

Betrayal at the hands of democracy in Coriolanus

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Abstract

Martius believes in a form of government in which only the elite and aristocratic should rule. The lower ranks should accept the decisions made by the ruling class as being in the best interests of the nation. Martius' political views are elitist deeply set apart from a class superiority from the common folk whom he despises and views as inferior. He may be a decorated war hero of Rome but he despises the plebeians right to vote him into power. He views the plebeians as lacking the Roman virtue. When Menenius asks him to consider how he will be perceived by the people if he is rude to them he remarks "Hang 'em/I would they forget me, like the virtues/Which our divides lose by 'em. (2.3.58-60) Coriolanus is thus betrayed by his class snobbery, he will never truly be seen as one of the people because of his arrogance and elitism.

Coriolanus is one of Shakespeare's Roman plays and it was originally based on the Plutarch biography of the same name. The play is set during the Roman Republican period at a time before it had spread out much beyond the Italian peninsula. At the time the Republic was facing a number of crises, including a food shortage and border wars with the Volscians. Coriolanus (not his original name, but a name that was given to him in honour of his service to the Republic) is a general in the army, and begins

performing civil duties in quelling food riots that are erupting throughout the city. When another border war with the Volscians flares up, he takes his legions and invades the city of Coriolus and captures it for Rome. As is typical of the Romans, his victory is honoured with a triumph, and he is then elected consul (the Roman equivalent of President). However being elected consul is not easy thing, because while the Senate may nominate the consul, the people must ratify it. The problem for Coriolanus is that he does not love the people, he is a patrician through and through, and does not hide it. While at first the people do accept him, his enemies the Tribunes (representatives of the people) sway them back to rejecting him. In response, Coriolanus rejects his home and flees to the Volscians and joins forces with them to have his revenge upon the Republic. It is Coriolanus' class snobbery which eventually betrays him and he is brought to ruin because he looks down on the lower classes.

In Act 2 of Coriolanus, Martius is told by Menenius that he will become consul once he appears before the people with the posture of humility and seeks their approval. Martius disgruntled asks to do away with this step, to 'o'erleap that custom' for according to him

I

cannot

Put on the gown, stand naked, and entreat them

For my wounds' sake to give their suffrage.
Please you

That I may pass this doing. (2.2.136-39)

Martius despises the plebeians and hates the fact they can vote him in or out. He despises democracy because he views the plebeians as inferior and lower in class than him though it is an old Roman tradition to stand before the people in a gown of humility and ask for their voices. Martius despises plebeian votes. He has to win the voice of the people to become consul then from election urge a politically conservative approach to representation. The tribunes and Menenius know this but Martius despises the plebeians so much that "It is a part/That I shall blush in acting". (2.2.144-45)
Indignantly Martius complains

To brag unto them thus I did
and thus

Show them th'unaching scars
which I should hide

As if I had received them
for the hire

Of their breath only!
(2.2.144-45)

Martius refers to plebeian votes as a breath indicating he takes it lightly and is condescending towards it. He does not care for the tradition of democracy and winning plebeian approval.

The citizens show that they believe that those who rule should earn their positions and work toward the common good. Martius believes in a form of government in which only the elite and aristocratic should rule. The lower ranks should accept the decisions made by the ruling class as being in the best interests of the nation. Martius' political views are elitist deeply set apart from a class superiority from the common folk whom he despises and views as inferior. He may be a decorated war hero of Rome but he despises the plebeians right to vote him into power. He views the plebeians as lacking the Roman *virtus*. When Menenius asks him to consider how he will be perceived by the people if he is rude to them he remarks "Hang 'em/I would they forget me,like the virtues/Which our divides lose by 'em. (2.3.58-60)

Martius is condescending because he thinks he possesses in contrast to the plebeians the ideal of *virtus* that "lauded the spirit of self sacrificing patriotism". Martius as an aristocrat owes the state not merely military service but civil service which he thinks is beneath his superior class standing. When Menenius tells him to have patience before he comes before the plebeians in his gown of humility Martius suggests the plebeians "wash their faces /And keep their teeth clean" (2.3.62-63) While Martius is a great decorated warrior he clearly loathes the poor. He thinks they should watch their sanitation and is rude in this regard. While he values his military service to Rome he loathes civic responsibilities to the plebeians as he thinks they are inferior and lesser than him as well as a waste of his time.

Coriolanus uses military force against people's uprising when they demonstrate against oppression and starving in Rome. Coriolanus is first declared as a hero but later relegated from the city by the Senate for his brutality. He then allied himself with its former enemy Tullus Aufidius and they march together to Rome to destroy the city. Coriolanus's mother, wife and son plead for peace and reconciliation and when he gives up he is murdered by Tullus Aufidius.

Set in a city on the verge of collapse that resembles Tripoli but calls itself Rome, the film charts the rise and fall of general Coriolanus a fiery soldier of war-torn Rome who earns his stripes in a bloody battle against an insurgent army lead by Turrus. In the aftermath of a brutal bullet storm and knife fight, Coriolanus emerges victorious and is branded the symbol of a new and prosperous empire. It doesn't work out. The decorated vet is more brawn than brains; his strong sense of pride coupled with the dirty work of corrupt bureaucrats and advisors lead to civil unrest and, in turn, a verbal attack by Coriolanus' on the people of Rome which results in his banishment from the city. Bitter, betrayed and hell-bent on revenge, the spitting outlaw seeks refuge and redemption in who else but his sworn enemy, Turrus.

The people of Rome are starting to revolt, they're poor, starving and desperate for grain. The police force is merciless. The guy in charge is Martius. When the Volscians threaten to invade, it's again Martius who is in charge of the military unit that meets

them at the city of Corolia where he near single-handedly defeats them, not before engaging in a knife duel that ends up in a wrestling match with his sworn enemy Aufidius.

On his return to Rome Martius he's seen as a hero and made a senate consul with the approval of the senate. Next he has to reluctantly ask for the people's permission of sorts. They grant it only to take it back minutes later when two of their representatives who are anti-Martius convince them. These two are constantly scheming to get rid of Martius. In a meeting with these two and with the people, he flips out and starts cursing at the people. When he has to apologize to a live audience on TV again he loses it. That gets him banished from Rome much to the delight of the two schemers.

He does what any reasonable person would do -join forces with the person he hates the most, Aufidius, to take over Rome by force. The Romans send some politician/family friend to convince Martius, who now is a leader among the Volscians, to reconsider, but he won't have any of it. Next they send his mother, wife, and son, to beg for mercy for Rome. He agrees to sign a peace treaty, but that doesn't win him any friends anywhere.

The plot is about a general who wins a great victory and is selected to be the next consul of Rome. However he regards the ordinary people with little more than contempt and his obvious discomfort in even pretending to

compromise in this belief results in his banishment. There is a great scene set in a TV studio where Coriolanus confronts those opposed to him. He then unites with a former enemy of Rome in order to gain his revenge.

Coriolanus starts out as a modern war/conflict movie with a social message. It's modern Rome, besieged by angry citizens whose leader is Gerard Butler's Aufidius, longtime enemy of Coriolanus. When the haughty, anti-commoner Coriolanus is banished from Rome, he joins up with his old enemy to turn on Rome. It seems like a perfect alliance until Coriolanus's formidable mother, Volumnia, and his wife, Virgilia, played by Jessica Chastain, confront him. Pushed by his controlling and ambitious mother Volumnia to seek the exalted and powerful position of Consul, he is loath to ingratiate himself with the masses whose votes he needs in order to secure the office. When the public refuses to support him, Coriolanus's anger prompts a riot that culminates in his expulsion from Rome. The banished hero then allies himself with his sworn enemy Tullus Aufidius to take his revenge on the city. But there are more problems. Martius is very contemptuous. He thinks of himself as noble and greatly superior to the common folk. He's a war hawk, childishly uncompromising even when his life is at stake, and holds on to his beliefs like they're religious doctrine.

The other theme of this play is the tragedy of the hero turned traitor. It was the decisions that he made that brought about his downfall. The purpose of joining the enemy

was purely one of vengeance, and unless he managed to destroy Rome, this alliance was never going to work. It is made clear, time and time again, that Aufidius and Coriolanus were bitter enemies: they hated each other, so for Coriolanus to think that he could then easily join Aufidius in an assault upon Rome and not meet a bad ending is folly. The main theme found throughout is betrayal. Coriolanus is betrayed by his people when they banish him, Aufidius is betrayed when Coriolanus decides on peace, Coriolanus betrays the people of Rome when he looks down on the poor.

Martius serves the terms of his stand winning the voice of the plebeians. He condescended to the plebeians and managed to send them off without seeing his wounds. His sarcastic response was insulting but overlooked by the kind plebeians. When the second group of citizens approaches Martius Fourth Citizen says " You have deserved nobly of your country and you have not deserved nobly." (2.3.87-88) Asked to explain the citizen replies they know how he is likely to repond as do the tribunes who know about Martius lack of emotional empathy. The people feeling they were treated with contempt agree with hundreds of plebeians to speak against Martius at the senate. The tribunes had stirred hostility towards Martius because of his very arrogant and condescending attitude towards the plebeians. It is the tribunes who have thus turned the Plebeians against Martius as it is not so clear Martius hates the people what he hates is being at their mercy when they have not made equal contributions to military service and protecting the state.

In Act 3 Scene 1 Martius is ignorant of the plot to destroy him and asks Titus Lartius what he knows about Aufidius and hears that he has alienated himself from the Corioles and moved to Antium. Martius no sooner says that he wishes he had cause to fight him than the two tribunes block his way to the marketplace although he is with Cominius Menenius patricians and senators. The tribunes suggest that trouble will begin if Martius is seen by the people. Martius angry asks the tribunes

Are these your herd?

Must these have voices that
can yield them now

And straight disclaim their
tongues? What are your offices

You being their mouths why
rule you not their teeth?

Have you not set them on?
(3.1.32-36)

Martius has guessed the rift between him and the plebeians and instead of acting to address the grievance rants against the lower classes and giving them democratic representation. He claims that it is a plot by the tribunes “To curb the will of the nobility/Suffer’t and live with such as
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cannot rule/ Nor ever will be rul’d “ (3.1.38-40) Martius simply does not desire to share his aristocratic privileges and right to representation with the common folk and the poor.

Coriolanus is a general, a politically valued but socially inept political figurehead central to the corruption of the Roman government and the chief architect of that government's subversion of civil liberties and basic needs among its population. For that reason he is despised by the people and feared by the politicians. Yet he is also a prized component of this society as a fearless, ruthless, and brilliant military commander. The built in irony for Coriolanus lay in his professional conduct as a soldier defending his nation, advancing it's interests through conquest, and all the while expressing utter contempt for that nation, the common man especially whom he regards as lower ranking plebeians or an obstacle to his ambitions. Coriolanus is thus betrayed by his class snobbery, he will never truly be seen as one of the people because of his arrogance and elitism.