anticipating the acting skills she would deploy when effectively killing her own boy and inadvertently earning Martius the epithet 'boy of tears' from his Volscian enemies (5.6.120).<sup>2</sup>

The rhetorical range of Volumnia was not matched by her son, who, following the script, was largely portrayed as a man of action. Page, who pioneered the highly physical part of the Green Goblin in the musical *Spider Man: Turn Off the Dark*, brought tremendous energy and athleticism to his performance, storming from left to right, upstage and downstage, suggesting that, like a shark, he was made to be in motion. Yet, unlike the comic book villain he played on Broadway, Page's Martius was not a generic monster. Although physically animated, he possessed a layered inner life. For instance, Martius displayed a sense of humor when he hurled back at the tributes the same sycophantic tone they employed, and again when, alone, he practiced calling for the 'voices' of the people in a saccharine mewl (2.3.136). Page's Martius was even able to laugh at himself, as he did, loudly, when capitulating to his mother in agreeing to apologize for his antidemocratic outbursts. Later, when surrendering to her in an interaction with much higher stakes—right before he stormed Rome—he exposed another side of himself by releasing a primal howl of anguish that reverberated through the entire hall. The moment was made more poignant by the nearly full minute of silence that he held before asking: 'O mother, mother! / What have you done?' (5.3.205-206).

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<sup>2</sup> Act, scene and line references are to *Coriolanus*, ed. by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009).

In sharp contrast to Page's multifaceted Martius, the tribunes, Junius Brutus and Sicinius Velutus (Philip Goodwin and Derrick Lee Weeden), were portrayed simply as bereft of all humanity. Dimmed lights and distorted sound accompanied their conniving against the Roman general, casting the pair as unnatural. More powerful than these design elements in accentuating the difference between the career politicians and the complex Martius was a subtle choice made by Page: when descending a flight of stairs to appear before the people, he tangled his foot in his robes and almost tripped before regaining his balance, intimating that he was no performer and exposing a vulnerability rarely seen in this formidable military man. Also less complex—and far less compelling—than Page was Reginald Andre Jackson as the leader of the Volscian forces, Tullus Aufidius. Jackson shared neither the animation nor the projection of his colleague, but his underwhelming performance seemed most likely a production choice rather than a casting issue. Aufidius was rarely centered, and when interacting with Martius he was more than once positioned with his back to the audience. During his one-on-one fight with Martius, the Roman general easily thrashed the Volscian, establishing that they were nowhere near equals. Rather than a mirror to Martius, Aufidius was portrayed simply as his inferior, indicating why the Roman soldier found it hard to relate to ordinary people and confirming Menenius' claim that 'His nature is too noble for the world' (3.1.326). The elevation of Martius in relation to the other men on stage tipped the audience to this production's sympathy for the aristocracy—despite Muse's insistence that his 'production [would not] take sides' in representing power struggles between the elite and the masses.<sup>3</sup>

Still, despite being an exceptional figure, Page's Martius remained accessible because of his commitment to his family—and not just to his mother. He did not share many words with his wife, but the couple had chemistry, especially when he returned from battle and Aaryn Kopp radiated heat as she drew him into her arms. More pointedly, several nonverbal moments between Martius and his son showcased his emotional depth, while exposing a budding skepticism about the expectations Rome put upon men like him. Before the general left the capital in banishment, he snatched his son's toy sword and snapped it in half, replacing the ruined prop with real steel. The obvious message was that Young Martius must become the man of his household—although at the same time there was, in this gesture, a warning that he should be leery of the games he was being conditioned to play in Rome. The boy seemed to have taken this warning to heart when he reappeared moments before the final curtain.

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<sup>3</sup> Muse, p. 5.

In his sprawling survey of the play's production history, *Coriolanus on Stage in England and America, 1609-1994*, John Ripley claims that the conclusion of *Coriolanus* 'brings no comforting insight, no reassuring accommodation with destiny: merely a deafening crash as irresistible force meets immovable object'.<sup>4</sup> Yet Muse's handling of the tragedy's ending challenged this scholarly assessment. Martius appeared a willing sacrifice, if not the embodiment of grace then at least a self-aware scapegoat for the Romans and the Volscians. As he was ringed by soldiers feverishly pounding drums to a crescendo, several Roman citizens looked on from the elevated position he had occupied at the start of the play. After his bloody death at the hands of a mob wearing both Roman and Volscian uniforms, every player exited and Young Martius reappeared. Silently standing over his father's body, the boy bent forward and then smeared his face with blood, before exiting in the same direction that Martius had when seeking 'a world elsewhere' (3.3.165). It appeared possible that the son would return as his father had: his father's blood was not only on him but also inside him. The promise of a violent revenge for the line of Martius lingered—an implication that would have better suited the close of *Titus Andronicus*. With that acknowledged, the ending of this *Coriolanus* reminded the audience that the flawed and fallen hero was the product of an upbringing that he had learned to question, albeit too late, offering some hope that perhaps his son would not break apart Rome but instead break away from it.

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<sup>4</sup> John Ripley, *Coriolanus on Stage in England and America, 1609-1994* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998), p. 1.