

Coriolanus Opposes the Plebs

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The story of C. Marcius Coriolanus, the famous turncoat, was later also identified with the conflict of the orders. When the aristocrats replaced the kings, who had sometimes intervened on behalf of the poor, the result was a debt crisis and open conflict between the patricians and the plebeians. It is difficult to establish the historical truth of the Coriolanus legend. The story of Coriolanus's conflict with the plebeians and his trial is probably an addition to an older story.¹

When word was brought to the people in Rome that the ships had arrived from Sicily laden with corn, a long debate arose among the patricians concerning the disposal of it.² For those among them who were the most reasonable and the greatest friends of the people, having in view the public necessary, advised them to distribute all the corn given by the tyrant among the plebeians, and to sell to them at a low price that which had been purchased with the public funds, pointing out that by these favors more than by any other means the animosity of the poor against the rich would be moderated. On the other hand, those who were more arrogant and more zealous for the oligarchy thought that they ought to use every effort and every means to oppress the plebeians; and they advised making the provisions as costly as possible to them in order that they might through necessity become more moderate and more observant in general of the principles of justice prescribed by the constitution.

One of this oligarchic party was that Marcius, surnamed Coriolanus, who did not, like the rest, deliver his opinion with secrecy and caution, but with so much openness and boldness that many even of the plebeians heard him.³ It seems that, besides the general grievance against them which he shared with the others, he had lately received some private provocations that seemed to justify his hatred of the plebeians.

For when he had stood for the consulship at the last election, in which he had been supported by the patricians, the people had opposed him and would not permit that magistracy to be conferred on him, since his brilliant reputation and daring inclined them to caution, lest he might make some move to overthrow the tribuneship, and they were particularly apprehensive because the whole body of the patricians promoted his interest with a zeal they had never before shown for any other candidate.

Marcius, therefore, being exasperated at this humiliation, and at the same time desirous of restoring the government to its ancient form, not only worked openly himself, as I have

already said, to overthrow the power of the people, but also urged his associates on to the same end. He had about him a large faction of young men of noble birth and of the greatest fortunes, as well as many clients who had attached themselves to him for the sake of the booty to be gained in the wars. Elated by these advantages, he assumed a haughty air, became conspicuous, and attained to the greatest distinction.

And yet, for all this, he did not come to a fortunate end, as shall now be related. The senate having been assembled to consider the matters I have mentioned, and the older senators, according to custom, having delivered their opinions first, only a few of them declaring openly against the populace, when it came to the turn of the younger senators to speak, Marcius asked leave of the consuls to say what he wished; and meeting with loud acclaim and strict attention, he delivered the following harangue against the populace:

“That the populace seceded, after him, not because of necessity and want, but because they were elated by the mischievous hope of destroying your aristocracy and of becoming themselves masters of the commonwealth, I think has become clear to nearly all of you when you observe the advantages which they gained by the accommodation. For they were not content, after they had destroyed the good faith which gave validity to their contracts and had abolished the laws made to secure it, to carry their meddling no farther, but introducing a new magistracy designed to overthrow that of the consuls, they made it sacred and inviolable by law, and have now, unobserved by you, senators, been acquiring a tyrannical power through this newly-enacted law.

“For when their leaders, in their great power putting forward the specious pretence of coming to the aid of such plebeians as are wronged, sack and pillage whatever they please by virtue of that power, and when there is no man, either private citizen or magistrate, who will oppose their lawless deeds for fear of this law, which destroys even our liberty of speech as well as of action by imposing the penalty of death on all who utter a word befitting freemen, what other name ought to be given by sensible men to this domination but that which is the true one and which you would all own to be such, namely, a tyranny? And if we are under the tyranny, not of one man, but of a whole populace, what is the difference? For the effect of both is the same.

“It would have been best, therefore, never to have permitted even the seed of this power to be sown, but rather to have submitted to everything, as the excellent Appius, who foresaw these mischiefs from afar, advised. But if that could not be, we ought now at least with one accord to pluck it up by the roots

¹ It was supposedly after Coriolanus had made many enemies championing the power of the aristocracy that he was banished from Rome; embittered, he allied himself with Rome's enemies, the Volscians.

² The action takes place in 497 BCE, when Rome relieved a grain shortage with several new shipments from Sicily and other markets in Italy.

³ That is, he expressed his opinions openly to the senate, loud enough that his speeches could be heard outside the meeting house, the doors of which were normally kept open.

and cast it out of the city while it is yet weak and easily combated.

“And we are not the first or the only persons to whom this experience has come, senators, but oft-times in the part many who have been reduced to unenviable straits and have failed to take the best counsel in matters of the greatest consequence, since they did not check the beginnings of the evil, have endeavored to prevent its growth. And the repentance of those who are late in beginning to be wise, though inferior to foresight, yet, when viewed in another light, is seen to be no less valuable, since it wipes out the error originally made in ignorance by preventing its consequences.

“But if any of you, while looking upon the actions of the populace as outrageous and believing that they ought to be prevented from making any further mistakes, are nevertheless afraid of seeming to be the first to violate the agreement and transgress the oaths, let them know that, since they will not be the aggressors but will be repelling aggression, and will not be violating the agreement but rather punishing the violators of it, they will not only be guiltless towards the gods, but will also be doing an act of justice while they consult their own interest.

“And let this be a strong argument that it is not you who are taking the first steps to break the agreement and violate treaty, but rather the plebeian element, by not observing the conditions upon which they obtained their return. For, after asking for the tribunician power, not in order to injure the senate, but to secure themselves from being injured by the senate, they no longer employ this power for the purposes they ought or on the terms on which they obtained it, but for the overthrow and destruction of the established government.

“For surely you recall the recent assembly of the people and the harangues there made by their demagogues, what arrogance and unruliness they showed, and how these infatuated men vaunt themselves now, since they have discovered that the whole control of the commonwealth lies in the vote, which they will control, being more numerous than we.

“What, therefore, remains for us to do, now that they have begun to violate the compact and the law, but to repel to attacks of the aggressors, to deprive them justly of what they now unjustly possess, and for the future to put a stop to their craving for ever more and more? And we should return thanks to the gods for not having permitted them, when they had gained an unfair advantage at first, to act after that with moderation, but for having inspired them with this shamelessness and officiousness which have forced you to endeavor both to recover the rights you have lost and to guard with due care those that remain.

“The present opportunity is favorable as no other, if you really intend to begin to act with wisdom, since the greater part of the plebeians are now reduced to dire straits by the famine and the rest cannot hold out for want of money if they find proves scarce and dear. The worst of them and those who were never pleased with the aristocracy will be forced to leave the city, and the more reasonable will be compelled to behave themselves in an orderly manner without giving you any further trouble.

“Keep the provisions, therefore, under guard, and abate nothing of the price of commodities, but pass a vote that they shall now be sold at as high a price as ever. For this you have just grounds and plausible excuses in the ungrateful clamor of the populace to the effect that the scarcity of corn was contrived by you, whereas it was occasioned by their own revolt and the desolation of the country which they caused when they pillaged it just as if it had been the territory of an enemy; and again in the disbursements from the treasury to the men sent to purchase corn, and in many other instances in which you have been wronged by them. By this means we shall also know at last what that grievous treatment is which they are going to inflict upon us if we refuse to gratify the people in everything, as their demagogues threatened in order to frighten us.

“But if you let this opportunity also slip from your grasp, you will often pray for such another. Moreover, if the people should become aware that you desired to overthrow their power but were deterred, they will bear down much harder upon you, looking upon your desire as a proof of enmity and upon your inability to carry it out as evidence of cowardice.”

After this speech of Marcius the opinions of the senators were divided and a great tumult arose among them. For those who from the beginning had opposed the plebeians and submitted to the accommodation against their will, among whom were almost all the youth and the richest and most ambitious of the older senators, some of them resenting the losses sustained in the loans they had made under contract and others their defeat when they sought office, applauded Marcius as a man of spirit and a lover of his country, who advised what was best for the commonwealth.

On the other hand, the senators whose sympathies were with the populace and who set no undue value on riches and thought nothing was or necessary than peace, were offended at his speech and rejected his advice. These maintained that they ought to surpass the humbler citizens, not in violence, but in kindness, and that they ought to regard reasonableness as not unbecoming, but necessary, particularly when it was manifested out of goodwill towards their fellow-citizens; and they declared that the advice of Marcius was madness, not frankness of speech or liberty. But this group was small and weak, and hence was overborne by the more violent party.

The tribunes, seeing this—for they were present in the senate at the invitation of the consuls—cried out and were in great conflict of mind, calling Marcius the pest and bane of the state for uttering malicious words against the populace; and unless the patricians should prevent his design of introducing civil war into the state by punishing him with death or banishment, they said they would do so themselves.

When a still greater tumult arose at these words of the tribunes, particularly on the part of the younger senators, who bore their threats with impatience, Marcius, inspired by these manifestations, now attacked the tribunes with greater arrogance and boldness, saying to them: “Unless you cease disturbing the commonwealth and stirring up the poor by your harangues, I shall no longer oppose you with words, but with deeds.”