

Name brand – the
use of names as
metonymy for actions
in coriolanus



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Mention Tonya Harding, Timothy McVeigh or Monica Lewinsky, and immediately the infamous deeds of each individual come to mind. Each of these names meant nothing until actions such as sex and violence became associated with them. Monica Lewinsky's name became so recognizable that she used her name alone to try to sell a line of handbags. This concept of a name embodying of particular set of actions is significant in understanding Coriolanus. Shakespeare uses names as metonymy for only the actions of a person, illustrating both advantageous and disastrous consequences of this simplistic association.

Despite the fact that the man's name is never revealed, the poor host who lodges Coriolanus is a principal example of the importance of linking a name and actions. Coriolanus, in trying to graciously repay people that helped him conquer Aufidius and the Volsces, speaks glowingly of a man who gave him accommodations while he was in the field. He us'd me kindly, he cried to me (I: ix 83), Coriolanus praises, establishing that the men were close enough to cry together. Coriolanus saw the man taken as a prisoner just as he spotted Aufidius, and requests of Cominius that he, give [his] poor host freedom (I: ix 87). Cominius is more than willing to accommodate this request, and his fellow general Lartius simply asks, Martius, his name (I: ix 89). Despite crying with this man and the extraordinary kindness the man showed him, Coriolanus responds, By Jupiter, I forgot! (I: ix 90) Not only has his name been forgotten, but within two lines Coriolanus is discussing more important matters, such as where the wine is located. In this case, having his name firmly established with his kind deed would have freed the man from being a

prisoner of war, illustrating the importance of having one's name represent their deeds.

Shakespeare less subtly illustrates the beneficial metonymy of names for actions with the surname Coriolanus being given to Caius Martius. Cominius, after listing many of the brave military deeds the still-bloody Caius Martius did for Rome, proclaims, For what he did before Corioles, call him Coriolanus (I: ix 63-65). Shakespeare makes a name literally a representation of actions by having it bestowed because of his heroic leadership. The name Coriolanus would not exist in the play without the valiant deeds that won the name for Caius Martius, and it is from the name Coriolanus that the people of Rome decide to elect him consul. Instead of showing the people his wounds, another signifier of his service to Rome, he is elected on the basis of winning his new surname, strengthening the link between a name and actions.

However, Shakespeare refuses to be satisfied with portraying only a heroic connection between name and actions, and explores a different perspective during Coriolanus's exile. Coriolanus goes to the house of his mortal enemy Aufidius in disguise, and Aufidius is suspicious of the vagabond in his house. He asks for Coriolanus's name, which Coriolanus is reluctant to give because of what it signifies. ' A name unmusical to the Volscians' ears, And harsh in sound to thine (IV: v 58), Coriolanus responds, choosing to postpone giving his name. Coriolanus finally relents, confessing his name and that Aufidius should, witness my surname, Coriolanus (IV: v 67-68), was won from committing great hurt and mischief (IV: v 67), against the Volsces. He continues on that, despite his name symbolizing atrocities against the Volsces, only that name remains (IV: v73). Coriolanus does not want his <https://assignbuster.com/name-brand-the-use-of-names-as-metonymy-for-actions-in-coriolanus/>

name is be a metonymy for his military exploits, and endeavors to break this connection by suggesting that he carries only the name now, not the malice that it represents.

While it seems that Coriolanus succeeds in this goal and wins over Aufidius, ultimately it is revealed that Aufidius merely pretended to disassociate Coriolanus from the violence perpetrated against his countrymen. In the final scene, Aufidius declares Coriolanus a traitor, adding insult to injury by addressing him as Martius. Coriolanus is insulted at being referenced as just Martius, and Aufidius exposes his scorn of the name by responding, Ay, Martius, Caius Martius! Dost thou think I'll grace thee with that robbery, they stol'n name Coriolanus, in Corioles (V: vi 87-89) Aufidius never forgot what the name Coriolanus represented, and uses it as justification to brand him a traitor and kill him. Despite his best efforts to disengage his name from his actions, the bond is so strong that Coriolanus fails.

Coriolanus does not come to a final conclusion about the value of a name representing only the actions of a person. This connection could have saved Coriolanus's host from imprisonment, but also leads to Coriolanus's death, illustrating the ambiguous nature of such an association. Is it fair to say that the host did not deserve to be imprisoned just because he was kind to Coriolanus? Perhaps he was a person of appalling moral character, but the reader is not allowed to explore that hypothesis because the host's name has such an unwavering connection with his kind deeds only. By representing a person's actions only through their name, instead of allowing it to stand for the many facets of a person, only a limited judgment can be

drawn about a person. Coriolanus reinforces that just as you should never judge a book by its cover, you should not judge it by its title either.