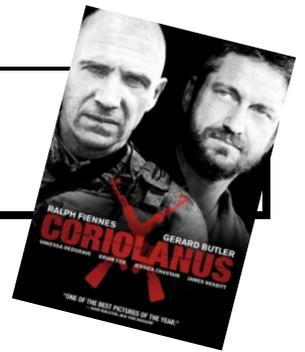


Revisiting Shakespeare's 'Coriolanus'

Recommended level: Grades 11 – 12 HL



Read the following passage, adapted from an article that appeared in the *New York Times*, and answer the questions that follow.

1. After a military triumph in the city of Corioles, Caius Martius, a respected if not beloved general, is given a new surname — Coriolanus — to honor his achievement, and his friends urge him to stand for election as a senator. But the pride that propelled Coriolanus to triumph in the battlefield makes him reluctant to engage in the kind of vote-mongering niceties that the public expects. So the voters turn on him, banishing him from the city — a fate that we all might be tempted to wish upon our least favorite politico, were it not for the play's violent denouement, in which our hero is murdered by his rival.
2. We've been taught to think of tragic figures as each having a defining characteristic that serves ultimately to undo him: Macbeth's ambition, Othello's jealousy and so on. But close readers of "Coriolanus" will know that Coriolanus is one of Shakespeare's most complex characters. For starters, his fatal flaw is tricky to pin down. He's typically said to be proud, even egomaniacal, as we see in the first scene, in which the citizens resolve to murder him. Patricians like Coriolanus, they claim, "suffer (the public) to famish" while cramming their own storehouses with grain. Even his noble deeds do not vindicate him, because he did them to serve his own pride rather than the public. In response, Coriolanus is too confident in his own virtuous qualities to concern himself with answering the people's charges. Instead, he argues that the public has no right to question the actions of the "noble Senate."
3. Coriolanus's paternalistic attitude — another primary cause of his downfall — is the characteristic that makes him most unappealing to a contemporary audience. He is deeply anti-democratic: he believes that the public has no right to tell him what to do, because they have not fought in the war and he has. Brutus and Sicinius, populist rival politicians, warn the voters that if it were in his power, he "would have made them mules", but Coriolanus's friend Menenius Agrippa comes to his defense: regardless of his personal feelings, Menenius argues, Coriolanus can be trusted to care for the people like a father.
4. This defense of authoritarianism sounds discomfiting to our democratic ears. But Shakespeare's sympathies are clearly with Coriolanus, and therefore so are ours. The public — the plebeians, as they are often called — are vulgar, uncouth, ignorant. Coriolanus, by contrast, is repeatedly referred to as "noble," and by hurting him, the citizens are also hurting themselves. Coriolanus is a great man who shouldn't be required to compromise, because he truly does know best. And he values his own accomplishments so deeply that he cannot tolerate even the suggestion that he might have performed his heroic acts in order to win the favor of the people.
5. In this election season, though, a modern Coriolanus might be a Republican's fantasy candidate — and the Democrats' nightmare. He's well educated, with military experience and a deep sense of personal conviction. Consistent to a fault, he's no flip-flopper; he has a strong work ethic; he's even married (only once) with a young son.
6. And yet — as Shakespeare knew well and the play ultimately demonstrates — Coriolanus is unelectable. Straight-talking politicians have a gut-level appeal, but in reality they lose all support as soon as they abandon the party line. An elected official who clings too tightly to his own vision of the world opens himself to accusations of inflexibility if the situation changes. Yet a candidate who allows himself to be manipulated by the public, as Coriolanus discovers, may be surprised to see his popular support withdrawn just as quickly as it is pledged.
7. A politician who wants to win must ultimately subdue his or her inner Coriolanus. Victory depends upon a fickle combination of personal merit, political strategizing and the skillful application of flattery. We think of this as cynical and unsavory, a symptom of our own corrupt political climate. But more than anything else, "Coriolanus" demonstrates that politics has never been pure — and that "May the best man win!" might be its most enduring myth.

By Ruth Franklin JAN. 20, 2012

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/22/magazine/revisiting-shakespeares-coriolanus.html?_r=1

[Accessed 24/06/2016]

Questions: Comprehension and Language – Revisiting Shakespeare’s ‘Coriolanus’

- Which two qualities of Coriolanus are highlighted in paragraph 1? (2)
- Refer to the word ‘niceties’ in paragraph 1
 - What part of speech is the word in this context? (1)
 - What does the word mean in the context of this sentence? (1)
- Provide a synonym for the word ‘denouement’ in paragraph 1. (1)
- In paragraph 2, Coriolanus is sometimes written with inverted commas, and sometimes without. Explain why the author has done this. (2)
- Select the best definition of ‘to pin down’ (par. 2) from the list below:
 - to force someone to give an opinion
 - to clearly establish details
 - to attribute a flaw to someone
 - to be placed in a position of dependence (1)
- In paragraph 2 Coriolanus is referred to as being egomaniacal. Quote evidence in paragraphs 3 and 4 to support this statement. (2)
- Patricians like Coriolanus, they claim ...* (par. 2)
What do the words ‘they claim’ suggest in this context? (2)
- In paragraph 3, Coriolanus’s attitude is described as being ‘paternalistic’. Which other words (phrase) in this paragraph support this description? (1)
- The writer mentions in paragraph 3 that some aspects of the play may not appeal to *contemporary* audiences. Why, do you think, did she feel the need to include the word ‘contemporary’? (2)
- What is the connotation of the word ‘mules’ in paragraph 3? (1)
- In paragraph 4, explain the difference between an autocratic (‘authoritarianism’) and democratic system? (2)
- Which of the following best explains the term ‘no flip-flopper’ as used in paragraph 5?
A person who:
 - works hard
 - is extremely loyal
 - is a good leader
 - is resolute (1)
- Would a ‘gut-level appeal’ (par. 6) be regarded as an emotional or rational reaction? (1)
- In paragraph 6, the writer suggests that an elected official may be in a no-win situation. Summarise this argument. (4)
- The word ‘fickle’ in paragraph 7 suggests that the winning combination of qualities is:
 - vitaly important
 - seldom consistent
 - dependent on personalities
 - essential for success (1)
- What, according to the article, are some of the important criteria for being a good politician? (3)
- How do you interpret the writer’s final comment, that the well worn cliché is in fact an ‘enduring myth’? (3)
- Study the two advertisements for a film version of ‘Coriolanus’. Explain the different focus of the visuals in each ad. (4)



A.



B.



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Suggested answers: Revisiting 'Coriolanus'

1. pride / bravery / honesty / proficiency as a soldier (any 2 qualities) ✓✓
2. 2.1 noun ✓
2.2 saying the right thing at the right time; following conventions etc. ✓
3. Outcome/conclusion ✓
4. When inverted commas are used, it refers to the actual play✓; when no inverted commas are used, it refers to the character in the play. ✓
5. B ✓
6. (Egomaniacal = pre-occupied with oneself; strong belief that you are right; may include delusions of greatness and feelings of under-appreciation.)
'has no right to tell him what to do'; 'he values his own accomplishments so deeply'; 'cannot tolerate even the suggestion that he might have performed his heroic acts ...' (any 2) ✓✓
7. It suggests that these words are not necessarily true. ✓ The play may reveal that their words are untrue, OR the author may feel that they are untrue. ✓
8. 'like a father' ✓
9. Times change, as does politics. ✓ At other stages in history, the audiences may have found another aspect more disturbing. ✓
10. Ignorance; cannot think for themselves; stubborn (any 1) ✓
11. In an autocratic system, one person (group) is responsible for all the decisions ✓, while in a democracy, everyone has an opportunity to contribute to decisions ✓, usually by voting for representatives who then carry out their wishes.
12. D (resolute = unchangeable = consistent = does not change [flip-flop] mind quickly) ✓
13. emotional ✓
14. If the person sticks to their word/promises/decisions too strongly✓, they can be accused of being inflexible✓; if, however, they are persuaded to change their ideas too much ✓they are likely to lose support✓. Either approach results in losing popularity. ✓ (any 4)
15. B ✓
16. Any 3: well-educated; military experience; strong personal beliefs; (happily) married with a family; hard worker; consistency; personal merit; skilful use of flattery; adopting sound political strategy etc. ✓✓✓ (Be flexible)
17. The expression 'May the best man win!' ✓is often used, and is widely believed ✓ as it expresses a feel-good, respected concept (just like a myth). However, the author realises that the best man does not always win✓, and in politics, many other factors come into play.
18. In A, the images focus primarily on the male characters who are at war ✓ with one another (the weapons) ✓ feature strongly.
In B, the images focus on the faces of a main character and a(n) (older) woman✓; relationships ✓ (possibly son-mother) seem to be the focus.

BONUS QUESTION

Give two reasons why you might think that the writer is American.



FOR DISCUSSION

Paragraph 6 explains the difficult paths that leaders sometimes have to follow. Can you think of leaders who have fallen into any of the scenarios outlined?