
Appropriated Shakespeare: Sensation, Politicization, and De(con)struction

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How do you disappoint me, Shakespeare? Let me count the ways: long-winded, out of date, given to obsolete words, no clear message. So let us cut, adapt, sensationalize, politicize, deconstruct – but always make relevant, because Shakespeare’s texts are for the most part just too much products of their time. Probably the play which has undergone the most surgery is *Coriolanus*, second in length after *Hamlet* and 45 lines longer than *Cymbeline*. Cutting is understandable but adaptation is odd because, as T. S. Eliot noted in 1919, it “may not be as ‘interesting’ as *Hamlet*, but it is, with *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare’s most assured artistic success.”¹ Still, the play’s first recorded performance is an adaptation, and the roster of adapters is long indeed. Over a span of more than 300 years, Nahum Tate, John Dennis, Thomas Sheridan, John Philip Kemble, René-Louis Piachaud, Bertolt Brecht and Robert Lepage adapted it, and in the last fifteen years certain critics have interpreted it in a bizarre manner.² At the root of this impulse is the feeling that actors cannot do justice to the Shakespearean concept, or that Shakespeare had no concept, or that audiences cannot connect with his play, and therefore must have something from the immediate world outside the theater to connect it with. No adapter seems to have realized that the contemporary world he was adapting the play to must itself rapidly become irrelevant.

The first adapter, Nahum Tate, retitled *Coriolanus* as *The Ingratitude of a Commonwealth*, which was acted in London in 1681 or 1682. He regarded Shakespeare's play as a vehicle for contemporary politics: James, duke of York, resembled Coriolanus, having in 1681 been the subject of an attempted exclusion from the throne. (This is the 1 James who became King James II of Great Britain in 1685.) The opposition politician was the earl of Shaftesbury, who was promoting for next king the protestant James, earl of Monmouth, Charles II's illegitimate son. Shaftesbury appears in Tate's play as Nigradius, a new character, who schemes with Aufidius to bring down Coriolanus, or James, duke of York.

Tate cut Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* by almost a third, kept only 1,274 of Shakespeare's lines, and wrote a completely new last act.³ In that act, Virgilia, Coriolanus' wife, learns from a letter from Menenius Agrippa that Nigradius is plotting something against her husband, so she goes to Corioles to rescue him. Little does she know that Aufidius has been in love with her for many years. Coriolanus, who has failed to take Rome, appears before the lords of Corioles and is accused of being a traitor; he explodes with anger, is wounded by the conspirators, and hurts Aufidius in the scuffling. A report about a riot of rival legions empties the council chamber, and Aufidius, bloody as he had desired, believes he can now rape Virgilia before her husband's eyes. But she has inflicted a wound on herself, and the sight of that kills Aufidius. This might be enough horror for most, but there is more: Nigradius has torn Young Martius limb from limb, thrown him at Volumnia, and murdered Menenius. Understandably Volumnia enters "*Distracted*" and imagines herself in Elysium, able to wrench Jupiter's lightning-bolt from his grasp – actually, it is a pike she seizes from a guard, which she kills Nigradius with. Coriolanus dies "grasping in each Arm" his wife and son – a most edifying tableau of family values. Tate combines his didactic ending – all of the villains get poetic justice – with his tabloid idea of deeply moving tragedy.

Other British adapters of *Coriolanus* followed: John Dennis in 1720 (*The Invader of His Country*), Thomas Sheridan in 1749 (*Coriolanus: Or, The Roman Matron*), and John Philip Kemble in 1789 (with the same title as Sheridan's). While Tate's and Dennis' versions failed, Sheridan's held the boards for thirty years and Kemble's did so for close to a century. The Kemble adaptation did so well because it was fitted to the late 18th- and early 19th-century fear of revolution, especially a mob-driven revolution such as happened in the 1790s in France. It was also fitted to Britain's early nineteenth-century hero, the duke of Wellington, who won at Waterloo in 1815.

With the demise of Kemble's version in the 1870s, English-speaking adaptations of Shakespeare went out of vogue; the 20th-century adapters are almost all German or French. One such adaptation took advantage of the rancorous political division in France when the Radical Socialists came to power under Camille Chautemps in the 1930s. The party was racked by the "Stavisky Affair," a scandal over huge quantities

of worthless bonds sold by Serge Stavisky, which came to light in December 1933, and involved highly placed members of the Chautemps government. The rightists forced Chautemps to resign, and his successor, Edouard Daladier, used force to suppress violent street riots on 6-7 Feb. 1934. The Radical Socialist party ended up discredited. Such was the backdrop to – perhaps the opportunity for – the riotous Comédie Française production of *Coriolan* in 1933-34.

Not that *Coriolanus* was new to France: in April 1910 it had appeared at the Paris Odéon, directed by Joubert, and some of its cast appeared in the 1933 production; and *Coriolan*, probably Shakespeare's play, had played on 29 July 1928 at the Théâtre-Antique in Orange. Neither production seems to have aroused any unusual reaction.

The 1933 Paris production opened on 9 December under the direction of Emile Fabre, using the translation of René-Louis Piachaud, who considered the play a regular classical tragedy, like Corneille's. He saw *Coriolanus* as "the misunderstood hero, the individual against the many," and he was biased against the plebeians ("dear little people") and the tribunes ("unscrupulous"). He cut three scenes and a number of speeches, and he compressed 4.4 and 4.5, 5.2 and 5.3, and 5.4 and 5.5 into single scenes. The cast totaled about 231, with a Roman mob of 92, and scrupulous attention was given to the crowd work. Alexandre played *Coriolan*, Colonna Romano was *Volumnie*, Jean Hervé was *Aufidius*, and Léon Bernard was *Menenius*. The production ran smoothly at first, though several parliamentary Deputies announced they would question the government about it because the audience in December "began wildly applauding passages . . . in which Galus [i.e., Caius] Marcius excoriates the fatuousness of the Roman mob and rails against the stupidities of Roman democracy."⁴ Axelrad has claimed the production was intended "as a signal for the abortive fascist coup," but offered no proof.⁵ Actually, the trouble began at the 6 and 17 Jan. 1934 performances, when the Chautemps government was under stress from the Stavisky financial scandal. "On 6 January supporters in the house of both Right and Left interrupted the play with partisan shouts and applause or derision. On 17 January scuffles occurred." The main hostility and approval were a reaction to the opening scenes of the play. Pandemonium broke out on 17 January, and many of the spectators began fighting among themselves; the curtain had to be rung down repeatedly.

When Edouard Daladier, another radical socialist, who had taken over the government on 28 January, appointed the Chief of Police as director of the Comédie-Française in Fabre's place (3 February), it led to protests at the 4 February performance; Fabre got his post back the next day. Daladier resigned on 7 February over the continuing scandal, and a coalition government was put in. More violent reaction took place on 20 February, evidently at the lines which derided public men, some of which were Piachaud's expansions of the English text.⁶ After a brief suspension in early March, the production, which recommenced on 11 March but changed its lead player from Alexandre to Jean Hervé, continued well into the summer of 1934.

Today the verdict is that Fabre's *Coriolan* was somewhat old-fashioned with a noble hero in the Kemble mold, and was quite atypically taken as a fascist manifesto by socialists and as a condemnation of socialists by right-wingers. *Coriolanus* was banned on the Paris stage, but Piachaud's text was played again on 21 November 1956 and 16 March 1965 without trouble. The 1933-34 *Coriolan* had a set with stairs, platforms, and brightly colored vistas of the Forum. During his early success, *Coriolanus* appeared at the top of the set; after his decline, below (unidentified newspaper cutting, 11 January 1934). The cast ran to 231, a figure of Kembleian proportions.⁷

The Bertolt Brecht adaptation of *Coriolanus* was done mostly in 1951-2, but never quite finished, at least by Brecht. He sought to introduce Hegelian dialectic into the play, only to realize later that *Coriolanus* is already dialectical and essentially "epic theater."⁸ Fifty years later Wilhelm Hortmann called it "brainwashing and dissection." Hortmann explains that Brecht had contempt for the corpus of great drama, considering it only raw "material" for transformation. The bourgeois who had watched the great plays of the past were under "cultured self-hypnosis."⁹ Brecht set himself to write a new *Coriolanus* with Marx on one side and Shakespeare on the other. The plebeians of the play needed names and got them (seventeen in all), just as the leading senators in Shakespeare's play have names. The crafty, foxy tribunes become "politically conscious people's representatives," and Volumnia at the end sides with Rome, whose citizens reject her son. And *Coriolanus*? Brecht turned him into a "specialist" in combat whose time had passed – a mortal danger to a state that urgently needed to solve foodsupply

problems. The Romans can manage without him, as the plebeians and even Volumnia believe. Indeed, when Coriolanus threatens Rome with a Volscian army at his back, he sees smoke rising from the city and asks what it is. Volumnia replies that it is rising from the smithies and forges, where weapons are being made that will arm the Romans and allow them to engage the Volscians in battle. Hence not only is Coriolanus dispensable, but so also is his mother, whose plea to him to spare Rome is only a debate over what will happen to the aristocrats. When Coriolanus yields to his mother's pleas, he yields as a patrician, not as a Roman or son. Brecht's Rome can take care of itself; it is aided even by the general Cominius, Coriolanus' former friend. After the Volscians kill Coriolanus, Volumnia and Virgilia appear before the people's council to ask if they can wear mourning clothes for ten months. They are summarily denied; there is to be no memorial to Coriolanus and no tragedy.

The Brechtian *Coriolan* is short and didactic in the post-war Marxist mode: warmongers are dangerous pests, aristocrats are ineffective and overprivileged, people's representatives are efficient and admirable, and the common people, set free from upper-class rule, are extremely intelligent and resourceful. Brecht, however, died in 1956, and so the Berliner Ensemble's directors, Manfred Wekworth and Joachim Tenschert, completed the play for production in 1960, putting it on in Frankfurt in 1962. Yet it was still considered too sketchy and preachy, and so Wekworth and Tenschert reworked it in 1964 to reduce the importance of Brecht's idealized blue-collar class. When the production arrived at the Old Vic in London in 1965, Coriolanus was played by Ekkehard Schall as close to mad. The reviewers praised the battle scenes in Act 1 lavishly, and rightly so, because adapters normally get rid of them entirely. Kenneth Tynan described them as "waves of soldiers clashing in the stylised manner of Chinese opera, knees akimbo and swords maniacally brandished. As they part, the mortally wounded slowly spin and fall."¹⁰ Brecht had gotten rid of Coriolanus' enormous Elizabethan respect for his mother – he is shocked in Shakespeare's play to see her kneel before him – but Wekworth and Tenschert had Helen Weigel (Volumnia) knock her head three times on the ground in front of Coriolanus.

It was surely surprising to find that in 1993 the adapters were still at work on *Coriolanus*, even though adaptation had become a very

suspect idea after the early 1960s. Respect for Shakespeare's texts had grown in those thirty years, with stage histories generally slighting or ridiculing historical adaptations. The verb "Tateified" had been invented to describe the sensational operations of Tate on several Shakespeare texts. Nevertheless, the Nottingham Playhouse imported a French-Canadian adaptation of the play by Michel Garneau of the Théâtre Repère and played it in Quebecois French. Few in the English Midlands could have followed the dialogue, despite the English subtitles, or even have been able to see the play. That was because the director, Robert Lepage, from the Théâtre Manège in France, had reduced the stage to a 4 foot by 15 foot cinema screen, a kind of peephole cut into a black screen, and a television station on stage.¹¹ The 28-member cast required for a full production of the play was also reduced to just ten actors, and the text was shortened to two hours' playing time. The idea was that a contemporary Rome would be full of "PR and effective self-presentation; an inside world of spoilt celebrities, narcissistic luminaries, and fixers with agendas," according to *The Times* on 26 November 1993. Menenius narrated his belly-fable on television to citizens who were off stage, represented only by "noises off." Volumnia, Virgilia, and Valeria wore negligees for the sewing scene. Military puppets fought the battle for Corioles; Martius and Aufidius wrestled erotically, seen in an angled mirror; the tribunes watched Coriolanus' triumphal entry into Rome on television and later plotted to ruin him by telephone; Martius was banished during a television talk show, and he gave in to his mother in a couple of filmic frames in which "a hand descended from a long black dress contemptuously to rumple his hair," again according to *The Times*. Indeed, Volumnia was in love with her son; she was played as "outrageous, a glamorous granny in a beehive hairdo who incestuously licks her son's face after he triumphs . . . her baleful yells and arrogant smirks" were tremendous. Aufidius' homosexual partner shot Coriolanus to death in a fit of jealous rage. For reviewer Michael Billington of *The Guardian*, director Lepage had indulged himself in "deconstructionist chic," or more accurately, "deconstructionist cheek."

This production, which originated in Montreal in 1993, certainly took only the barest hints from Shakespeare's play and blew them out of all proportion, while ignoring its major themes entirely. True, Volumnia does say, "If my son were my husband" in 1.3, and Aufidius also says, "I

lov'd the maid I married; never man / Sigh'd truer breath; but that I see thee [Coriolanus] here, / Thou noble thing, more dances my rapt heart / Than when I first my wedded mistress saw / Bestride my threshold" (4.6.115-19). Here "deconstruction" seems to mean "trivialization and sensation," and Lepage may be compared with Nahum Tate in this regard.

To return to Brecht's version, as worked over by Wekworth and Tenschert a second time, we can categorize it as an attack on militarism and an exaltation of the working class; and though its hour came and went, its shadow lingered. By the 1990s, Coriolanus as *enfant terrible* became the British norm; by 2000 Ralph Fiennes was playing the hero as immature, psychotic, insecure, hollow, petulant, infantile, and lethal.¹² In fact, he had ceased to be a hero at all, his good points – truthfulness, fidelity, excellence, and self-sacrifice – stripped away to fit the post-war Marxist agenda. That agenda has as its watchword anti-militarism and anti-heroism. It is doubtless a commonplace to suggest that Shakespeare never created a tragic hero without a sense of potential greatness wasted by some weakness, which in the end brings him to precipitate death. (Some deaths – Antony's and Coriolanus's, for example – occur at a point some time past the protagonist's peak of success.) And yet we must continue to make the point: no largeness of soul, no admirable moments, mean no tragedy. And to watch a hero end in premature death is to teach us far more about the human condition than any adapter of Shakespeare can by adding "relevance."

As noted earlier, the motive for reducing Shakespeare in all these ways is to be found in a disheartened feeling about the play and the desire to make the audience feel the taste of its own time. Anyone looking back at the dates when the cuts on *Coriolanus* were committed will find that Tate (1681), Dennis (1712), Sheridan (1749), Kemble (1789), Piachaud (1933), Brecht (1950), and Lepage (1993) were all afraid that Shakespeare would not stand up politically in their times. What they all thought was needed was a new adaptation that would sell to a public excited by politics, even in need of a change of politics, and, most recently, by sex and the media. Needless to say, all of them failed to improve on Shakespeare, who did not write polemical plays, and all but Sheridan and Kemble failed to achieve more than a few performances.

It may be maintained that after all, a theater audience can walk out – and they did, often enough – but also that a production that takes a

fillet knife to Shakespeare's play usurps the resources and energy required for a careful production. We may grant that the adapter's aim is not really destruction, but redirecting of the Shakespearean energy; yet as every good critic knows, the real task is to release the energy of the Shakespeare texts. If he is lengthy and occasionally tedious, as he is when Menenius berates the tribunes or when Coriolanus overexplains his banishment and resentment to Aufidius, then we acknowledge that and cut. However, we build from the effective scenes a satisfying account of what Shakespeare set out to accomplish, as far as we can know this, and thus instruct adapters and directors in what matters in his plays and let the unsatisfactory parts pass in silence.

Notes

1. Eliot, p. 91. However, Eliot's observation had been anticipated fifty years earlier by Heinrich Viehoff in "Shakespeare's Coriolan." *Jahrbuch der Deutschen Shakespeare-Gesellschaft* 4 (1869), pp. 41-61.
2. For example, Bache and Loggins alleged that Coriolanus does not deserve his title; he was not wounded in Corioles, but "tickled his nose with speargrass to make it bleed, and then he beslobbered himself with his own blood" (pp. 117-34). Equally bizarrely, Jonathan Goldberg alleged that "the social processes of the play are insistently about evacuation (banishment) and entrance," and hence the significance of the last four letters of Coriolanus' name (pp. 260-71). Goldberg evidently did not know that the *-anus* ending was common among important Romans, including Sejanus, Scipio Aemilianus, Martianus Minneus Felix Capella, and Marcus Ulpius Traianus. Moreover, *OED* has no instance of "anus" before 1658.
3. McGugan, p. xxviii, 131-4.
4. Warren, p. 375.
5. Axelrad, p. 53.
6. Dromey, pp. 94, 98, 104, 105, 112, 121, 124, 126, 131, 135-6, 138, 142; Dawson, p. 206. I am indebted to Dr. Dromey (now Dr. Chaffee) for her kindness in sending me her dissertation.
7. Londré, pp. 119-32.
8. Dort, pp. 69-71.
9. Hortmann, pp. 81-6.
10. Tynan, pp. 161-62.
11. A photograph of the set may be found in John Ripley, *Coriolanus on Stage in England and America*, 1609-1994. Madison, NJ: Associated Univ. Presses (1998), p. 330.
12. This account of the 2000 Almeida Theater's production at the Gainsborough Studios, London, is compiled from the following reviewers: Nicolas de Jongh, *Evening Standard*; Alastair Macaulay, *Financial Times*; Benedict Nightingale, *The Times*; Charles Spencer, *Daily Telegraph* (all 15 June); Michael Coveney, *Daily Mail*; Mark Jagasia, *Express*; Paul Taylor, *Independent* (all 16 June); Georgina Brown, *Mail on Sunday*; Susannah Clapp, *Observer*; John Gross, *Sunday Telegraph*; John Peter, *Sunday Times* (all 18 June); Sam Marlowe, *What's On*; Kate Stratton, *Time Out* (both 21 June); Alan C. Dessen, *Rescripting Shakespeare*, pp. 19, 25.

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