



TEACHER PACK

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CORIOLANUS

ABOUT THIS PACK

This pack supports the RSC's 2017 production of *Coriolanus*, directed by Angus Jackson. The production opened on 15 September 2017 at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon.

The activities provided are specifically designed to support KS3-4 students attending the performance and studying *Coriolanus* in school.

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These symbols are used throughout the pack:



READ

Notes from the production, background info or extracts



ACTIVITY

A practical or open space activity



WRITE

A classroom writing or discussion activity



LINKS

Useful web addresses and research tasks

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Coriolanus is the story of a Roman soldier at the time of the birth of the Roman Republic, as a new political structure was emerging and people jostle for power. This was hundreds of years before Rome became an Empire, so the play shows a society that is just establishing itself and struggling with ideas about how to govern and rule.

The play opens at a time of famine. The people of Rome, known as plebeians, are rioting because they believe the Patricians or ruling class have been hoarding grain and are responsible for their suffering. They make it clear how unfair the system is and call Caius Martius the worst of them all, declaring him an 'enemy of the people'. It is Caius Martius that then goes on to become Coriolanus, when he defeats the enemy in battle.



The Company of *Coriolanus*. Photo by Helen Maybanks

EXPLORING THE WORLD

NOTES FROM THE REHEARSAL ROOM

In this first few weeks of rehearsal Angus and the company worked together to build a picture of the world the play is taking place in. As part of this, they worked with guest speakers Natalie Haynes and Sir Michael Jackson as well as looking at editing the play together with historian James Shapiro. As a company they then explored how they could build the layers and levels of society in their setting and particularly focused on what the political system would look like.



SYNOPSIS

A full synopsis of the play is available at:

<https://www.rsc.org.uk/coriolanus/the-plot>



ACTIVITY 1: ROME AS A POWER VACUUM

When *Coriolanus* opens, Rome is a state of political uncertainty. Within the last few decades the king has been thrown out and the Consuls set up to rule people.

There are two main groups of people in Rome as a result of this – the Patricians who are a political class, the people who run the republic, and the Plebeians who are the normal people of Rome. The play starts with the Plebeians rioting because of a famine which they think the Patricians could have helped by allowing them more grain.

In the following activity students will be able to explore this tumultuous political atmosphere and also introduce the main characters and factions of the play.

- Ask students to walk around in an open space, stopping when you tell them to.
- Select one student and explain that they are going to be the 'king'. They should tell everyone else what the rules are in the room and everyone else has to obey them. The rules might be that they can only stop and start when he/she tells them to, that they have to move in a certain way, that they can't talk or they have to smile. Some might be specific to the King, for example. Do they have to bow when he/she passes?
- Ask students to reflect on how this feels and then remove the King from the space. How does it feel to be free from their rules?
- Select one third of the students in the group at random and label them Patricians. Explain to them that now the king is gone they still need a system to help them make the rules. The Patricians make the rules now, but they have to make them together. Explain that they all still have to move around, but they can't make a new rule without agreeing it first.

- Ask all students to reflect on how this felt. How did they feel about the Patricians? What kind of rules did the Patricians make, were there any rules that were about the others and not them? Did the room change? Did the Plebeians mix with the others, or did they start to move together, separately? Is this system fair?
- Allow the Patricians to continue making rules, but provide them with the following instructions: every new rule they make must take away a freedom from the Plebeians and give them an advantage. For example, they might not be able to step further than one pace in any direction which then gives the Patricians more space to move in.
- Explain that, in *Coriolanus*, this is the system of government that replaced the old king and the Patricians created a rule to ration grain that led to a huge famine among the Plebeians. How would the Plebeians feel if this happened to them and they were starving because of the smaller group of Patricians? How did they feel when they were restricted for the benefit of the Patricians? How could this be made better?
- Explain to the Plebeians that to help them keep their rights and freedoms, they can choose two people from their group to go and make decisions with the Patricians. These people will be their 'tribunes'.
- Once the Plebeians have elected their two tribunes, ask them all to continue moving around the room. This time, the rules will be made by the Patricians, but the two tribunes also have to agree the rule and reason with them.
- After trying this a few times, reflect with students on what the problems are with this system. Is this job easy for the Tribunes; do they feel outnumbered in one or both groups? Does it work for the Plebeians? How do the Patricians feel towards the tribunes? What might be the difficulties with this?
- Within their existing groups, ask one of the Tribunes to imagine they are Junius Brutus and two of the Patricians to be Coriolanus and Menenius Agrippa and explain the following:
 - Coriolanus is a Patrician who is a very successful Roman general. He has a very aristocratic background and does not like the plebeians even though they adore him as a military leader.
 - Junius Brutus is one of the Tribunes elected by the plebeians to represent them in the government of Rome. He considers Coriolanus to be dangerous to his class and works to keep him out of power.
 - Menenius Agrippa is a Patrician and Coriolanus' friend. He has a reputation for being able to calm down arguments and avoid conflict.
- Invite the students to explain how they think these three characters might feel towards the other groups of people: Plebeians, Patricians and Tribunes.

Explain to students that Coriolanus really dislikes the plebeians and is very distant from them. How do they think the Plebeians might feel towards Coriolanus? Do they like him or trust him?

NOTES FROM THE REHEARSAL ROOM

The company spent a lot of time considering what happens when you change the way people are governed and also how different groups react to a power vacuum. Angus made the choice to cast the Tribunes as women to emphasise the difference between these elected figures and the Patricians and in key scenes they looked at how it felt to be women stepping into the male world of politics. They explored some of the connections this has to modern politics as well.

GOVERNING A PEOPLE

In this production of *Coriolanus* the tribunes have been cast as women and the company spent time discussing the effect of this in Act 2 scene 2 and Act 3 Scene 1 in particular.

In Act 2 Scene 2, the tribunes come into the Senate house, which is the equivalent of the Houses of Parliament in the UK today. In this production, they have deliberately made this space feel like a 'man's club' and – as the tribunes come into it - they have to be the voice of the people in a place where they don't seem to belong. This makes the divide between the tribunes and the patricians more visual and more obvious – but students will recognise the issues if they have completed the first exercise.

WAYS TO EXTEND THIS WORK

- You may want to look at Act 4 Scene 2 and Act 3 Scene 1 as well – in more detail - where the tribunes meet the grieving women. How would casting the tribunes as women change the dynamic of this scene?
- Ask students to look at the scene and think about how this interpretive choice makes a difference, perhaps staging it with female and then with male Tribunes. Does one feel more severe and is it the one you would expect?

WAYS TO EXTEND THIS WORK

- A-level students can also take part in the For the Good of Rome film challenge which is open from May 2017 until October 2017. Please see www.rsc.org.uk/goodofrome/film-challenge for details. Students do not need to be film students to take part and can enter independently or as part of a group.



ACTIVITY 2: THE TRIBUNES

The following activity will help students to explore Act 2 scene 2 and the relationship of the different characters to the people or the plebeians. In this scene, the victorious Coriolanus is welcomed by the Senators and they talk about how much he deserves to be chosen as Consul – so they tell him to go into the market place and let the people know they can vote for him. When Coriolanus reacts badly to this idea, the Tribunes take it as a sign he considers the people beneath him.

- Organise students into groups and provide them and ask them to create a list of the important things that happen in Act 2 Scene 2, a list of events.
- Ask each group to work together to create their own version of this scene, thinking carefully about how much power each of the groups has: the senators, the tribunes and Coriolanus himself. Challenge them to think about how they can show this and ask them to include one line from the text for each of the events in their list.
- Watch a couple of the performances and ask students to think about the choices they



Martina Laird as Junius Brutus and Jackie Morrison as Sicinius Veletus in *Coriolanus*. Photo by Helen Maybanks

have seen. Why do they think the Tribunes react so badly to Coriolanus when the senate want him to succeed? Why would Coriolanus not want to become a Consul?

- Reflect with students on how much of the previous exercise they drew on to play the Tribunes. How does it feel to be these two characters? Why do they want the treatment and voice of the people to matter?
- Ask students to think about how this scene would be different if the Tribunes were female and all the senators and Coriolanus men. Does this change the dynamic? You may even want to task one group to look at this in advance and allow them to share their interpretation at this point. Does it help you, as an audience, to see how different they are? Does it matter what that difference is?

FAME AND IDENTITY

NOTES FROM THE REHEARSAL ROOM

During rehearsal, the company explored the question of how you show honour to somebody physically, looking at what the rituals are that could show how Coriolanus is treated differently and with more honour after his name is officially changed to recognise his achievements in battle. They looked at different levels, including kneeling and bowing, and experimented with how they can show veneration on stage. As part of this, they looked at how modern society treats celebrities and idols and the comparison between them.



ACTIVITY 3: CORIOLANUS THE ICON

In Act 1 Scene 1 Coriolanus comments on the people of Rome saying 'how quickly do you change your mind' and in Act 2 Scene 1 we see them treat him like a hero.

In rehearsal the company discussed this as being like the cult of celebrity, where the public fixate on the idea of a person instead of the reality of them. Just as, in Coriolanus, the Plebeians fixate on the idea of Coriolanus as their saviour. The power that comes as a result of that 'celebrity' is then something that is quite difficult to manage.

- Provide students with the edited copies of Act 2 Scene 1 and Act 3 Scene 1, explaining that these two extracts show Coriolanus at the height of his celebrity in Rome and then at the point when he returns on behalf of the Volscians.
- Ask students to first read Act 2 Scene 1 together, standing in a circle. Allow students to read one line each around the circle until the extract has been read twice.
- Re-read the scene with students, asking them to bow each time they reach a word that makes them think about honour, victory or success.



Sope Dirisu as Coriolanus and Charles Aitken as Cominius in Coriolanus. Photo by Helen Maybanks

- Reflect with students on how this homecoming feels. Is Coriolanus welcome in Rome? How do they think he feels? Did they bow as much during his lines? Why might that be? How does he react to this welcome?
- Arrange students into small groups of four and ask them to explore the extract from Act 3 Scene 1. Ask them to stand in a square and read the lines to each other, taking one part each. Explain to them that these four characters are two Tribunes on one side and Coriolanus and his friend on the other.
- Encourage them to stamp whenever their character repeats a word used by the previous speaker. For example, when Coriolanus repeats the word 'choler!' after Menenius first uses it.
- Ask each group to reflect on how it felt to emphasise those repetitions. Do they happen a lot throughout the discussion? This is Coriolanus' second return to Rome. Can they think of three ways it's different from the first return to Rome after his victory?
- Students may well mention the presence of the people in the first scene and the closed nature of this one.
- Ask students to work in their small groups of four and to create two freeze frames that show the first return and the second return. As they work on them encourage them to also select one word or line from the scene that summarises their freeze frame. For example, Act 2 Scene 1 might be 'Welcome to Rome, renowned Coriolanus!' and Act 3 Scene 1 might be 'poison'.
- As each group shares their freeze frames you may also want to introduce them with the line from Act 1 Scene 1 where Coriolanus warns us about this: 'how quickly do you change your mind'.

NOTES FROM THE REHEARSAL ROOM

During rehearsal, the company also looked at turning points in this scene and how this scene is a turning point for the whole play. They particularly looked at the moment where Coriolanus says 'pluck out this multitudinous tongue', essentially saying let's not listen to the voices of all these people. At this point the Tribunes know that they can bring him down as he's spoken out against everything the Republic stands for!



ACTIVITY 4: CORIOLANUS THE ROMAN

Coriolanus is a Roman and this is very important to him as part of his identity. It's also important to him that he's a soldier and that's how he defines himself.

Ask students how they would identify themselves if they had to finish the sentence 'I am a _____ and I am a _____'

What kind of words do they use? Are they similar? How would they feel if suddenly they couldn't be one of those things? Coriolanus tries to take up a new identity in the Consulate but this doesn't work for him. Coriolanus talks about how he's 'rather live with them in my way than sway with them in theirs' in Act 2 Scene 1, and he finds it very difficult to adapt. As the play goes on we then see him banished from Rome and then swear allegiance to the Volscians in Act 4 Scene 5.

- Ask students to create a timeline for Coriolanus through the play. On one side of the timeline ask them to detail the things that happen to him and the things he does. On the other side, ask them to think about how he is feeling and what his inner questions are.
- Share some of the timelines before thinking together about where the turning points are for him and why he acts the way he does. What do they think the most significant moments are for Coriolanus in the play? When are his most significant moments of change and what is happening inside his head at that moment in time?
- Ask students to reflect on whether or not these emotions are tied to how he defines himself. What is the impact of it, for him, when he can no longer be a Roman? Does this drive the actions he then goes on to take?

WAYS TO EXTEND THIS WORK

- Coriolanus' soliloquy in Act 4 Scene 4 is a great way to explore his journey. In this speech he questions what it makes you when your friends become your enemies and your world is turned upside down.
- Divide up the lines of the soliloquy between students, asking them to create short freeze frames for each line.
- Watch each of the sections in performance together and agree on the three central questions of his speech. What is he wrestling with here? Why?
- This speech very clearly shows Coriolanus' struggle with identity and he is reacting to the things that impact his identity. Is there anything missing that they think might also be on his mind?

FAMILY AND ALLEGIANCE



ACTIVITY 6: VOLUMNIA'S ROLE

Coriolanus' Mother Volumnia is an important figure in his life. In the following activity students will be able to explore her speech to him in Act 5 Scene 3 where she tries desperately to persuade her son to listen and do what she wants him to.

Before completing the activity ask students to think about what tactics their own parents might use to persuade them to listen to them or do something they don't want to do. Encourage them to think about verbal tactics, but they might be about delivery or about content. How many can they think of?



Hadyn Gwynne as Volumnia and Sope Dirisu as Coriolanus in Coriolanus. Photo by Helen Maybanks

- Why might Volumnia think she would be able to persuade Coriolanus when others can't?
- Provide students with a copy of Volumnia's speech to Coriolanus.
- Ask students to read this aloud together, listening to the words.
- Read the speech a second time asking them to listen to see if they can hear two tactics she uses to persuade her son to do what she thinks is best. Can they remember what the first strategy is she tries?
- Organise students into pairs and ask one to take on the role of Coriolanus and one to take on the role of Volumnia. The student playing Volumnia should read the speech while Coriolanus listens to her arguments. Ask the student playing Coriolanus to move close to Volumnia when they think his character would listen to her and further away when they think he would be less convinced.
- Reflect with students on which parts of the speech they were closest together? Are they the same? Which arguments are most convincing?
- Do they think Volumnia is completely calm the whole way through this speech? Is there a point where she loses her temper? Can they count how many tactics she tries before that point?
- Ask students to think about how she might know that her tactics weren't working. Coriolanus isn't speaking or replying so what might he be doing on stage that makes her change tactic and eventually lose her temper?
- Encourage each pair to create a staging of the speech where Volumnia delivers the speech, ut responds to what Coriolanus is doing. For example, she shouldn't move on to another tactic until she's worked out that the last one hasn't worked. This might mean there are gaps in the speech while he turns away or she has to follow him.
- Allow students the opportunity to share their versions of the speeches. Who seems in control in each version? Does it change? Where are the turning points?
- Reflect with students, after watching everyone's, on what they think the relationship between Volumnia and Coriolanus is here. Why do they think she goes in to persuade him?
- This is her second speech to Coriolanus, the first is in Act 3 Scene 2. If you have time, you might want to ask students to look at both. Can you tell which comes first? Are there tactics she uses earlier in the play that she doesn't try again?

RESOURCE MATERIALS

ACT 2 SCENE 1 EXTRACT

(Enter Coriolanus crowned with an oaken garland)

HERALD

Know, Rome, that all alone Martius did fight
Within Corioles' gates, where he hath won,
With fame, a name to Martius Caius; these
In honor follows "Coriolanus."
Welcome to Rome, renowned Coriolanus.
[Sound flourish.]

ALL

Welcome to Rome, renowned Coriolanus!

CORIOLANUS

No more of this. It does offend my heart.
Pray now, no more.

COMINIUS

Look, sir, your mother.

CORIOLANUS

O,
You have, I know, petitioned all the gods
For my prosperity. [Kneels.]

VOLUMNIA

Nay, my good soldier, up.
[He stands.]
My gentle Martius, worthy Caius, and
By deed-achieving honor newly named--
What is it? Coriolanus must I call thee?
But, O, thy wife—

CORIOLANUS

My gracious silence, hail.
Wouldst thou have laughed had I come coffined home,
That weep'st to see me triumph?

MENENIUS

Now the gods crown thee!

CORIOLANUS

And live you yet? [(To Valeria.)] O, my sweet lady, pardon.

VOLUMNIA

I know not where to turn. O, welcome home!--

MENENIUS

A hundred thousand welcomes! I could weep,
And I could laugh; I am light and heavy. Welcome.

HERALD

Give way there, and go on!

CORIOLANUS

[to Volumnia and Virgilia] Your hand and yours.
Ere in our own house I do shade my head,
The good patricians must be visited,
From whom I have received not only greetings,
But with them change of honors.

VOLUMNIA

I have lived
To see inherited my very wishes
And the buildings of my fancy. Only
There's one thing wanting, which I doubt not but
Our Rome will cast upon thee.

CORIOLANUS

Know, good mother,
I had rather be their servant in my way
Than sway with them in theirs.

ACT 3 SCENE 1 EXTRACT

COMINIUS

The people are abused, set on. This palt'ring
Becomes not Rome, nor has Coriolanus
Deserved this so dishonored rub, laid falsely
I' th' plain way of his merit.

CORIOLANUS

Tell me of corn?

This was my speech, and I will speak 't again.

MENENIUS

Not now, not now.

FIRST SENATOR

Not in this heat, sir, now.

CORIOLANUS

Now, as I live, I will.

My nobler friends, I crave their pardons. For
The mutable, rank-scented meiny, let them
Regard me, as I do not flatter, and
Therein behold themselves. I say again,
In soothing them, we nourish 'gainst our senate
The cockle of rebellion, insolence, sedition,
Which we ourselves have plowed for, sowed, and scattered
By mingling them with us, the honored number,
Who lack not virtue, no, nor power, but that
Which they have given to beggars.

MENENIUS

Well, no more.

FIRST SENATOR

No more words, we beseech you.

CORIOLANUS

How? No more?

As for my country I have shed my blood,
Not fearing outward force, so shall my lungs
Coin words till their decay against those measles
Which we disdain should tetter us, yet sought
The very way to catch them.

BRUTUS

You speak o' th' people
As if you were a god to punish, not
A man of their infirmity.

SICINIUS

'Twere well

We let the people know 't.

MENENIUS

What, what? His cholera?

CORIO LANUS

Choler?
Were I as patient as the midnight sleep,
By Jove, 'twould be my mind.

SICINIUS

It is a mind
That shall remain a poison where it is,
Not poison any further.

CORIO LANUS

"Shall remain"?
Hear you this Triton of the minnows? Mark you
Her absolute "shall"?

COMINIUS

'Twas from the canon.

CORIO LANUS

"Shall"?
O good but most unwise patricians, why,
You grave but reckless senators, have you thus
Given Hydra here to choose an officer,
That with her peremptory "shall," being but
The horn and noise o' th' monster's, wants not spirit
To say she'll turn your current in a ditch
And make your channel hers? If she have power,
Then veil your ignorance; if none, awake
Your dangerous lenity. And my soul aches
To know, when two authorities are up,
Neither supreme, how soon confusion
May enter 'twixt the gap of both and take
The one by th' other.

COMINIUS

Well, on to th' marketplace.

CORIO LANUS

Whoever gave that counsel to give forth
The corn o' th' storehouse gratis, as 'twas used
Sometime in Greece—

MENENIUS

Well, well, no more of that.

CORIO LANUS

Though there the people had more absolute power,
I say they nourished disobedience, fed
The ruin of the state.

BRUTUS

Why shall the people give
One that speaks thus their voice?

VOLUMNIA'S SPEECH (5:3)

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. 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.