What is a Name?

Humans identify, classify, and categorize everything they can grasp. Even if it is only in terms of knowledge, they name individual creatures, plants, and the stars. They even identify themselves, by giving themselves and their children names. One's name is what defines and separates him from everyone else. For some cultures and people, when a name is given, it dictates who the child becomes. They believe that if the child is given a name with a bad meaning, then that child will become a bad person, and vice versa for a child given a name with a good meaning. William Shakespeare often used this belief and created allegorical names for his characters to represent their personalities and future actions within his plays. One play with many allegorical names is his tragedy, *Coriolanus*. Shakespeare uses these names to symbolize what the characters of *Coriolanus*: Coriolanus, Volumnia, The Tribunes, Cominius, Virgilia, and Valeria are in relation to the plot of the play and their connections with each other.

The main character of the tragedy, Caius Marcius Coriolanus, is unusual when it comes to his name. He begins in the play being called Marcius. In Latin the root word *marc* means “marked or separated,” and -*us* is a Latin suffix inferring a singular masculine item (Adams 189). His name marks him as an individual, someone separate from his peers. Marcius, also means war-like (Name Meanings). As a high ranking soldier for the Roman Empire, Marcius begins his part in the play fighting a battle against Rome’s enemy the Corioles. It is a fitting name for someone who is a soldier, and it fits his attitude. His attitude is also very war-like. At every moment, he is ready to attack those who oppose him or who he does not like. During the first riot he attended, after being told that the peasants wanted food, he said, “Hang them! ... would that the nobility lay aside their ruth/ and let me use my sword, I’d make quarry/ with thousands of these quartered slaves” (1.1.190-99). He wanted to kill the common people for petitioning for
food instead of trying to work with them, which demonstrates his war-like attitude. He also proves himself very aggressive on the battlefield. When all of his men turned back to the trenches, Marcius shouted, “Come on! If you you’ll stand fast, we’ll beat them to their wives/ as they us to our trenches. Follow’s!” (1.4.41-3). He urged his men forward, even when they wanted to retreat. He even rushed towards the battle without looking to see if his men were following, and ended up fighting alone. His actions earned him alone a new name, Coriolanus increasing the difference between him and his fellow comrades. Marcius’s aggressive attitude causes most of the turmoil in the play. The citizens dislike him because of his forcefulness, saying “Hang’em!” (1.1.189), whenever they anger him. That anger is the main force behind the plot and is comparable to the meaning of his name.

A change in something belonging to the character in Shakespeare’s plays, be it his name or dress, typically means a change in the character’s personality or position (Crunelle 12). In Coriolanus, Marcius changes from a warrior for Rome fighting Rome’s battles to leaving Rome and joining the Volscian armies to fight against Rome. He first changes when he returns from the war. Coriolanus cannot put aside his belligerent self and be peaceful. He draws a sword against a countryman, which is a crime in Rome (3.1.230). This is the point where he becomes a different person; someone who once fought for Rome now turns his sword against it. Coriolanus becomes a traitor. It is ironic because he took the name of his enemy as a sign of victory, but almost as soon as he took that name, he became Rome’s enemy. The people cast him from Rome, so he went to his old enemy Aufidius with his hat in his hand: “So use it/ that my revengeful services may prove/ as benefits to thee, for I will fight/ against my cankered country…” (4.5.93-6). Coriolanus then goes to Aufidius, the enemies that he had just fended off of Rome, in order to
destroy his homeland. His change of name to Coriolanus correlates with his change of sides in the play.

The name Coriolanus is not a name that can be found in a name dictionary, but if one is looking in Latin it has a meaning nonetheless. Corio is a form of the verb corior meaning “to suddenly attack” (LATdict). This fits Coriolanus because, as already stated, he is very aggressive. He drew his sword suddenly against his countryman (3.1.230). With his temper, he would suddenly attack someone if they made him angry. –Lanus is a suffix in Latin meaning a connection to a place (Adams 189). With this put together, it would read as one who suddenly attacks. This describes Coriolanus because he attacks many people, and when he does not attack, he is attacked: “My lords, when you shall know—as in this rage/ provoked by him…you’ll rejoice/ that he is cut off” (5.6.1142-6). Even when Coriolanus finally chose peace over war, he could not escape that war. Coriolanus’s name translated this way signals not only his personality, but also the plot of choosing war over peace.

There is another fitting way to break down his name’s meaning as well. Another way to read it is by breaking his name down into its smaller syllables. For instance, Cor is a Latin word that means heart (LATdict). This applies to Coriolanus because he is the main character of the play, and it ties in to the extended metaphor of Rome being a body, The Fable of the Belly. When the heart rebels against the rest of the body, there is bound to be turmoil and death in the wake. Iol is a sudden declaration like “hey!” (LATdict). This fits Coriolanus because much of his trouble comes from declarations. The people do not like how he speaks to them, and that is why the people do not like him. Menenius tells the people while they are urging for Coriolanus’s demotion, “Consider further/ That when he speaks not like a citizen/ you find him like a soldier. Do not take/ his rougher accents for malicious sounds…” (3.3.55-8). Menenius is telling the
people that he does not mean to speak bluntly and angrily to them, but he is a soldier so that is how his words come out, harshly and bluntly like the definition of ‘cor.’ These words are part of Coriolanus’s name, and therefore part of his character and plot.

There are two ways to read *anus*, a Latin meaning and one referring to the body. The Latin definition is foolish person (LATdict), which connects with Coriolanus because he goes to his enemy for help, and then dropped them to go back to his original allegiance. He was foolish because he believed that Aufidius is moved as much as he is by his mother’s words: “Now, good Aufidius/ were you in my stead, would you have heard a mother less?” (5.3.191-3). To which Aufidius replies, “I was moved withal” (5.3.194), but aside he says, “Out of that I’ll work/ myself a former fortune” (5.3.201-2). Coriolanus was a fool to believe that his enemy would be a swayed by his mother as he was (5.3.201). He should have known that his mother did not have power over warlike Aufidius.

The second meaning of anus is the English meaning, which according to the Oxford English Dictionary Online is: “The posterior opening of the alimentary canal in animals, through which the excrements are ejected” (OED ONLINE). During the beginning of the tragedy, Menenius gives an extended metaphor that is carried through the whole play, commonly referred to as the fable of the belly: “There was a time when all the body’s members/ rebelled against the belly, thus accused it…The belly answered…with a kind of smile/ which ne’er came from the lungs…” (1.1.94-106). If this is applied to the actual body, it means that there is discomfort pressuring the belly, and it releases a fart since it didn’t come from the lungs. This all applies to Coriolanus because if Rome is thought of as the belly, then he is the discomfort that must be removed (Crunelle 13). Something in the metaphorical belly of Rome upset him, so he attacked it causing quite the disturbance in the belly, making it wish that it never had him. In the end, he
is violently expelled by Aufidius and taken from the body to be buried. Like a fart, he is cast from the body, easing the belly of Rome.

Coriolanus is not the only character with an allegorical name in the text. Another loud character with such a name is Volumnia, Coriolanus’s loud mother. The first part of her name is easily picked out, “volume.” Volume is a word that has French roots, and it has two meanings: a book, and amount such as the amount of loudness in one’s speech (OED ONLINE). For the first definition, a book fits Volumnia because she simply speaks enough to fill volumes. In every scene she appears in, except one, she speaks all the time she is present, taking much of the conversation on herself, and speaking much more than her female compatriots. For example, when the women go to convince Coriolanus to cease his war against Rome, his wife Virgilia spoke four lines. Volumnia took over, speaking a hundred and five lines out of the two hundred and nine lines in the scene, four lines short of half the scene (5.3). She speaks volumes. The second definition applies because of the size of the role she played in Coriolanus’s life. When she first appears, the viewer or reader knows who is in control of their family unit: “[I] was pleased to let/ him seek danger where he was like to find fame. To a/ cruel war I sent him…” (1.3.12-14). By saying this, Volumnia gives one the impression that she makes the decisions for Coriolanus, and she chose that he would become a warrior.

Her voice in Coriolanus’s life is very loud and powerful. For Coriolanus, she is almost a goddess. He kneels before his mother and greets her before even seeing his wife after returning from the war (2.1.170-4). It strikes as unusual. Kneeling is something that one does before their master to show adoration and servitude, yet this grown man gives this to his mother, who, even now, should no longer have such control over him. His wife, Virgilia, does not even get a glance until after he rises. Volumnia is also the one who convinced Coriolanus to cease his attacking
Knapp: 6

against Rome. She was sent after Coriolanus would not listen to Menenius (who Coriolanus viewed as a father) because as Sicinius observed, “He love[s] his mother dearly” (5.4.15). Sicinius knew that he would listen to her if no one else. After Volumnia finishes speaking, Coriolanus cries, “Oh, my mother, mother! Oh!/ You have won a happy victory to Rome” (5.3.85-6). He credits his change of heart only to her, even though his son and wife were there also to convince him. She had the power to change his will. There is one scene, however, where she appears, but does not speak. This scene seems to defy the implications of her name, but it is merely a different aspect of size that she fulfills. At the end, she and the other two women, Valeria and Virgilia, are led in a procession with a Senator shouting, “Behold our Patroness, the life of Rome!/… Repeal him with the welcome of his mother” (5.5.1-4). According to the stage directions for this scene, all three women should be present, yet Volumnia is the only one who is credited with the victory. Her being given this praise suggests, “an acknowledgment of female values” (Luckyj 4). She achieves a sort of god-like status when she re-enters the city, becoming the heroine for the people. Volumnia fulfils the allegory of her name, becoming an ever more substantial character, first for her son and secondly for all of Rome.

Volumnia and Coriolanus are the main characters, but there are several lesser characters that also carry names that have symbolic meaning for their position in the plot. Take, for instance, the tribunes Sicinius and Brutus. Sicinius is a made up name with Latin roots. Sici means to separate or break up (LATdict). This applies to him because he was the one to rile the citizens and separate Coriolanus from Rome. He gave these orders to the citizens, “If I say ‘fine,’ cry ‘fine!’ , if ‘death’ cry ‘death!’” (3.3.17). Sicinius ordered the citizens to follow what he said. He told Coriolanus to go, and they backed him up. Ni in Latin means if…not and unless (LATdict). Sicinius would have succeeded in forever cutting Coriolanus off from Rome, but he
lost his power against Coriolanus when the citizens turned against him saying, “I ever said we were I’ th’ wrong when we/ banished him” (4.6.163-4). When the citizens turned against them, Sicinius could no longer separate Coriolanus from Rome. In this way, Sicinius’s name gives away his role in the play.

Sicinius’s partner is called Brutus. Brutus is also a Latin based name. It sounds to viewers of Shakespeare like the English word brute, which is also Latin based (OED ONLINE). They both mean the same: rough, rude, and dull. As a character, he fulfils this within the play by helping Sicinius incense the citizens against Coriolanus: “Did you perceive/ he did solicit you in free contempt” (2.3.198-9). This is Brutus telling the people that they were taken advantage of by Coriolanus, making them angry enough to go after Coriolanus. He tells the citizens what to do once he has them angry enough to work against Coriolanus: “when you have drawn your number/ repair to the capital” (2.3.253-4). He means for them to gather support and protest in the capital. Brutus does not fight himself, but he is deserving of his name by provoking the people to violence.

Their names have an even greater meaning when they are together, which is all but one of the scenes that they appear in. These two go hand in hand together, separation and senseless violence. They work together. It is almost as if they are twins finishing each other’s sentences: “‘You speak o’ th’ people/ as if you were a god to punish, not/ a man of their infirmity’/ ‘Twere well/ we let the people know’t’” (3.1.83-6). If one did not know that Brutus spoke the first part and Sicinius took over after ‘Twere’, one would think that it was the same sentence. Together, these men strive to separate Coriolanus from Rome forever, but they are foiled. Their power comes from the people. When the people turn violent against Brutus and threaten Sicinius
(5.4.35-40), they are no longer able to create violence or separation as the meanings of their names suggest, and after this point, they are not given any more lines for the rest of the play.

Another man with an allegorical name is Cominius. Cominius means “close at hand” (LATdict). Cominius fulfils the symbolic meaning of his name well. He is always by Coriolanus. During the battle in the first act, Cominius says, “I have/ before-time seen him thus…The shepherd knows not thunder from a tabor/ More than I know the sound of Marcius’s tongue” (1.6.25-6). Cominius is saying that he would know Marcius anywhere and has followed him through bloody wars long enough to know his voice through any noise and his face no matter how obscured by blood. Cominius jumps to defend Coriolanus from the attacks of the tribune: “The deeds of Coriolanus/ should not be uttered feebly” (2.2.82-2). He is right there to defend Coriolanus. He remains loyal to Coriolanus after his exile, promising, “I’ll follow the a month. Devise with thee/ where though shalt rest,/ that thou mayst hear of us/ and we of thee” (4.1.38-40). Cominius is trying to stay close to Coriolanus to be able to help him and his family. He lives up to his name, always ready to help Coriolanus. Even when Coriolanus seems to have turned his back to Rome, Cominius again is ready to defend him, saying, “Who is’t can blame him?” (4.6.112). He is still close to Coriolanus’s side, to support him.

The other two women of the play also have symbolic names. Virgilia, for instance, The first few letters remind one of the beginning of the word “virgin.” Since she is married to Coriolanus and has a child, it is safe to assume that she is not an actual virgin. But, “virgin” can also mean pure and untouched (OED ONLINE). In a story of conflicts, she seems to be the only one that advocates no violence throughout the whole play. She wishes her husband home instead of at war, and at the word of blood from Volumnia, Virgilia replies, “His bloody brow? O Jupiter, no blood!” (1.3.39). She does not want her husband in a dangerous situation. Out of
everyone, she seems to be the only one incapable of violence. When conflict beckons her, instead of facing it she backs down: “Give me excuse, good madam. I will obey/ you in everything hereafter” (1.3.103-4). She backs down, offering obedience instead of trying to get her way by force. It is, perhaps, because she never fights back that Coriolanus refers to her as his, “gracious silence” (2.1.175). If she never fights back, no one will ever hear her voice. It may also account for the few lines she has. She does not even attempt to convince her husband to lay down his arms. However, she apparently also has the ability to cleanse Coriolanus of his promise to:

“stand/ as if a man were author of himself/ and knew no other kin” (5.2.35-8). Even though he made up his mind not to hear the pleading of his wife and mother, after a kiss from his wife, he is more willing to listen, immediately afterward he supplicates himself to his mother (5.3.45-50). Virgilia lives up to her name. She has never been tainted by violence and has some ability to clear it from other people as well.

Her compatriot, Valeria also has an allegorical name, even though her part is small. Valer in Latin means strong (LATdict). Even in English, valor is associated with strength (OED ONLINE). She appears in two scenes, and in both she lives up to it. Valeria is not like the gentile housewife that Virgilia is. Instead of sitting at home sewing, she goes out visiting as she tries to convince Virgilia to do (1.3.77-8). She states her philosophy towards women at home after Virgilia refuses to accompany her: “You would be another Penelope. Yet they/ say all the yarn she spun in Ulysses’ absence did but/ fill Ithica full of moths” (1.3.83-5). All the house work Penelope did was no good. She meant to tell her friend that it would not matter if she did not finish her housework. Valeria finds no use for house craft when her husband is gone for so long from home. She is strong, not needing a man to go out. Coriolanus acknowledges her strength too: “The moon of Rome, chaste as the icicle/ That’s curded by the frost from purest snow/ and
hangs in Dian’s temple” (5.3.64-9). He compares her to the cold and hard ice, strong and sharp enough to cut skin. She is also compared to the moon, alone and aloof. According to Coriolanus, she is untouchable, strong enough to stand on her own.

It is also interesting to note the endings of all their names also have meaning. –Us, like at the end of all of the male names, for example: Coriolanus, Marcius, Brutus, and so on, is Latin for singular, male objects (Adams 189). This is not surprising, since they are male and there is only one person with each name, but the female names end in –ia which is a plural, feminine ending (Adams 189). By having these endings, Shakespeare may have been saying that the story was about individual men, and treating the women as epitomes of womanly characteristics. Using the Latin, Virgilia and Valeria are purity and strength. Volumnia is the one that keeps them all from being virtues. She is loudness, but she is used to divert a war against Rome by her son. Under those circumstances talkativeness is useful, and in this case a virtue. When they are presented for victory, they are presented as epitomes for Rome (5.5). At this point, it is like the women are no longer women, but goddesses for Rome’s safety, but, “at the moment in which the appearance of these values not in [the women] but in her son can only mean his death” (Luckyj 4). The virtues of these women are acceptable for all women, hence the plural feminine ending, but at the same time, these are not acceptable for men. Coriolanus fell into these womanly characteristics by showing mercy to those that offended him, and because of it, he died. He gave up masculine war for feminine peace. The women, upholding the virtues they were meant to, shared the fate of becoming heroines for Rome, while the men each kept the course their names describe had a different ending in more or less the same positions they started in, minus one Corilanus.
The characters of Coriolanus have symbolic names pertaining to their roles in the plot. Coriolanus is supposed to be a warrior, so both his names have to do with war and attacking. His mother, Volumnia, has a loud voice through the play as her name suggests. Cominius is a loyal friend, always ready to back Coriolanus up. Brutus and Sicinius walk hand in hand in violence and separation, but they fail, just like the Latin bits of their names. Shakespeare was one who liked to play with words, including names. Often, his names were allegorical, connecting the characters’ fate to the plot. A name is important to its holder. It classifies who one is and what they are. This works for both the characters of Coriolanus and people of the world today.
Works Cited


