

Consider the way in which Shakespeare presents Martius in the early part of the p...



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The first, and perhaps most popular view of Martius is that of the plebeians in the opening scene, who have an unequivocally negative opinion of the man soon to become a popular and 'noble' consul, albeit transiently. While it is argued by Martius that the citizens can never be content ('what would you have, you curs, that like nor peace nor war?'), it is still significant that the earliest reference to him in the play states that he is 'chief enemy to the people'.

Further quotations help explain why this conclusion is drawn. Shortly after this point, one citizen suggests that they 'kill him (Martius), and...have corn at our own price'.

Since 'Coriolanus' is set in the period immediately succeeding a great famine in Rome, it is of paramount importance to the plebeians that they do not encounter the same situation again, therefore they are aggrieved that patricians like Caius Martius have the power to raise the price of corn at their discretion. Although it is widely understood that, during this period of civil unrest in Rome, few patricians are held in high esteem by the lower classes ('They ne'er cared for us yet', complains one citizen), it would be fair to state that Martius is among the least popular. In fact, he is further described as, 'a very dog to the commonalty'. Here Shakespeare uses animal imagery, common throughout the play, to great effect in portraying Martius' unpleasant character. The assembled hoi polloi continue their criticism of Martius' personality, describing how he 'pays himself (that is, for his services to the country) with being proud'. Additional reference is made to his pride in line 35, where the First Citizen alleges that 'what he hath done famously.

.. he did..

. to be partly proud - which he is, even to the altitude of his virtue'. Here, the implication is that Martius is as proud as he is righteous. It is interesting to note here that every single epithet used to describe the acclaimed soldier so far in the scene has been derogatory. Another interesting insight provided by the mob in this section is that on Volumnia, who is Caius Martius' mother.

One member of the crowd makes the point that he carried out his greatest acts of bravery in order to ' please his mother'. This is the first insinuation of the degree of control exercised by Martius' formidable mother, Volumnia over her son. Volumnia makes her first appearance in Act 1 Scene 1, wherein she is seen talking about her son with his devoted, if rather spineless (' O Jupiter, no blood!'), wife Virgilia, and Valeria, a friend of theirs whose taste for anecdotes of a brutal nature is as voracious as Volumnia's own. In this scene, Martius' mother comes across as warlike (speaking of blood, she claims, ' it more becomes a man than gilt his trophy'), and preoccupied with her son almost to the point of incest (' If my son were my husband..

.'). Much of Martius' psychological background is revealed in this part of the play, in description of his childhood, his behaviour on the battlefield and his reputation by his mother; his character is also manifested in the behaviour of his young son, which is spoken about at length by Valeria. Volumnia speaks boastfully of how she, in effect, made her son the ruthless man he is today, through sending him to ' cruel war' as a ' tender-bodied' youth. This is certainly not typical maternal behaviour.

Bearing in mind that she is the single body with most influence over Martius, it is important to observe here Volumnia's attitude to war. Volumnia maintains that she would sooner have ' eleven (sons) die nobly for their country than one voluptuously surfeit out of action'. It is growing up with the encouragement of this sort of mentality that has shaped Martius into a callous autocrat. Volumnia makes repeated reference to blood and violence throughout the scene, particularly in describing her son's bravery in war, for example, ' His bloody brow with his mail'd hand then wiping'; ' He'll beat Aufidius' head below his knee and tread upon his neck'. If this is a true depiction of Martius' behaviour in conflict, and it would appear to be so from the later battle scenes, then he would certainly be a daunting opponent; only a hardened warrior would ever wipe a painful gash with a chain mail glove, as this would invariably make the injury worse.

In what seems to be an innocent account of young Martius' antics, Valeria describes a miniature version of his parent (hence she uses the expression, ' O my word, the father's son!') With great gusto, she outlines how the little boy wantonly and viciously attacks a butterfly, focusing on an attack of bad temper reminiscent of the child's father when riled by the mob, in which young Martius tears the insect to pieces with his teeth. Shakespeare includes this tale to enable his audience to draw parallels between father and son, a highly effectual device given the grim imagery used. Martius himself is, unfortunately, exactly the man his mother intended him to be; he is cruel to and disparaging of the citizens back in the first scene, from his first speech onwards. In fact, his first words, addressed to the plebeians are: ' What's the matter, you dissentious rogues? That, rubbing the poor itch of your opinion,

make yourselves scabs?' It does not worry him that the plebeians are going hungry; to him, he sees them simply as a 'many-headed multitude' creating a disturbance, like an outbreak of the plague (hence the disease imagery), and should as such be settled down as quickly as possible, even if it requires force. He threatens to 'make a quarry' of them if he gets the chance.

Almost every word Martius speaks in this scene is an insult to the plebeians; he sees himself as far distanced from them in the class system, and scorns them for their common behaviour, criticising their 'cobbled shoes', their gossiping, the way they 'presume to know what's done i'th' Capitol, and accuses them of not knowing what is best for them in saying, 'your affections are a sick man's appetite, who desires most that which would increase his evil.' Whilst much of this could be considered as witty in some social circles, there is no doubt that Martius is an incorrigible snob who has no interest but his own at heart. He is certainly not a fan of democracy, and feels that the mob should be even more oppressed than they already are. Martius' reputation as a soldier is undoubtedly a good one, even if his rapport with the lower classes leaves a lot to be desired; his mother speaks of how he returned from his first battle 'brows bound in oak', the plebeians acknowledge his services for his country in an earlier part of the act and, towards the end of Act One, he is given the title Coriolanus, meaning 'man of Corioles' in recognition of his achievements. On one occasion, in Act One Scene Five, Titus Lartius is speaking with some of his soldiers about Martius' bravery on having tackled the city of Corioles single-handedly, following the cowardly retreat of his men. Lartius assumes immediately that his colleague has been defeated and killed, and begins to pronounce what is effectively

Caius Martius' obituary, which summarises how he is seen as a soldier quite well.

Lartius says, ' Oh noble fellow, who sensibly outdares his senseless sword...A carbuncle entire, as big as thou art, were not so rich a jewel.

Thou wast a soldier even to Cato's wish...with thy grim looks..

. thou mad'st thine enemies shake as if the world...did tremble.

' Here Shakespeare compares him to a precious stone, and describes the fear which he instilled in his opponents, using a simile for increased emphasis. Further adulation for Martius' achievements on the battlefield comes from Cominius in Act One Scene Ten, who is of the opinion that ladies will be ' frightened' and ' gladly quak'd' to hear of his brave deeds, ' great patricians' shall ' admire' him, and even the ' dull tribunes' and ' fusty plebeians' who are normally resentful and jealous of Martius, shall be thankful that ' Rome hath such a soldier'. Martius is seen as hero of the battle, and largely responsible for the Romans' victory, and is duly praised, and rewarded with the title ' Coriolanus' and Cominius' ' noble steed'. In fact, it is only for his capabilities as a soldier, not for his charisma, that Martius is acclaimed; this explains his later downfall as a politician - he is quite simply unaccustomed to appeasing the wishes of others (later in the play he confides in Cominius that he would ' rather be their servant in my way than sway with them in theirs.

'). He has little tolerance for those whose opinions differ from his own, for example the plebeians, a point which will be examined more closely at a

later stage. Although the praise of Martius' battle skills is a fairly good advertisement for them, Shakespeare also provides his audience with many visual examples of what a dextrous and valiant combatant he is. Examples of this are found in stage directions such as ' Martius beats them back', ' Enter Martius bleeding', ' Enter Martius, bloody', ' Martius fights till they be driven in breathless', ' at another door Martius with his arm in a scarf'. Although readers of the play very often overlook such instructions, visual factors are probably the most important aspects regarding how an opinion is formed of a character acting on stage - Martius' intimidating demeanour speaks for itself on most occasions here.

Returning to the study of what is actually spoken in the first act, Martius is spoiling for a fight almost from the moment he appears on stage. One particularly memorable line, ' Would the nobility lay aside their ruth and let me use my sword,' is, I feel, the best summary of Martius' attitude to physical combat; like his mother, he has an insatiable taste for bloodshed and gore. On hearing that the Volsces wish to do battle with the Romans, Martius admits that he is ' glad on't', and is positively delighted to come up against his old enemy, Tullus Aufidius', whose nobility he admits to ' envying', describing him as ' a lion I am proud to hunt'. This is another example of the type of metaphoric animal imagery Shakespeare often uses in ' Coriolanus' to add strength of feeling and excitement to a character's speech. In Act One Scene Four, Martius gives the impression of being eager for warfare to commence; he urges Mars, the Roman god of war, to make them ' quick in work', and is anxious to know what stage of the battle his general has reached. He also seems to take a perfectionist view of the war,

threatening his men that if they don't pull their weight they shall feel the 'edge' of his sword.

Once the battle is underway in Scene Five, and the Romans meet their first setback, Martius is livid and shows the same lack of tolerance as his child did in the third scene. He curses his troops, calling them, 'shames of Rome' and 'souls of geese that bear the shape of men', for example, and wishing 'contagion...Boils and plagues' upon them for their cowardice in running away from a weak army whom he feels could have been beaten by 'apes'.

Again there is use of both animal and disease imagery, accentuating the strength of feeling behind Martius' words. This comes as a stark contrast to Cominius' words of encouragement for his soldiers; he tells them to take a rest ('Breathe you') and refers to them as his 'friends', making Martius seem even less humane than he did already. Nonetheless, Martius does demonstrate great valour in Scene 6; having by himself overcome the Volsces, he insists that he is able to continue fighting despite having lost a lot of blood, claiming that this loss would actually be good for his health. It is this type of behaviour, however, that meant that he was condemned as foolhardy by one of his own men in Scene Five. Martius' words in Scene Seven are of little consequence, serving only to further the narration of the story, and to demonstrate his enthusiasm to continue with the battle, in phrases such as 'Come I too late?', 'Where is the enemy?' and, towards the end of the scene, his speech to encourage like-minded soldiers to follow him for a further battle against Aufidius.

Scene Nine is not particularly useful scene either; it is essentially a visual 'showdown' between Martius and his great adversary Aufidius, in which Martius gains the upper hand and comes away a hero. After the final battle of the act, Martius returns to the Roman camp where a hero's welcome awaits him. The most peculiar aspect of this scene is how he displays uncharacteristic modesty, which can, on account of his pride, in most cases be put down to either his being shaken after a day's fighting or to false humility and a desire for further praise. At one stage, in fact, his speech becomes incoherent and garbled in declining this constant stream of adulation, which would indicate genuine embarrassment and disbelief at the degree of appreciation shown for his acts. Another occurrence directly after the battle which comes out of character for Martius, now known as Coriolanus, is his display of generosity in asking that a man who gave him shelter in Corioles be freed by the Romans for this gesture.

These examples of anomalous behaviour on his part could have been brought about by the fact that either he was traumatised after long hours of combat, or that he was still in shock after having been given such a great honour. In the first act, Coriolanus is depicted during his rise to the epitome of popularity. Although he does not always come across as pleasant, charisma is unimportant while he is still a soldier; what is necessary is that he fights well, and that is exactly what he does in order to attain success. It is not until later acts that his less attractive traits begin to work to his disadvantage.