

Note

CORIOLANUS'S CUSHIONS

Over a third of all Shakespeare's cushions appear in this distinctly unpadded play. Elsewhere, cushions are mentioned nine times as props. Cushions are a sign of status: provided for the Sexton when he judges Borachio, brought in by officers for the court of Elsinore, part of Gremio's offer for Bianca, and snatched up as an improvised crown by Falstaff. They give ease: Fidele's cheek rests on one, Hermia and Helena sit together on one to sew, Brutus's officers sleep on them, and Lear is invited to do so. Finally, they appear as a trick pregnancy, used by Doll Tearsheet.

In *Coriolanus*, cushions also appear as status symbols awarded to rulers: officers lay them out for the Senators, Coriolanus would deny them to tribunes, and Aufidius uses them as a symbol of how Coriolanus is at a loss in peacetime. Cushions also, however, appear in three passages in which their status is degraded. The spoil of fleeing soldiers is damned as tawdry by Coriolanus ('Cushions, leaden spoons, /Irons of a doit'), Menenius taunts the tribunes by saying that their beards could not even stuff a 'bother's cushion' or ass's saddle, and Volumnia kneels before her son 'with no softer cushion than the flint' (I.v.5–6, II.i.85–6, V.iii.53).

Cushions are a quick and easy way to style a room, bringing a pop of colour to a room and

giving it a cosy feel. Early modern inventories include many expensive cushions which do the former job, establishing their owner's status and taste (the sorts which Gremio boasts of owning, of Turkey work with pearls).¹ The Arden edition's comment on the unusual plentitude of cushions in the play envisages this type.² In practice, however, it is likely that the more ubiquitous (and—thinking of those pearls—more comfortable) sort of cushions would be buffers for elbows, knees, and buttocks, botched up at home from scraps of leftover cloth, and largely omitted from inventories.

Miranda Thomas calls the play's multiple gestures of kneeling passive-aggressive, pointing to the patrician advice to Coriolanus to kneel apparently humbly before the citizens, the preparatory embassies to him by the besieged Romans (imagined or undertaken), and the sourly competitive moments of kneeling by mother and son, in the final embassy.³ Her conclusion might be extended to the play's humbler cushions: one of Shakespeare's premier props is aggressively denuded of value and comfort.

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¹ C. Richardson, *Domestic Life and Domestic Tragedy in Early Modern England: The Material Life of the Household* (Manchester, 2006), 66, 88–90, 102, 194, 208.

² W. Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, ed. P. Holland (London: 2014), 422.

³ M. Thomas, *Shakespeare's Body Language: Shaming Gestures and Gender Politics on the Renaissance Stage* (London, 2020), 161–80.