

A most compelling quality of Shakespeare's tragedies is their fine line between *what if* or *if only*. In *Coriolanus* we meet Caius Marcius, a successful, proud and unyielding Roman general. Overwhelming victory over the enemy city Corioli lends him the honorific name "Coriolanus," and a springboard for election by the Roman Senate, to the Consulship. Quickly unpopular, he is contemptuous of the people's wartime suffering, and once overthrown, he's banished from the city. He enlists Aufidius, a bitter enemy from the subjugated Volscians, with an offer to "fight against my canker'd country with the spleen of all the under fiends."

Leading Aufidius' force as far as the gates of the city, a visit from Coriolanus's mother, wife and son convinces him to seek peace instead. The Volscians, disappointed at what they see as his betrayal, assassinate him. Coriolanus's story is told in several histories and adaptations, including an impressive 2011 movie adaptation by Ralph Feinnes, and historically, by German playwright Heinrich von Collin, in 1801. Beethoven's overture to Collin's tragedy, composed a few years after the play's debut, seethes with Coriolanus's anger and pride, giving way only to a tender and melancholy secondary theme, perhaps characterizing Virgilia, Coriolanus's sensitive and peace-making wife.