

CORIOLANUS | FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Shakespeare's language can seem scary, but give it a try! *Go at your own pace, and have fun!*



SHAKESPEARE IN PRISON

DETROIT PUBLIC THEATRE'S
SIGNATURE COMMUNITY PROGRAM

We're in Rome! Meet Caius Marcius, a snooty general in the Roman army and general jerk-about-town. Politicians like him, but he doesn't care about them. The people hate him, and he hates them right back. Still, when the Volscian army threatens Rome, Marcius is the one who goes out to save the city. There's an epic battle, including a duel with Aufidius, the Volscian general. Then: Rome wins! Marcius comes back to a big parade and, as a reward, he gets to use a fancy new nickname: Coriolanus.

Now that he's famous and has a cool nickname, Coriolanus decides to become a politician. The other politicians supports him, so he becomes consul of Rome. But the first thing he does is give a speech about how useless and lazy the people are (he says that he's an "eagle," and they're just "crows" pecking at him). This does not go over well, and Coriolanus gets banished from Rome. "Nuh-UH!" he says, "you can't banish me! I banish you!" And then he goes right to Aufidius and signs up with the Volscian army.

The Volscian army, now led by Aufidius and Coriolanus, marches on Rome. Near the end of the play, Volumnia, Coriolanus's mother, comes out with his wife, Virgilia, and his son (we don't know his name), and they try to talk him out of destroying the city.

The Shakespeare

VOLUMNIA

Even he, your wife, this lady, and myself
Are suitors* to you.

CORIOLANUS

I beseech you peace:
Or, if you'd ask, remember this before:
The thing I have forsworn* to grant may never
Be held by you denials. Do not bid me
Dismiss my soldiers, or capitulate*
Again with Rome's mechanics*. Tell me not
Wherein I seem unnatural; desire not
T'allay* my rages and revenges with
Your colder reasons.

VOLUMNIA

O, no more, no more!
You have said you will not grant us any thing;
For we have nothing else to ask but that
Which you deny already. Yet we will ask,
That, if you fail in our request, the blame
May hang upon your hardness, therefore hear us.

CORIOLANUS

Aufidius, and you Volscies, mark, for we'll
Hear naught from Rome in private. [Sits.] Your request?

VOLUMNIA

Should we be silent and not speak, our raiment*
And state of bodies would bewray* what life
We have led since thy exile. Think with thyself
How more unfortunate than all living women
Are we come hither; since that thy sight, which should
Make our eyes flow with joy, hearts dance with comforts,
Constrains them weep and shake with fear and sorrow,*
Making the mother, wife, and child to see
The son, the husband, and the father tearing
His country's bowels out. And to poor we
Thine enmity's most capital*; thou barr'st us
Our prayers to the gods, which is a comfort
That all but we enjoy. For how can we,
Alas! how can we, for our country pray,
Whereto we are bound, together with thy victory,
Whereto we are bound? Alack, or we must lose
The country, our dear nurse, or else thy person,
Our comfort in the country. We must find
An evident calamity*, though we had
Our wish, which side should win; for either thou
Must as a foreign recreant* be led
With manacles through our streets, or else
Triumphantly tread on thy country's ruin,
And bear the palm* for having bravely shed
Thy wife and children's blood. For myself, son,
I purpose* not to wait on fortune till
These wars determine. If I cannot persuade thee
Rather to show a noble grace to both parts
Than seek the end of one, thou shalt no sooner
March to assault thy country than to tread
(Trust to't, thou shalt not) on thy mother's womb
That brought thee to this world.

VIRGILIA

Ay, and mine.
That brought you forth this boy, to keep your name
Living to time.

BOY

*A shall not tread on me;
I'll run away till I am bigger, but then I'll fight.

CORIOLANUS

Not of a woman's tenderness to be,
Requires nor child nor woman's face to see,
I have sate* too long. [Rises.]

VOLUMNIA

Nay, go not from us thus.
If it were so that our request did tend
To save the Romans, thereby to destroy
The Volscies whom you serve, you might condemn us,
As poisonous of your honor. No, our suit*
Is that you reconcile them; while the Volscies
May say, "This mercy we have show'd," the Romans,

"This we receiv'd"; and each in either side
Give the all-hail* to thee, and cry, "Be blest
For making up this peace!" Thou know'st, great son,
The end of war's uncertain; but this certain,
That, if thou conquer Rome, the benefit
Which thou shalt thereby reap is such a name
Whose repetition will be dogg'd* with curses;
Whose chronicle thus writ: "The man was noble,
But with his last attempt he wip'd it out,
Destroy'd his country, and his name remains
To th' ensuing abhorr'd.*" Speak to me, son.
Thou hast affected the fine strains of honor,*
To imitate the graces of the gods:
To tear with thunder the wide cheeks a' th' air,
And yet to charge thy sulphur* with a bolt
That should but rive an oak.* Why dost not speak?
Think'st thou it honorable for a noble man
Still to remember wrongs? Daughter, speak you:
He cares not for your weeping. Speak thou, boy:
Perhaps thy childishness will move him more
Than can our reasons. There's no man in the world
More bound to 's mother, yet here he lets me prate*
Like one i' th' stocks.*—Thou hast never in thy life
Show'd thy dear mother any courtesy,
When she, poor hen, fond of no second brood,
Has cluck'd thee to the wars, and safely home
Loaden with honor. Say my request's unjust,
And spurn me back*; but if it be not so,
Thou art not honest, and the gods will plague* thee
That thou restrain'st from me the duty which
To a mother's part belongs.—He turns away,
Down, ladies; let us shame him with our knees.*
To his surname Coriolanus 'longs more pride
Than pity to our prayers. Down! an end,
This is the last. So, we will home to Rome,
And die among our neighbors.—Nay, behold 's!
This boy, that cannot tell what he would have,
But kneels and holds up hands for fellowship,*
Does reason* our petition with more strength
Than thou hast to deny't.—Come, let us go.
This fellow had a Volscian to his mother;
His wife is in Corioles, and his child
Like him by chance.—Yet give us our dispatch,*
I am hush'd until our city be afire,
And then I'll speak a little.

Coriolanus holds her by the hand, silent.

CORIOLANUS

O mother, mother!
What have you done? Behold, the heavens do ope,
The gods look down, and this unnatural scene
They laugh at. O my mother, mother! O!
You have won a happy victory to Rome;
But, for your son, believe it—O, believe it—
Most dangerously you have with him prevail'd,
If not more mortal to him.* But let it come.
Aufidius, though I cannot make true wars,
I'll frame convenient* peace. Now, good Aufidius,
Were you in my stead, would you have heard
A mother less? or granted less, Aufidius?

AUFIDIUS

I was mov'd withal.*

CORIOLANUS

I dare be sworn you were:
And, sir, it is no little thing to make
Mine eyes to sweat compassion.* But, good sir,
What peace you'll make, advise me. For my part,
I'll not to Rome, I'll back with you, and pray you
Stand to me* in this cause.—O mother! wife!

AUFIDIUS [Aside.]

I am glad thou hast set thy mercy and thy honor
At difference* in thee. Out of that I'll work
Myself a former fortune.

CORIOLANUS [To Volumnia, Virgilia, etc.]

Ay, by and by;
But we will drink together; and you shall bear
A better witness back than words, which we,
On like conditions,* will have counter-seal'd.*
Come enter with us. Ladies, you deserve
To have a temple built you. All the swords in Italy,
And her confederate arms,*
Could not have made this peace. *Exeunt.*

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

- **suit** - someone who comes with a request or demand (a "suit" is a demand; a legal demand is a "law-suit")
- **forsworn** - given a promise to *not* do something ("forswear" is the opposite of "swear")
- **capitulate** - come to an agreement
- **mechanics** - manufacturers and artisans
- **T'allay** = to *allay* - to make calm or quiet
- **raiment** - ceremonial clothing (in this case, traditional outfits for people in mourning)
- **bewray** - reveal
- **thy sight, which should...shake with fear and sorrow** - seeing you should make us happy, but it makes us sad and afraid instead
- **to poor we / Thine enmity's most capital** - to us, your hatred is especially deadly
- **how can we...Whereto we are bound?** - we can't pray for our country, even though we're loyal to it, and also pray for you, even though we're loyal to you
- **evident calamity** - a certain disaster
- **recreant** - traitor
- **bear the palm** - march to victory (palm leaves were a sign of victory)
- **purpose** - intend
- **'A** - he
- **sate** - listened
- **suit** - demand or request (see "suitor")
- **Give the all-hail** - shout praise
- **dogg'd** - followed, hounded (like an animal gets followed by hunting dogs)
- **his name remains / To th'ensuing abhorr'd** - his name is forever hated
- **affected the fine strains of honor** - pretended to be honorable
- **sulphur** - lightning (sulfur is a crystal that flashes when it burns; it was used to make gunpowder)
- **Should but rive an oak** - do only a little damage (all of that lightning, just to split an oak tree)
- **prate** - speak (especially when using a lot of words without saying much)
- **stocks** - a form of punishment
- **spurn me back** - turn me away
- **plague** - punish
- **with our knees** - by kneeling
- **for fellowship** - just to keep us company
- **reason** - argue on behalf of (in other words, the presence of Coriolanus's son, even though he doesn't completely understand what's happening, is the strongest argument they have)
- **give us our dispatch** - tell us we should go away
- **if not more mortal to him** - even if he might die because of it
- **convenient** - fitting, proper
- **withal** - by it
- **sweat compassion** - flow with tears
- **stand to me** - support me
- **at difference** - in conflict
- **on like conditions** - according to the same terms (he's going to write an official treaty declaring that he won't attack Rome)
- **counter-seal'd** - made legally binding with a seal (like notarizing a document)
- **confederate arms** - the armies of Italy's allies



SAY WHAT??



Still confused?
Can't blame ya!
Here's the scene
in a nutshell:



Volumnia: My son, I brought your wife and kid here to talk you out of attacking Rome.

Coriolanus: If you have something to say, mom, you can say it in front of my new best friend, Aufidius.

Volumnia: I don't trust that guy, but okay. Look, we're feeling pretty torn here: Either you win this battle and destroy our hometown, or you lose and get executed as a traitor. We love you, but what the heck, man?

Virgilia: What she said. You are not husband of the year.

Boy: I don't understand what's going on. I'm just here to be cute and make my dad feel guilty.

Coriolanus: I don't care about any of that. Goodbye.

Volumnia: Wait! What do you want to be your legacy? The dude who spared Rome, or the dude who sacked his hometown? [*Coriolanus shrugs*] Well, logic is clearly useless. Just look at your wife and son for a minute and tell me that you're still planning to destroy our home.

Coriolanus: What's this? I'm... *feeling* things?! That did the trick! You just saved Rome, mom! Wow! Feelings! Who knew? Wasn't that awesome, Aufidius?

Aufidius: Very touching. I'm totally not planning to betray you.

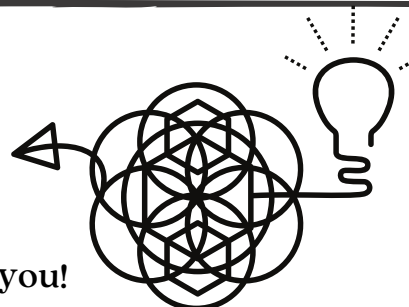
Coriolanus: I knew you were a good friend! Let's make it official! This is great!



CORIOLANUS | FOOD FOR THOUGHT

You can respond to these in any way you choose:

Write **ACT IT OUT** Talk about it
Draw **THINK ABOUT IT**



... up to you!

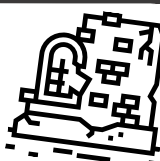
SHAKESPEARE IN PRISON

DETROIT PUBLIC THEATRE'S
SIGNATURE COMMUNITY PROGRAM

Volumnia is a minor character in the play, but she does two very important things: She talks Coriolanus into becoming a politician, and she talks him out of destroying Rome.

- Why would Shakespeare give this role to Coriolanus's mother? Why not his wife? Or another general? Or someone else?
- What does it say about *him* that his mother convinces him to do these important things?
- What does it say about *her* that she has that much influence over her son?

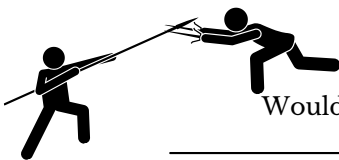
And, while we're at it, how does she influence him in this scene? Obviously, her **objective** is to stop Coriolanus from destroying Rome. What are her **tactics**?



OR ELSE TRIUMPHANTLY TREAD ON THY COUNTRY'S RUIN...

Volumnia feels intense allegiance to **Rome**. But Coriolanus is ready to burn Rome down until she convinces him not to.

Do you feel allegiance to your hometown? Or to your state?



How does that allegiance compare to the allegiance you feel towards friends or family?

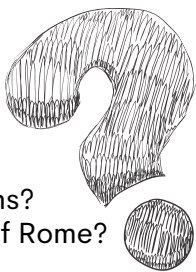
Would anything make you turn on the place you're from?

WHAT DO YOU THINK HAPPENS NEXT?



What might be the results of Coriolanus's decision not to attack Rome?

- ... for Coriolanus?
- ... for Volumnia?
- ... for Virgilia?
- ... for Aufidius?
- ... for the politicians?
- ... for the people of Rome?



And... would those consequences affect how you stage the scene?

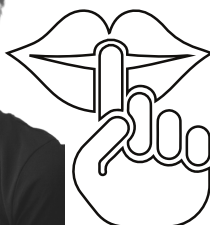


After Volumnia is done talking, Coriolanus's speech changes.

One way it changes is that he says "O" a lot (five times—four times in six lines!).

In Shakespeare, "O" is an expression of emotion, and it doesn't always need to sound like "Oh." Read those lines and try different ways of saying "O" until something works. Are they all the same? All different? What are your "O"s like?

Look at Coriolanus's lines at the beginning and end of the scene. Other than all the "O"s, how else is the way he speaks different at the end?



Aufidius doesn't talk much, but he's there for the whole scene.

What is he thinking?
What is he doing?

The Department of REPUTATION, REPUTATION, REPUTATION

the benefit
Which thou shalt reap is such a name
Whose repetition will be dogg'd with curses

Volumnia talks a lot about her son's reputation—without using that word. Look back over the speech and find the places where she's talking about reputation.

- What words *does* she use?
- Does it work on Coriolanus?
- What's the difference between honor and reputation?
- What's the difference between pride and those things?

*to his surname
Coriolanus 'longs more
pride / Than pity to our
prayers*

*thinkst thou it
honorable for a
noble man / Still to
remember wrongs?*

CORIOLANUS SAYS THAT VOLUMNIA AND VIRGILIA "DESERVE TO HAVE A TEMPLE BUILT" TO THEM. WHAT WOULD THAT TEMPLE LOOK LIKE?



What was a time someone talked you out of doing something destructive? What did they say? Why did it work? Was there a time when you were the one talking someone out of doing something that was a really bad idea?

ALSO, WHY DO YOU THINK CORIOLANUS REPEATS AUFIDIUS'S NAME SO MANY TIMES? WHAT DOES HE WANT FROM AUFIDIUS? DOES AUFIDIUS GIVE IT TO HIM?