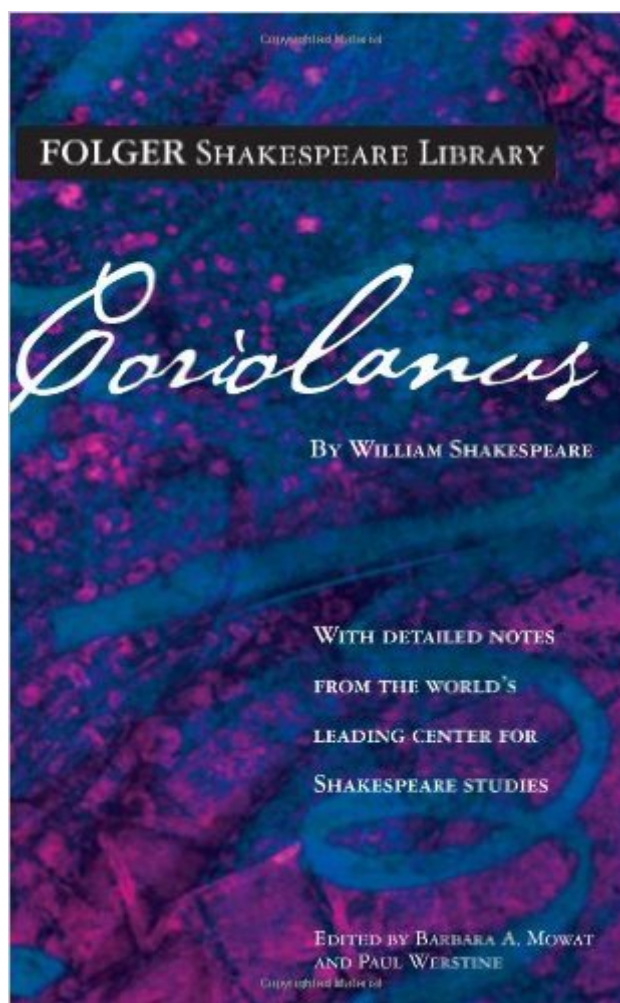


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Coriolanus (Folger Shakespeare Library)



Synopsis

Set in the earliest days of the Roman Republic, *Coriolanus* begins with the common people, or plebeians, in armed revolt against the patricians. The people win the right to be represented by tribunes. Meanwhile, there are foreign enemies near the gates of Rome. The play explores one reason that Rome prevailed over such vulnerabilities: its reverence for family bonds. Coriolanus so esteems his mother, Volumnia, that he risks his life to win her approval. Even the value of family, however, is subordinate to loyalty to the Roman state. When the two obligations align, the combination is irresistible. Coriolanus is so devoted to his family and to Rome that he finds the decision to grant the plebeians representation intolerable. To him, it elevates plebeians to a status equal with his family and class, to Rome's great disadvantage. He risks his political career to have the tribunate abolished and is banished from Rome. Coriolanus then displays an apparently insatiable vengefulness against the state he idolized, opening a tragic divide within himself, pitting him against his mother and family, and threatening Rome's very existence. The authoritative edition of *Coriolanus* from The Folger Shakespeare Library, the trusted and widely used Shakespeare series for students and general readers, includes:

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Essay by Heather James

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Customer Reviews

Any Shakespeare play that leaves people with totally different interpretations regarding the nature of the lead character can't be all bad. That said, "Coriolanus" suffers from its ambiguity. The first time I read it was in college. My kindly professor laid out the case for seeing Coriolanus as a kind of fascist strongman brought down by his contempt for the people, and I went away comforted in my small-L liberalism. This time, however, reading it on my own, it was hard not to see Coriolanus as something else entirely, a deserving elitist brought down by an envious, parasitic mobocracy who couldn't bear to see him succeed. In short, John Galt in a toga. A more disturbing realization with this second reading was that as a play, "Coriolanus" doesn't hold together. It's considered likely to be Shakespeare's last tragedy, written in 1608-09, but lacks for the vitality or singular inspiration you expect from the seasoned tragedian of "MacBeth" or "King Lear." It has a fantastic first act as I read it, brimming with great dialogue, highly charged scenes, and a well-extended battle sequence. Act I also sets up the core issue of the rest of the play. "He that trusts to you,/Where he should find you lions, finds you hares/Where foxes, geese," is how the bold patrician Marcius puts it to the rabble rousers at the play's start. "He that depends/Upon your favors swims on fins of lead/And hews down oaks with rushes." Marcius will later be renamed Coriolanus, after conquering the city Corioles. Rome proves more of a problem, where he's rejected by an easily-led and ungrateful mob. They have a point about Marcius' coldness when it comes to their need for corn, but he's not a dangerous character.

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