

2008 Study Guide for *Coriolanus* by William Shakespeare

Before seeing/reading the play

1. Research the Roman Republic during the time of *Coriolanus*, which begins in 494 BCE. These and other websites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_republic
<http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/romeancientrome/u/History-Of-Ancient-Rome.htm#s3>
2. What is a republic? What are the similarities between the Roman Republic and our own political system? What are the differences?
3. What were patricians? What were plebeians? What was their relationship? What were tribunes? How were they chosen? What was their function? These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.historyonthenet.com/Romans/government.htm>
<http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/romans/government/index.htm>
<http://www.livius.org/to-ts/tribune/tribune.html>
4. What was a consul? How was a consul elected? What were the qualifications? What were the responsibilities? What were the honors? This and other websites provide information:
<http://www.livius.org/cn-cs/consul/consul.html>
5. Look up the origin of the word “candidate.” What rituals and ordeals were required of Romans to be elected to public office? This and other websites provide information:
http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/SMIGRA*/Ambitus

6. At the time of the historical Coriolanus, what was the relationship of the Romans and the Volscians? These and other websites provide information:
<http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/rulersleaderskings/a/Coriolanus.htm>
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volsci>
7. Research the famine that happened at the time of the historical Coriolanus. This and other websites provide information:
<http://www.roman-empire.net/republic/earlyrep-index.html#coriolanus>
8. What was the Tarpeian Rock and how was it used? This and other websites provide information:
<http://www.roman-empire.net/tours/rome/tarpeian-rock.html>
9. Who are the Roman gods Mars, Juno, Jupiter?
<http://www.pantheon.org/articles/m/mars.html>
<http://www.pantheon.org/articles/j/juno.html>
<http://www.pantheon.org/articles/j/jupiter.html>
10. Research the type of the Machiavellian individual. What does a Machiavel wish to accomplish? How does he (or she) go about accomplishing it? These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.ctbw.com/lubman.htm>
<http://www.philosophypages.com/ph/macv.htm>
11. According to Aristotle, what elements are essential for tragedy? For a tragic hero? This and other websites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tragic_hero

Learn more about Shakespeare's life and times at the following websites:

<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/index.html>
<http://www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=865&CFID=6230886&CFTOKEN=25420173>
<http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare.html>
<http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/life.htm>
<http://www.bardweb.net/man.html>

After seeing/reading the play

1. What issues and attitudes from the time of Coriolanus—the early Roman Republic, about 2500 years ago—have echoes in modern times, in the United States in the year 2008? What issues and attitudes had echoes 400 years ago when Shakespeare wrote the play? In what ways does director Laird Williamson's decision to set the production in modern times highlight the issues and attitudes in the play?
2. *Coriolanus* has been called Shakespeare's only play involving democracy. What events were happening when Shakespeare was writing the play that might have prompted him to choose this theme? What arguments does the play make in support of democracy? What arguments in opposition?
3. How does Caius Martius acquire the name Coriolanus?
4. Find instances of imagery using body parts and animal imagery in reference to people. What attitude is the speaker displaying toward the person or persons described?
5. What are the strengths of the citizens, also known as plebeians? What are their weaknesses? Provide examples from the text to describe the wishes, likes, dislikes and reasoning of the plebeians. In what instances are the demands of the plebeians reasonable and justified? In what instances are their demands influenced by someone else and by whom?
6. What is Coriolanus' attitude toward the citizens? On what does he base that attitude? How do the people demonstrate that he has accurately assessed them? How do they show him to be wrong?
7. For what virtues and actions is Coriolanus loved and respected? By whom? What are Coriolanus' strengths? What are his vulnerabilities?
8. Analyze the relationship between Coriolanus and his mother, Volumnia. Coriolanus and his late father. Coriolanus and his wife, Virgilia. Coriolanus and his friend, Menenius. How has each contributed to the man that Coriolanus has become? Find

instances in which he demonstrates his maturity and independence. Find instances in which he reveals his immaturity.

9. Which characters serve Coriolanus as stand-ins for his missing father? How does each influence him? How does each benefit him? How does each contribute to his downfall?
10. Within the world of the play, what are the characteristics of a warrior? Which of those characteristics does Coriolanus possess? How does he fall short? What is your own definition of a warrior? How does Coriolanus measure up?
11. Why is becoming consul the appropriate next honor for Coriolanus? What steps must he take to win the consulship? Which steps are distasteful to him? Why?
12. Refer to your research on the word “candidate.” How is the word related to the ritual Coriolanus must endure in order to be elected to public office? In this election year, 2008, what rituals and ordeals must candidates submit to? What parallels, if any, do you find between contemporary election practices and those of ancient Rome, especially as they apply to *Coriolanus*?
13. In what respects do Coriolanus and Tullus Aufidius mirror each other? In what respects are they different from each other? What vices and virtues in each does the other emphasize? What does each like in the other? What does each hate in the other?
14. Chart Coriolanus’ response to Aufidius’ use of the word “boy.” Why does the word particularly upset him?
15. Tell the story from the point of view of these characters: Volumnia. Virgilia. Menenius. Cominius. Brutus. Sicinius. First Citizen.
16. Write the story of Volumnia’s girlhood, her marriage, her widowhood, her life as a single mother, her aspirations for her son. What happens to her after the play?

17. Refer to your research on tragedy. Consider *Coriolanus* as a classic tragedy. Describe the elevated position occupied by the protagonist as the play begins. What inner traits lead to his downfall? What outer circumstances lead to his downfall? What actions lead to his downfall? Why does he choose the actions that lead to his downfall? At what point could he have avoided his fate? At what point is his fate inevitable?
18. The word “honor” occurs 53 times in the play, suggesting that it is a matter of some importance. How do the different characters define “honor?” How is “honor” respected in Rome?
19. Describe the causes and manifestations of the enmity between Coriolanus and 1) Brutus and Sicinius, 2) the plebeians, or citizens of Rome, 3) Tullus Aufidius. How do the enemies try to get the better of each other?
20. Describe the machinations of the tribunes? What do they hope to achieve? How successful are they?
21. Referring to your research on the Machiavellian individual, consider the tribunes Sicinius and Brutus as Machiavels. What are they ambitious for? What obstacles do they encounter? How do they overcome the obstacles? Contrast their methods with those of Coriolanus.
22. How and by whom are the Roman gods Mars, Juno, Jupiter invoked in the play? How is each invocation appropriate for the situation and individual speaking?
23. In many of his plays, Shakespeare explored the traits of a good leader and ruler. What traits does Coriolanus possess that help him be a good leader? What traits does he lack that keep him from being a good leader?
24. What does Coriolanus hope to accomplish by going to the Volscians, the worst enemy of himself and Rome?
25. Compare the two warrior-heroes Othello and Coriolanus: as military leaders, as political leaders, as private individuals, as husbands.

26. Compare Volumnia and Troy Maxson (*Fences*) as parents. What does each wish for her/his son? How does each go about achieving it? How does each reward success? How does each punish failure?

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