CHAPTER VI

CORIOLAN

Of all the adaptations tackled by Brecht in Berlin his version of Shakespeare's Coriolanus provoked the most complex responses, raising as many questions as it answered. Although he proposed a new handling of Shakespeare's play as early as April 1951, he had not completed the text on his death over five years later. In the published adaptation the battle scenes (Shakespeare, 1, 4–10) are represented by the classic Tieck translation which Brecht had intended to replace by a single scene to be written while the rehearsals were actually in progress. This lacuna is not in itself a serious impairment, but it does draw attention to the absence of a factor that was of particular importance to Brecht as playwright and producer, namely the transposition of the potential of a text into actual and unique performance on the stage. In the Programmheft accompanying the first Berliner Ensemble production eight years after Brecht's death (first night 25 September 1964) the audience is told quite straightforwardly that Brecht's Coriolan lacked 'jene wesentliche letzte Phase des Arbeitsprozesses, in dem die Dramaturgie einer praktischen Kontrolle unterzogen, Fabel- und Figurenführung vom Regisseur gemeinsam mit dem an der Aufführung arbeitenden Kollektiv — von Darstellern, vom Bühnenbildner, Komponisten und den anderen künstlerischen Mitarbeitern — erprobt, durch Vorschläge bereichert und weiterentwickelt wird'. The adaptor becomes the adapted one; a reviewer, with Brecht's text open in his lap, was startled by the contrast with the earlier Frankfurt production that had used the published version: 'Was da zu lesen stand, konnte nur mit Mühe und durch dauerndes Vor- und Zurückblättern zu dem, was ich sah und hörte, in Verbindung gebracht werden; ... die Abweichungen Brechts vom Shakespeare-Text sind nicht zahlreicher als die (oft wieder näher an Shakespeare heranführenden) Abweichungen der Brecht-Bearbeiter vom Brecht-Text. Es ist ein ganz neues Stück entstanden, das mit dem, das 1962 in Frankfurt aufgeführt worden ist, kaum mehr etwas zu tun hat.'¹

In this same year of the Ensemble production Günter Grass called in question the whole basis of Brecht's ideological position with regard to the adaptation in a talk entitled Vor- und Nachgeschichte der Tragödie des Coriolanus von Livius und Plutarch über Shakespeare bis zu Brecht und mir.² This iconoclastic demolition of Brecht's supposed ideals is a lively reassessment of the theme and an idiosyncratic — yet partly justified — unmasking of the aesthete Brecht intent on creating a reflection of life on the stage while the living are trampled down outside the walls of his theatre: 'In die Zeit der
Bearbeitung fällt das fatale Datum: Der siebzehnte Juni. Während sich Brecht, von Livius gestützt, den Kopf zerbrach, wie er Shakespeares nur mit Knüppeln bestückte Plebejer zu Beginn des Aufstandes schlagkräftiger bewaffnen könnte, erhoben sich, ungeprobt und unbewaffnet, die Bauarbeiter der Stalinallee, um gegen die erhöhten Normen zu protestieren, wie dazumal die Plebejer gegen den unerschwinglichen Kornpreis. The provocative outcome of Grass's speculations was his play Die Plebejer proben den Aufstand; in it he establishes an unresolved tension between Brecht's declared bias in adapting Coriolanus and the notorious ambiguity of his reaction in June 1953 when the East Berlin workers' uprising took place on his doorstep. (Needless to say, he was not rehearsing Coriolan at the time, but Erwin Strittmatter's Katzgraben.)

However, though Brecht's Coriolan remains open-ended into the future, Shakespeare's play too is not really a conclusive source, but heavily dependent on the account of the Graeco-Roman chronicler Plutarch, who in his turn was indebted to the succinct Livy and a wordier Dionysius of Halicarnassus. Indeed, these historians themselves handed on unauthenticated material of a semi-legendary nature: the figure and exploits of Coriolanus were shrouded in the uncertain events connecting the expulsion of the Tarquin rulers from Rome and the establishment of the young republic (c. 500 B.C.). Such imprecision naturally allows great latitude to the dramatist (who is thus not exposed to the pedantic charge of falsifying history) both in the marshalling and arranging of facts to serve his purpose and in the interpretation of motive and event. In this respect Brecht is to be accused of despotic manipulation of Shakespeare's play only to the extent that the latter can be reprehended for having plundered Plutarch in his search for dramatic material. The shafts of insight of historians and dramatists that have illuminated Coriolanus from several angles make him into an enigmatic figure. This chapter will centre on the interplay of dramatic imagination between Shakespeare and Brecht which at some points may be elucidated by the perspective of the ancient chroniclers or that of the Berliner Ensemble.

A comparison of Coriolanus and Plutarch's Life of Martius Coriolanus (in the translation by North that Shakespeare knew) quickly reveals how the Elizabethan kept close to the guide-lines of his source for the major sweep of the action as it moves through successive phases: opening unrest in Rome followed by the campaign against the Volscians and the capture of Corioli; the victorious Coriolanus standing for Consul, but needing the votes of the multitude he scorns; his opposition to the tribunes and to the distribution of cheap corn, arousing the anger and hostility of the people; his swift trial and banishment; the sudden and unexpected volte-face that allies him with the Volscian leader Tullus Aufidius; his march to the gates of Rome and the embassy of women sent to plead with him; his surrender to his mother's entreaties and withdrawal from Rome; his death at the hands of the Volscians. Shakespeare, writing drama not history, elaborated the story-line with extra scenes and features that emphasized the personal and individual situation in a
'historical' context, and gave intuitive aesthetic coherence to his ready-made theme. Such elements are Coriolanus's wife receiving the visit of Valeria and the episode with his bellicose young son; the intensification of the personal rivalry with Aufidius and the latter's disclosure of his motives to his soldiers; the meeting of the Volscian and the Roman informer; the implication that the tribunes manipulated the trial and the voting out of spite and animosity; Coriolanus's reluctance to stand for Consul and his even greater aversion to complying with the traditional forms; the early introduction of Volumnia to urge him to placate the people; Coriolanus's subsequent anger against all the Romans including the 'dastard nobles'; his death incurred through the 'ungovernable violence' of his speech to the Volscians (while in Plutarch Aufidius has him cut down before he can defend himself with eloquence).

These deviations from the source all add greatly to the individualization of the drama, shifting the centre of force from the historical record to the interplay of human personalities. To make the grand simplicity of his tragic sweep even more effective Shakespeare omitted the plebeians' secession to the Mons Sacer and the social grievances leading up to it, together with the consequent granting of tribunes to represent the people; he simply has Martius announce in the opening scene that two of them will be Brutus and Sicinius — an inaccurate use of the sources, but at once identifying a pair of the main protagonists for us. Nor does Shakespeare mention the enforced colonization of the recently plague-ridden town of Vellitrae and the resulting hatred of the people when Martius woos their votes. These are exclusions that greatly strengthen the structure of the tragedy by concentrating the energy of motivation into few but powerful moments.

Notes to an early version of his adaptation show that Brecht initially intended to keep close to the accounts of the legend in order to be more credible in the interpreting of it; this meant starting the plot at an earlier point than Shakespeare had done, namely with the secession.³ The original conception, with the curve of the play progressing from event to event, would in its chronicle flow have been congenial to Brecht's interest in the process of action, the 'Spannung auf den Gang'. Although the early division of his version into three acts comprising thirteen scenes gave way finally to Shakespeare's five-act shape, and the secession theme was also dropped, Brecht stuck firmly to his interpretation of the play in political terms, as his summary shows:

Brutus und anderseits über den reaktionären Flügel unter Coriolan. So weit er diese Dinge darstellt, ist er die absolut notwendige und logische und auch die historisch tatsächliche Schlußfolgerung aus Revolution und Gegenrevolution.4

In keeping with such a reading he asserted that any private action could only be admitted if it fitted into the overall political frame. This meant that Brecht had to re-think the function and motivation of many characters, especially Volumnia.

The stress laid by many commentators on Shakespeare’s preoccupation with ‘dramatic art’ and ‘human nature’ per se seems to point to a vast gap between Shakespeare and Brecht. Dover Wilson claims that the central theme is ‘not politics or fighting, but Nature, or if you will human-kindness, a leit-motif of all his last plays’. In Coriolanus, as in his other plays, Shakespeare is interested in dramatic art and nothing else. If, therefore, in reshaping his source material, he seems to tilt the balance here in favour of the patricians or there in favour of the plebs, he does so for no other purpose than to keep his tragedy moving upon an even keel or to give a character an opportunity for an interesting speech. Yet Hazlitt, in his Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays, had been quite vehement about the political ‘message’ of Coriolanus: ‘Any one who studies it may save himself the trouble of reading Burke’s Reflections or Paine’s Rights of Man or the Debates in both Houses of Parliament since the French Revolution or our own. The arguments for and against aristocracy or democracy, on the privileges of the few and the claims of the many, on liberty and slavery, power and the abuse of it, peace and war, are here very ably handled, with the spirit of a poet and the acuteness of a philosopher.’ More recently D. J. Enright has maintained that Coriolanus embodies ‘certain qualities of an intellectual debate’ and is political in so far as the Rome here portrayed is peopled by factions. But a more accurate analysis of what Shakespeare was doing in Coriolanus is given by a critic concerned with the political aspect:

Shakespeare being Shakespeare, his political characters interest us also as private persons and have an interior life of their own, but they are essentially political characters ...

Coriolanus presents the aristocrat in a vain effort to come to terms with the common man...

Shakespeare presented in 1609, without malice or favour, a Roman aristocrat who despised the electorate. Shakespeare was not primarily interested in the merits of aristocracy or democracy as a form of government. He was interested in Coriolanus as an individual who happened to be confronted with a political situation which arises in every period and remains with us today.
nothing is arbitrary, no man can be abstracted as an autonomous being from the social network of the *polis*. Thus the re-working of *Coriolanus* amounted to an investigation of the events of the hero's life in the context of the community, an undertaking justified for Brecht by the shifting perspective of each historical epoch that inevitably alters the attitude to and understanding of the past:

Ich glaube nicht, daß die neue Fragestellung Shakespeare davon abgehalten hätte, einen 'Coriolan' zu schreiben.
Ich glaube, er hätte ungefähr in der Weise, wie wir es taten, dem Geist der Zeit Rechnung getragen, vermutlich mit weniger Überzeugung, aber mit mehr Talent.¹⁰

There are two impulses simultaneously at work in Brecht's concern for adaptation. One is the immediate practical need for a repertoire providing aesthetic theatrical enjoyment which might, however, run the risk of being a mindless distortion if no account were taken of the enormous changes in society and sensibility that have come about between the time of the original and our own. This entails the second impulse that is inherent in Brecht's concept of epic theatre, namely that the theatre has an exegetic task to perform closely bound up with the evolution in the audience — Brecht dreamt of a proletarian one — of a reflective historical sense as a function of the aesthetic apprehension. A close collaborator on *Coriolan* has described this essentially didactic procedure:


In setting about the task of laying bare the causal historical mechanism in *Coriolanus* Brecht appears on the face of it to have adhered fairly respectfully to the structure of action provided by Shakespeare. A scrutiny of the two texts reveals, however, that Brecht's version is only about sixty per cent of the original in length (Act 1, Scenes 4–10 are not included in the calculation as Brecht did not supply a battle scene). Moreover, of this about seventeen per cent is wholly new material concentrated in a few scenes, so that Brecht actually used only half of Shakespeare's text — a radical adaptation by any standard. But the positive changes remain few for Brecht relies to a great extent on omission rather than alteration; almost every scene shows a drastic curtailment of speeches and metaphorical language that turns this already austere tragedy into an even more astringent analysis of an uncompromisingly harsh theme. Bullough concluded that the manner in which Shakespeare used Plutarch made *Coriolanus* 'the most economical and closely designed of all Shakespeare's plays, the history-play with least "surplusage", the most intense from start to finish, structurally one of his finest achievements'.¹² It was the
The principles of adaptation subsequently formulated in the essay *Einschüchterung durch die Klassizität* had to be applied to a complicated situation in *Coriolanus*. Brecht claimed that to bring out the original conceptual content of a work the adaptor had to subject both its historical context and the individual attitude of the author to intensive study. Out of these exponential factors should emerge, as he never tired of reiterating, the socio-critical statement of the play. *Coriolanus*, in contrast to the plays by Lenz, Hauptmann, Molière and Farquhar, is the only work (apart from the Antigone in Hölderlin’s translation) handled by Brecht in which the playwright and his theme are not synchronous. A significant element actively incorporated into Brecht’s other adaptations is his assessment of the author’s own attitudes to his time, conditioned as these are by the relevant epoch. This becomes more complex in *Coriolanus*, for the core of Brecht’s interest lies in ancient Rome and he substitutes a historical analysis for Elizabethan notions. The perspective of the seventeenth century swings through an angle to become that of the twentieth. This does not diminish the impact of late Tudor and Jacobean conditions on Shakespeare’s play and Brecht was well aware of this. The Reformation had generated widespread social unrest, especially as a result of the rapacity of the new landlords who had taken over the monastery lands, the eviction of peasants to make way for sheep-rearing that supplied the expanding wool trade, and the increasing acquisitive enclosure of common land. Kett’s Norfolk rebellion in 1548/9 was economically motivated; in 1604 the people of Northamptonshire protested to Parliament against ‘the depopulation and daily excessive conversion of tillage into pasture’, and not long after, in 1607/8, scarce food and high prices brought about the Midland Revolt, when rebellion spread from Northamptonshire to Warwickshire and Leicestershire. All these troubles provided parallels with Plutarch’s ‘sedition at Rome, by reason of famine’ and the prolonged struggles over the agrarian laws.

Of more significance for *Coriolanus* than events in England is the manner in which the underlying postulates of the drama reflect and incorporate in action the contemporary political notions to which Shakespeare was necessarily exposed. Paramount in the conception of the structure of the state at this time was the ideal of a stable organic entity wholly dependent on the peaceful interrelation of its separate constituents and that must be protected at all costs against disintegration stemming from internal strife or the injurious malfunctioning of any single part. Many critics have interpreted this view as the rational inference from the political equilibrium brought about by the consolidation of Tudor power and absolutism, and point to ‘the very real horror with which Renaissance writers regarded the presocial state of disorder and bestiality’. Phillips describes how Tudor thought ‘presented the state as a structure established by God or by natural reason, designed for the common good of all its members, governed by a sovereign authority, and
composed of functionally determined ranks and degrees each of which, performing its appointed task, contributed to the welfare of the whole.\textsuperscript{14}

Foremost in importance was the concept that every man had his allotted place and purpose in the state (ordained from on high in a Hegelian sense, for whom whatever structure existed was right and God-given by the very fact that it was that structure), and ‘the very and true Commonweal’ could only survive if this were accepted on all sides. Harmony and order would immediately be jeopardized by any challenge to these assumptions, so writers ‘constantly warned against the social disruption which would follow failure to maintain the established order of degree and vocation’.\textsuperscript{15}

This critic musters three grand metaphors from three opening acts by Shakespeare to exemplify the insistence on natural and ordered processes in political organization: in \textit{Henry V} Canterbury points to the pattern of the beehive for the production of honey; Ulysses in \textit{Troilus and Cressida} paints a dreadful picture of the catastrophic discord that would ensue if the heavenly bodies left their predesignated courses; and Menenius placates the hungry citizens in \textit{Coriolanus} with Plutarch’s fable of the belly. These are, of course, representative of a vast abundance of Shakespearian imagery, especially in the Histories and Roman Plays, where factious elements and their disruptive effects play such a vital role, but no less in dramas where the micro-unit of personal relationship (father to child, husband to wife) is the centre of interest. It is not only in the state of Denmark that something is rotten, for disease and infection lurk everywhere, ready to emerge and canker and corrupt the smooth functioning of the healthiest organism. Wilson Knight locates the malady of Rome in \textit{Coriolanus} in the internecine struggle between plebs and patricians, and sees Coriolanus as ‘a poisonous agent in the political organism’.\textsuperscript{16} But this is not to imply that Coriolanus alone is pernicious to the city, his rampant aggression can only materialize in collision with the insur- gent vehemence of the plebs, and it is probably true that ‘this is not the tragedy of a ruler alone or of a people alone, but a picture of the threatened disintegration of an institution including and yet superior to them both — the state’.\textsuperscript{17}

The maintenance of an ordered state, its welfare dependent on each individual respecting and adhering to his appointed function in it — this then is a preoccupation of the Elizabethan mind. But such thinking also ensures the maintenance of a status quo on grounds that are anathema to modern social attitudes and especially to a committed person like Brecht. This is demonstrated specifically in the specious reasoning and spurious analogy of the classic fable of the belly, embroidered from Plutarch’s laconic mention into a grand rhetorical figure by Menenius. In Plutarch’s narrative Menenius had been among ‘the pleasantest old men and the most acceptable to the people’ sent by the Senate to persuade the plebeians to end their secession. Livy described him as ‘an eloquent man, and one who was a favourite with the people, because he derived his origin from them’, while Dionysius stressed his diplomacy and how he was ‘looked upon as a person of superior wisdom and
was particularly commended for his political principles, since he pursued a middle course, being inclined neither to increase the arrogance of the aristocratic party nor to permit the people to have their own way in everything. However, in all the chronicles Menenius had died soon after the campaign in which Martius (later Coriolanus) captured Corioli, whereas Shakespeare retains him as the 'portrait of an average member of the privileged class in any community, the speaking likeness of an English squire removed to a Roman setting'. He is a smooth-tongued propagandist for the patrician party, able to render the somewhat ignorant people amenable with his uncouth suavity. Jan Kott calls him 'a tactician and philosopher of opportunism', and Brecht too, according to the Programmheft, 'hat die Figur des Menenius Agrippa vom üblich gespielten Witzemacher zum Realpolitiker aufgewertet'. The metaphor of the belly obviously has a principal part to play in the sophistry that easily sways the fickle mob in Shakespeare's play, but it is remarkable that Brecht kept it almost in its entirety simply for its celebrity, although he knew it ill fitted his own conceptions. The most he does is to hint more strongly than Shakespeare that Menenius is an empty talker by having the Erster Bürger announce him to be 'Senator und Schönredner' and alter the grudging 'yet you must not think |To fob off our disgrace with a tale' into an ironical willingness to be instructed in honeyed speech: 'Aber ich für mein Teil möchte schon lang gern schön reden lernen, und das kann man von dir, Agrippa. Schieß los!' The inherent fallacy in the fable of the belly reduces to very simple terms: in the organic whole of the human body the belly (the patricians) may appear to gorge itself but is patently performing a primary function in the economy of the natural process, the failure of which would be detrimental to the continued existence of the remaining parts. Indeed, 'the great toe' (First Citizen) is the part that could be cut off with no loss to the welfare of the body. But the image loses all force, and even masks the truth, when applied to the estates that make up the city: in economic terms, the patricians accumulate wealth and corn through power, and at the end of Menenius's oratory the plebs are no less hungry nor is the price of corn any lower. There is no natural bond between those who take and those who lose. Uncharacteristically, Brecht made no alteration or interpolation to expose this subterfuge with which Menenius vindicates a false 'natural law' in the order of society.

From elsewhere in Shakespeare, however, Brecht did borrow the gist of yet another extended metaphor extolling the supreme merit of the harmony achieved in a proper and moderate integration of the different parts of the state. Typically, natural growth in the garden (controlled by the civilizing and thoughtful care of man) provides the imagery. The scene occurs in Richard II (iii, 4) at the point where the downcast Queen and her ladies overhear a gardener and his men discussing their work amongst the plants with un concealed allusion to the news that Richard is about to be toppled through not exercising enough foresight and authority. While Shakespeare's protracted metaphor relies entirely on the maintenance of order, Brecht adjusts the focus
and introduces the notion of equality of rights to supplant the idea of a predetermined hierarchy. When Coriolanus is canvassing the voices of the people he finds out the trades they follow:

**Fünfter Bürger**: Ich bin ein Gärtner, Herr.
**Coriolan**: Und was lehrt Euch Euer Gewerbe, was den Staat angeht, denn hier sollt Ihr etwas für den Staat entscheiden.
**Fünfter Bürger**: Herr, mein Garten lehrt mich —
Dies kleine Reich der Beete und Rabatten —
Daß selbst die edle Rose von Milet
Von allzu üppigem Wuchs beschnitten sein muß
Soll sie gedeihn. Auch muß sie sich drein finden
Daß Kohl und Lauch und allerlei Gemüse
Von niedrer Abstammung, doch ziemlich nützlich
An ihrer Zeit ihr Wasser abbekommen.
**Coriolan**: Was soll das heißen, Stimme?
**Fünfter Bürger**: Der Garten müßt verwildern, dächte man
Der königlichen Rose nur.21

The gardener's words are symptomatic of the 'New Order' that Brecht embeds in *Coriolan*; fresh factors are distinguished in the structure of the state, and value will depend on an open assessment of usefulness, not on preformed categories. Brecht jettisons the deployment of the metaphor that best conveys the Tudor ideal of the state, but keeps the political problem firmly at the core of his adaptation: it is still a question of who rules, and, perhaps, who ought to rule.

This theme of government and power in *Coriolanus* provokes conflicting views that are never likely to be resolved: is it an argument about politics or a drama of human emotions and character, is it debate or event? Dover Wilson adamantly refuses to interpret the play as a political gloss:

Inasmuch as its main theme or rather its political shell or envelope bears an accidental resemblance to the political controversies that dominate the modern world, the play is often read, and sometimes produced, as if it were a political pamphlet. The fact that some interpret in fascist and others in communist terms should be enough to prove the fallacy of such anachronism.22

On the other hand, in his *Causerien über Theater*, Fontane commented on a performance he attended at Sadler's Wells in 1857: '... wenn ich auch nirgends dem antiken Gegensatz zwischen Patriziat und Plebejertum begegnete, so hatte ich wenigstens überall den Gegensatz zwischen englischer Aristokratie und englischem mob. Diese Kerle mit ihren Knitteln waren wie von der Straße genommen.' Heine, too, detected the play's topicality for English politics in the nineteenth century and its links with a social reality outside the auditorium: 'Man sollte manchmal glauben, Shakespeare sei ein heutiger Dichter, der im heutigen London lebe und unter römischen Masken die jetzigen Tories und Radikalen schildern wolle.' And in *Shakespeare und kein Ende* Goethe voiced the common attitude that sees in *Coriolanus* the struggle
of innate excellence to retain its rightful control over the state: 'So geht durch
den ganzen Coriolan der Ärger durch, daß die Volksmasse den Vorzug der
Bessern nicht anerkennen will.' But, though arguments about forms of
government may be a strong motive force in Coriolanus, Shakespeare creates
individuals who are far more than mouthpieces. Thus Hazlitt's assertion that
the stuff of this drama consists of arguments for and against democracy can
fairly be rebutted:

There are no such arguments. There are only aristocrats and democrats. He refers to
power and the abuse of it. There is no discussion of this problem. There is only a
proud man who assumes the right to despise persons of a lesser breed... 'Corio-
lanus' is not the dramatisation of a political thesis. It is not a play in which the
supreme conflict is one of political principle.23

Balancing the public theme are a number of aspects concerning the men
and women of the drama in their private relationships and reactions. There is
the personal envy and spite of the tribunes towards Coriolanus, and his pride
and ambition and suicidal urge to be true to his own nature in the teeth of all
practical argument. There is the motif of Coriolanus's aesthetic perception
of experience: he loves bravery and the 'aristocracy of courage' for their own
sakes, and his bond with Aufidius is stronger than patriotism; he seeks
personal glory, and power only as an enhancement of that glory; his hatred
of the populace is more aesthetic than political, and their stinking breath
rather than any threat to his freedom excites his gall. There is the tense homo-
sexual trait in Coriolanus that explains why the seasoned Menenius was set
a-trembling when he received a letter from the youthful warrior (II, 1), and why
he 'godded' him; it also intensifies the relationship with Aufidius, for Corio-
lanus loves war more than a woman, prefers his opponent in battle to a wife,
thinks of his mother as a Hercules, and is welcomed like a beloved by Aufidius
('our general himself makes a mistress of him', 'Let me twine | Mine arms about
that body' (IV, 5, 109 f. and 200 f.)). But in the end the 'natural' woman
triumphs, Coriolanus's betrayal to Volumnia is an infidelity, Aufidius is left as
the discarded lover and takes furious revenge. Such elements add immeasur-
ably to Coriolanus, making it humanly exciting, injecting passion into politics
within the bounds of a unique set of situations. Brecht whittles them down,
either intentionally — as with the personal motives for the tribunes' loathing
of Coriolanus — or as a penalty to be paid for omitting such lengthy tracts of
Shakespeare's text.

As a result the play is drained of a great deal of the dramatic energy that was
engendered by Shakespeare's subtle equilibrium of conscious and unconscious
promptings, public and private psychology. In this respect Günter Grass sees
Brecht's adaptation as a lifeless substitute for the intuitive power of the ori-
ginal, alleging that this version 'hat der Tragödie das naive Gefälle genommen
und an dessen Stelle einen fleißigen Mechanismus gesetzt, der zwar sein Soll
erfüllt und die gewollte Tendenz geschmackvoll ästhetisiert', but claiming
that this spoliation does not warrant the 'Griff nach dem fremden Stoff'.24
Thus Brecht converts the attraction and repulsion of Coriolanus's vibrant personal rivalry with Aufidius almost entirely into the clear-cut terms of suspicion and opportunism. It is true that Shakespeare had not minimized the vein of conspiracy colouring Aufidius's behaviour towards Coriolanus: the conflict of mercy and honour when Coriolanus yields to his mother is welcomed (‘Out of that I'll work | Myself a former fortune’ (v, 3, 201 f.) and exploited (‘therefore shall he die, | And I'll renew me in his fall’ (v, 6, 48 f.). But the ‘dark’ speech (‘All places yield to him . . .’ (iv, 3)) with which Aufidius concludes his discussion of the situation with his Lieutenant, a meditation on the philosophy of power spawning half-articulated hopes and lurking desires, is subjected by Brecht to radical change in both content and tone that narrows the general's musings down to objective facts and attendant possibilities:

... hat er Rom, dann hab ich ihn.
Denn was er dann auch macht, ist falsch, weil er's macht.
Faßt er den Adel unzart an, ist's aus —
Dann lamentiert der volksische Adel, und
Faßt er den Adel zart an, ist’s auch aus —
Dann lamentiert der volksische Adel auch.
Der Mann hing ab vom Glück und konnte Glück
Nicht nutzen.25

Brecht then keeps the skeleton of Aufidius's ponderings on services and rewards, virtue and power: the general reflection (‘So our virtues | Lie in th' interpretation of the time’ (iv, 7, 49 f.) is anchored in the practical reality (‘Und unser Wert hängt ab von dem Gebrauch | Den unsre Zeit macht von uns’). Altogether, Brecht makes the motif of suspicion in the tussle for power dominant in the relationship of the competing generals, thereby blurring less manifest factors suggested in Shakespeare's text; in the adaptation Aufidius presses his rival urgently and with less tact to action that will destroy him:

AUFIDIUS: Wie lang willst du noch warten?
CORIOLAN: Wir lagern morgen vor den Mauern Roms.
AUFIDIUS: Warum nicht heut?
CORIOLAN: Partner in diesem Feldzug
Ihr müßt den Herrn in Antium bestätigen
Wie rückhaltlos ich die Aktion betrieb.
Doch auch von diesem alten Mann [i.e. Menenius], der dich
Vergöttert, nichts von Unterwerfung, nur
Beschwörung und die Bitte 'Geh und häng dich!'27

The more central theme of Coriolanus's relationship to his mother demonstrates even better how Brecht curtails imagination in favour of the aridity of political argument and decision. In Shakespeare's text there are several facets to this relationship that cohere in the intensity of emotion induced by Volumnia's kneeling before her son to plead for Rome. She is the symbol of his mother-city, but also a dominant woman who has moulded him to her ideals.
from childhood. His 'own nature' is as much a product of upbringing as of innate qualities; and her kneeling before him is a violation of the moral and social order that is tantamount to an infraction of natural law. Many arguments of a logical, psychological, emotional character converge in the near-blackmail of her entreaties, but the motive force that pulses through this encounter is the clash of wills between two individuals, not the question of Rome's survival:

This is not, in essentials, a conflict of class prejudice with civic patriotism, though Volumnia is free enough with references to her country. It is a conflict of personal pride with a sense of what is due from Marcius to 'great Nature'.

This scene is crucial in the assessment of Brecht's version, for he and his collaborators were fully aware of its appeal to passion and intended instead to elucidate the self-interest concealed by the fire. Concerning the legend and its interpretations we read in the Programmheft:

Fast ausnahmslos spricht man vom Hohenlied der Sohnesliebe, die mit dem Tod bezahlt wurde...[Brecht noticed] daß William Shakespeare die Rede merkwürdig schwungslos, mit schwachen Argumenten seitens der Mutter ausgestattet hat...Brecht, der die Kunst Shakespeares zu hoch schätzte, um Zufälligkeiten zu unterstellen, stellte die Frage: Was, wenn Shakespeare die Rede absichtlich mit schwachen Argumenten ausgestattet hat? Vielleicht wollte Shakespeare andeuten, da seien noch andere Gründe für die Umkehr des Coriolan im Spiel; daß die Rede der Mutter zwar Anlaß zur Umkehr, keinesfalls aber alleinige Ursache ist. Und wenn dem so ist, was sind das wohl für andere Ursachen?

Perhaps Brecht had good reason to look behind the scenes of Shakespeare's dramatic construct, for we find that none of the ancient chroniclers mentions that Coriolanus was consumed by totally intransigent rage; he was instead prepared to spare Rome on 'honest and just conditions of peace' which he gave the Roman emissaries — before Volumnia's appearance — thirty days to think over. As Plutarch says: 'he willed them to restore unto the Volsces all their lands and cities they had taken from them in former wars; and, moreover, that they should give them the like honour and freedom of Rome, as they had before given to the Latins'. Shakespeare, naturally intent on shaping his material to achieve the maximum impact as drama, suppresses this 'fact', makes much of Coriolanus's unbending spurning of Cominius and Menenius in turn, and so throws into greater relief Volumnia's appeal to her son to serve both duty and honour by reconciling the two peoples. Brecht, on the other hand, severely limits Volumnia's intuitive eloquence that is designed to move Coriolanus through his better instincts. Of her two major impassioned speeches ("Should we be silent and not speak..." and 'Nay, go not from us thus...') (v, 3, 94–125 and 131–82)) Brecht replaces lines 94–107, retains the remainder of that speech, and effectively substitutes an entirely new text for the whole of the second:

VOLUMNIA: Könnt ich schweigen, schwiege ich.
Dann hät't ich nichts gesagt, was dich bewegte
Und tötete, und auch nicht, was umsonst.
Denn ich ging nicht wie andre Mütter weg
Das Kind zu retten, sondern zu verderben
Und zwar, wenn ich‘s noch menschlich find, ansonsten
Fällt’s mich an . . .

... Vergiß
Das kleine Ungemach, daß es mir schwerfällt
Weil mich dein Vater nicht daran gewöhnte
Jetzt mein Gesicht ins Tuch zu hüllen, wenn ich
Aus dem Haus geh, laß die kindische Rührung, wisse
Daß du auf ein sehr andres Rom marschierst
Als du verließest. Unersetzlich
Bist du nicht mehr, nur noch die tödliche
Gefahr für alle. Wart nicht auf den Rauch
Der Unterwerfung! Wenn du Rauch sehn wirst
Dann aus den Schmieden steigend, die jetzt Schwerter
Wider dich schmieden, der dem eignen Volk den
Fuß auf den Nacken setzen will und dafür
Sich seinem Feinde unterwirft. Wir aber
Der Glanz und Adel Roms
Muß nun die Rettung vor den Volskern
Dem Pöbel danken oder deinen Volskern
Die Rettung vor dem Pöbel! 29

Gone is the tearful supplication of mother to son, in its place we hear the rational persuasion of an argument that is measurable in public terms. Volumnia is made to evince a clarity of political insight and a realism in evaluating her conclusions that is not unprepared for in Shakespeare (she had earlier been successful in urging Coriolanus to curb his disdain of the populace for reasons of expediency); but the ground of this important scene is shifted from emotion to reason and its dimensions are scaled down, with a resultant change in quality. Coriolanus yields to Volumnia in petty fashion, like a politician forced out of office for an error of judgement. He is no longer the man of heroic mould invested with grandeur and expressing himself in magniloquent gesture. The fall of a tragic hero acquires an ironical connotation for Brecht who refuses to see the hero and his greatness as forming an indivisible entity; for him, personal worth is a variable of service to the community. Thus, since the hero does not necessarily carry his greatness to the grave, there is no contradiction in Brecht’s reducing the stature of Coriolanus when his behaviour is socially reprehensible. Brusque notes outline the reasoning that sees the individual as not indispensable from the public point of view, for he might well hold society to ransom if he were thought irreplaceable:


Volumnia bittet den Sohn nicht um Umkehr, sie kniet nicht nieder, sie zeigt ihm nur die Ausweglosigkeit der Lage. Rom ist nicht auf seine Umkehr angewiesen, der
Plebs wird die Stadt verteidigen — die Demokratie setzt sich aber in jedem Falle durch. Mit der Alleinherrschaft des Adels ist es vorbei. Coriolan verschuldet den Untergang seiner Klasse.

Coriolan kehrt nicht um, weil er der Sohnesliebe nachgibt, sondern weil er erkennt, daß er sich selbst überschätzt hat.

Seine neue Tragik: Coriolan wird nicht, wie er hoffte, von Rom zurückgerufen, sondern die Stadt hat sich gegen ihn bewaffnet. Der Nimbus seiner Unentbehrlichkeit ist dahin. Es stellt sich heraus, daß jedermann, auch er, entbehrlich ist. Er war als Held nützlich, aber sein Preis — die Unterwerfung Roms — ist zu hoch für die Gesellschaft. Die Tragik Coriolans ist damit aus dem Privaten — Konflikt Mutter/Sohn — ins Gesellschaftliche gehoben: Nützlichkeit des Individuums für die Gesellschaft.30

Brecht's undisguised intention is thus to make public issues the fulcrum of his version, whereas Shakespeare's problem was how to create the drama of an individual out of the material of political ideas and parties. Evidence of this ambivalence in Coriolanus is the significant intrusion of the concept of loyalty — abstract and yet a very emotional concern — to Rome, to the Volscians, to his class, to his mother, to himself. It can be said that Shakespeare solved this problem intuitively by carrying through the action of the drama on the individual plane through the impingement of one life on another, while the tone set by the language and background reflects the collective affairs that are at stake. Wilson Knight talks of 'the sheeted iron of this play',31 and draws attention to the essentially 'civic' setting in the imagery packed with the materials of buildings and war, hard stone and metal. Perhaps because Shakespeare used the language of the play as a vehicle to convey the harsh, uncompromising clash of party interests, few people find any poetry in it. There is no softness of language because there is no love, but as a correlate of the implacable struggle for power fought out in the city the fabric of this language is of immense expressive potency. This is possibly why Jan Kott can say that to the classicists 'it seemed incoherent, vulgar, brutal' and for the romanticists 'it was too bitter, flat and dry'; he tacitly accounts for these reactions by describing how the human interest in Coriolanus shrinks in the face of such bulk of public matter: 'There is only a historical chronicle, dry as a bone, though violently dramatized. There is also a monumentalized hero, who can rouse all sorts of emotions, but never sympathy.'32 This grey, cold, inimical world in which the play unfolds is more congenial to Brecht's rigorous playing down of passions, his practice of flooding the stage in neutral white light to expose motives visually, his predilection for greys and browns and muted tones, worn articles of everyday life that channel attention to the matter under elucidation.

The core of the contrast between Shakespeare and Brecht is to be found ultimately in the attitude of the playwright to the relationship of history and drama, subject-matter and its treatment. Lessing believed that the 'inner probability' of events is what makes them credible and authentic in drama, and
he advocated a handling of history that adequately describes Shakespeare's approach: 'Auf dem Theater sollen wir nicht lernen, was dieser oder jener einzelne Mensch getan hat, sondern was ein jeder Mensch von einem gewissen Charakter unter gewissen gegebenen Umständen tun werde. Die Absicht der Tragödie ist weit philosophischer, als die Absicht der Geschichte.' Lessing was here combating the ingrained demand for factual verisimilitude in historical events which Shakespeare had long since jettisoned for the sake of psychological and aesthetic truth. But Brecht — like Schiller with whom he had so much in common — is an analytical interpreter of history through the medium of drama, and his plays are animations of historical textbooks rather than events relived as immediate experience. Jan Kott dismisses the superficial use of history as a mere background for personal dramas and contrasts with this the deeper historical drama of Brecht and Schiller on the one hand, and Shakespeare on the other:

They know history, have learnt it by heart, and do not often go wrong. Schiller was a classic author of this kind of historical drama. Marx used to call his characters speaking trumpets of modern ideas. They interpret history because they know the solutions it offers. They can sometimes express real trends and conflicts of social forces. But even this does not mean that the dramatization of history has been effected. It is only a historical textbook that has been dramatized. The textbook can be idealistic, as in Schiller and Romain Rolland, or materialistic, as in some dramas of Büchner and Brecht; but it does not cease to be a textbook.

Shakespeare's concept of history is of a different kind... History unfolds on the stage, but is never merely enacted. It is not a background or a setting. It is itself the protagonist of tragedy.

The difference between the unique happening and the analysis of that happening is the difference between Shakespeare and Brecht; the latter's primary concern is how a particular individual acted in a precise historical context and with specific implications for the future. Thus the unending arguments about Shakespeare's personal opinions on the populace, the merits and faults of democracy and aristocracy, or contemporary social and political structures, are essentially peripheral to the central dramatic interest. This does not exclude the fact that Shakespeare's consciousness of his own time has relevance where circumstances are similar, but it is quite unlike the total framework of historical perspective brought to bear by Brecht, of which contemporary parallels are only a chronological culmination.

It is thus almost inevitable that a detailed and exhaustive study of the formative stages of Rome after the expulsion of the Tarquins and their dynasty should be a prerequisite for Brecht's interpretation of Coriolanus. The Programmheft presents the analysis of 'Sage und Geschichte', describing how the newly-established Roman republic had a predominantly peasant population still dominated by the aristocracy, and how the latter's attempts to crush the small (middle class) property owner and keep the peasants in subjection led to a long-drawn-out class struggle:
In diesem Klassenkampf war die Verweigerung des Kriegsdienstes die wirkungs- vollste Waffe der Plebejer, deren Anwendung u.a. zur Wahl eigener Interessenvertreter, der Volkstribunen, führte und damit zu weiteren Erfolgen der um ihre ökonomischen und politischen Rechte kämpfenden Klasse... Shakespeare benutzte die Aufzeichnungen des Plutarch als Stoff, um in seiner 'Tragödie des Coriolanus' — einem Stück mit Parabelcharakter — auf Ereignisse im England seiner Zeit zu reflektieren: auf die mit dem Ende der Tudorherrschaft ausbrechenden Kämpfe zwischen Adel und dem erstarkten, politische Anerkennung fordernden Bürgertum.

Brecht's collaborator Käthe Rülicke, after summarizing the background of Shakespeare's time — especially the contradictions arising from the collision between the feudal Stuarts and the rising Puritan bourgeoisie — defines the contrasting approaches of the two dramatists, Shakespeare going for the individual hero and his fate, Brecht taking into account the historical repercussions of his actions:


It is inaccurate to argue that Shakespeare was vindicating in Coriolanus the aristocratic form of government, and that Brecht reversed this by promoting the plebs; instead he introduced bias where it was absent in Shakespeare by exploiting the latter's powerful realism. Tendentiousness is not a yardstick for measuring Shakespeare's play, though it is for the adaptation. In clouding this differentiation Käthe Rülicke distorts Shakespeare:

Nur eine handfest gebaute, auf echten Klassenwidersprüchen basierende Fabel konnte diese Umkehrung der Tendenz vertragen. Das Stück Shakespeares bleibt auch bei Einnahme des entgegengesetzten Klassenstandpunktes intakt, lebendig und erweist sich als in hervorragendem Maße realistisch.

Another East German critic, Friedrich Dieckmann, suggesting with cautious respect for Shakespeare that it is 'der Widerstand einer großen und gültigen Form, der ihn [Brecht] zu veränderndem Eingriff reizt', discriminates more perceptively between the realism — and consequently the aims and methods — of the two playwrights. He acknowledges that there must be some sort of affinity of viewpoint between them which is crystallized in 'der realistische Bezug... in den Shakespeare hier einen politischen Stoff zu seinen sozialen Bedingungen gestellt hat', and goes on to argue that Brecht's task was to make the adaptation hinge on the socio-political reality immanent in the situation,
not on the moral make-up of the hero. It was necessary to show the reaction of the hero to the demands of his position in that society rather than the reactions of other people to him.

In keeping with his ‘textbook’ conception of history Brecht makes no pretence of being truly objective; unashamedly he sides with the plebeians and effectively transposes the ideological action to a modern context. If we accept that Shakespeare imposed the political and social thinking of his own era on the Roman situation, then Brecht is only adopting the same procedure in grafting on to Shakespeare’s play the categories of the twentieth century. The discrepancy between them is a measure of the gap separating their periods: the idea of a harmonious hierarchical commonwealth is very far removed from the representation of society as a stratification into classes locked in bitter struggle, the outcome of which is as historically and impersonally inevitable as the order of the ‘commonweal’ was in accordance with natural and divine law. Whether these political philosophies are absolute or relative is itself a philosophical question; it suffices that Brecht subscribes to and *operates* with the criteria of post-Marxian consciousness — his ideological framework is cast entirely in terms of the class structure. The realistic resilience of Shakespeare’s drama is proved by the fact that many critics of *Coriolanus* talk almost unawares in terms of class division. But Brecht goes beyond Shakespeare and is qualitatively different in that he has *consciously* superimposed the modern perspective, even to the point of applying anachronistic terminology in designating Menenius a ‘Realpolitiker’ and discussing whether Sicinius (in an early version) possesses ‘die meisten Fehler eines sozialdemokratischen Kompromißlertums’. Dieckmann recognizes the intensity of Brecht’s reaction to events he had lived through, and construes this as the reason for the almost rabid projection of his virulence towards Hitler on to Coriolanus, after shattering the dictator’s contemporary image in Arturo Ui. This reading of Coriolanus is ‘ein unhistorisches Unterfangen, das eine Über-Entlarvung zeitigt, aber geboren aus dem Trieb, den gehaßten Zeitgenossen bis in den letzten Schlupfwinkel zu verfolgen und ihm nach der Gegenwart auch die Vergangenheit zu rauben’.

As has been said, Brecht scrutinizes the Roman context analytically, where Shakespeare, bent on a quite different dramaturgical intention, could ignore the historical factor and create a realistic setting for his individuals. What Shakespeare does suggest is that there existed already in this rudimentary stage of what was to become a mighty empire the ethos of city republic, family organization, great patriotic deeds and greater reputations, that was to leave its mark and its myths imprinted on the consciousness and imagination of Western civilization. MacCallum describes how this sense of grandeur emerges from Volumnia’s actions to create in the spectator a feeling of the ‘majesty and omnipotence of the Eternal City’. In contrast to this stands Brecht’s dry formulation of the Roman situation in modern terminology:
Nur in Rom ist ein politisches Problem kaum ein religiöses, und nur in Rom findet sich diese Simplifizierung und dabei diese strenge Klassenschichtung, die für das Stück notwendig ist...

Zweitens bietet Rom eine besonders starre und eindeutige Klassenscheidung. Drittens ist ein Klassenkampfmittel wie die Auswanderung absolut einmalig und nur im antiken Rom durchführbar und vorgekommen. Viertens dadurch, daß man als Schauplatz Rom wählt, gewinnt die ganze Handlung weltpolitische Bedeutung...

Dann ist es auch eine Tatsache, daß Rom seine inneren Klassengegensätze vermittels einer antiken Form von Imperialismus ausglich.

Such cool probing of the mechanism of the Roman state cannot accommodate the emotional fascination of the Idea of Rome, and begins to dispel the aura of untouchable majesty that instills uncritical awe. An outline of the action of the drama in the Programmheft — again in modern terms — is a further characteristic step in the deflation of the myth of Coriolanus's greatness. However, the appraisal of a situation in up-to-date terms is not of itself truly historical; to be so it requires an awareness of the consequences of events, the resultant of counterbalanced forces in time, projected into the future. This is illustrated especially in the added final scene where Brecht attempts to integrate the historical impulse into the dramatic fabric of his adaptation by opening the play into the future. We see a placid Senate dealing with its everyday business after the death of Coriolanus, which for Shakespeare had been the end of the drama and with it the play:

Brecht deutet mit nur einer kleinen Schlußszene die tatsächliche historische Weiterentwicklung an. Es wird deutlich, wie die Parteinnahme für die Plebejer eine Fabelführung ermöglicht und erzwingt, die den objektiven gesellschaftlichen Gesetzmäßigkeiten entspricht.

It is worth noting that Brecht did not adhere, any more than Shakespeare, to the ‘historical’ facts: he kept to the assassination of Coriolanus (though Livy hints at discrepant accounts of how he met his death, and that he may even have lived on in exile), but had no authority for depicting the peaceful business in the Senate nor for implying that control was in the hands of the tribunes and therefore of the plebs. Brecht was not, however, presenting a re-enactment of events, he was postulating here historical potentiality, as in the brief scene he substitutes for the victorious return of the ladies, and their welcome, in v, 5:

**BOTE:** Die Neuigkeit!
Die Völker ziehen ab und Marcius mit!
**BRUTUS:** Der Stein hat sich bewegt. Das Volk erhebt
Die Waffen, und die alte Erde bebt.

The messenger’s news comes from the preceding scene (“The Volscians are dislodged, and Marcius gone” (v, 4, 42)), but Brutus’s couplet — ironically Shakespearian in its closing position — skilfully reverts to the image Menenius had used (v, 4, 1–8) to illustrate the immovability of Coriolanus’s stubbornness:
MENENIUS: See you yond coign o' th' Capitol, yond cornerstone?
SICINIUS: Why, what of that?
MENENIUS: If it be possible for you to displace it with your little finger, there is some hope the ladies of Rome, especially his mother, may prevail with him. But I say there is no hope in't: our throats are sentenced, and stay upon execution.

In the adaptation it is not left at this: Brutus replies, in the knowledge that Volumnia had more persuasive matter than tears to take to her son: 'Er mag unbeweglich sein durch ihre Rede — obgleich das nicht so sicher ist, sie hat ihm manches zu berichten, was ihm neu sein wird — der Stein dort ist unbeweglich. Ein Erdbeben, und ich bewege ihn vielleicht danach doch.'45 By cleverly repeating the motif, Brecht creates a sudden tension that leaps between the two moments and matches the real convulsion that has taken place in the state; it is the signal that the revolution, which is indeed an earthquake, has toppled the patrician power embodied in Coriolanus.

It becomes very apparent from any consideration of the handling of the political and historical content of Coriolanus that neither Shakespeare nor Brecht is objective, and neither would claim to be so. The latter is evidently the more outspokenly committed it is certainly easier to identify radical commitment which tends to change rather than support for the status quo — but many critics accuse Shakespeare of sustaining the nobility because of his unflattering portrait of the mob. Phillips argues that this is inevitable, given the political ideas current in Shakespeare's time: 'In the turbulent history of Rome in this period Tudor theorists who argued in defense of monarchy and the hierarchy of degrees found a convincing demonstration of the dangers of democratic government.' He describes how Shakespeare's 'expressions of contempt for the plebeians are qualified by a sympathetic presentation of the grievances of the people' and thinks this impartiality suggests that Shakespeare's main political interest was 'not in the privileges of a special class, but in the welfare of the whole state.' Coriolanus demonstrated 'the disastrous consequences of violating those principles by which a healthy political society is maintained'.46

In the light of this argument it is reasonable to deduce that the idea of 'specialty of rule' was for Shakespeare and his contemporaries a tacit assumption underlying their political attitudes, conducive therefore to a maintenance of existing structures and a hindrance to change. Brecht leaves no one in the dark about his intentions: he sets the class struggle between plebs and patricians squarely at the heart of his adaptation, unblushingly asserting his right — just as the bourgeois had done — to 'kräftig interpretieren, d.h. parteiisch vorgehen, umso mehr als man damit die Partei des Volks nehmen kann'.47 His blunt aim is to demonstrate the political maturity and reliability of the lower classes:

Grundlinie: Sh[akespeare] behandelt den Plebs als 'unreife Klasse'. Das sind die Argumente der heutigen Bourgeoisie: das Proletariat ist nicht reif für die Führung.
Bei uns muß der Plebs in der Lage sein, die Macht zu übernehmen. Das ist zu zeigen.48

Brecht thus introduces a single, goal-directed criterion, defines its values uncomprisingly and creates schematically in accordance with it.

The treatment that Brecht metes out to Shakespeare's play is thus not based intrinsically on dramatic grounds but reflects a far more fundamental problem, that of comparing the value of two inherently diverse organisms or political philosophies. The question we are driven to ask is whether the 'democratic' rule of the plebs advocated by Brecht is in any way an advance on the 'specialty of rule' conditioning Shakespeare's play. In a philosophical sense it is difficult to maintain that historical change is progress any more than are changes in art or other areas of human activity. The concept of progress necessitates self-generating axioms through which history can be categorized and evaluated; a phenomistic apprehension of consecutive events in time could not accept as objective the Marxist analysis of history as an inevitable sequence of necessary stages within the conceptual framework of an evolutionary view. For Marx, as for Brecht, a later stage in development is necessarily better, but such discrimination is impossible in an existential conception of experience. The modernity of Coriolanus lies in this problem which overshadows the arguments engrossing Marxists and historians, and disturbs because the answer to it can only be relativistic and pessimistic. Critics sense the irresolvable contradictions that make Coriolanus enigmatic, dramatic and at the same time a subject of speculation about the moral value of history. Jan Kott is well aware of the doubtful accuracy of objectivity:

Eagles do not lower themselves to the level of rats and crows. Coriolanus wants the world to recognize his greatness. But the world is divided into plebeians and patri-otics. Coriolanus's hierarchy of nature does not agree with the real world. Rats have no wish to consider themselves worse than eagles.49

Wilson Knight, too, resorts to the animal world to define the relativity of perspective:

Coriolanus is shown as infinitely superior to the tribunes in all noble qualities, in all exquisite strength. He is proud as a lion might be proud among jackals. But that is no reason why jackals should tolerate a lion in their midst.50

Eagles and rats, lions and jackals: superiority in the phenomenal world is a matter of greater strength or staying power. The reasoning faculty of human beings superimposes a moral scheme of value on the chaos of occurrences and especially on the affairs of men. Part of the richness of Shakespeare is that this drama does not allow the phenomenal world to be reduced to nothing more than a well of illustrations for mental constructs.

A major contradiction arises from the personality and position of Shakespeare's Coriolanus. A great general, he has the virtues of a leader; turned against those he leads, these same virtues become grave demerits as he takes
on the appearance of a tyrant. A double moral emerges: ‘An ambitious general aiming at dictatorial power is extremely dangerous for the republic . . . The moral drawn from the second chapter is very bitter indeed. The city that exiles its leader becomes defenceless. The people can only hate and bite, but are unable to defend their city.’

Coriolanus complicates the deceptively simple-looking class struggle; he ‘accepts two of the classic opposites of the plebeian theory: the rich — the poor, the rulers — the governed. But to these two, he adds two more: the noble — the base, the wise — the fools’. That is, to a clear factual situation concerning the actual distribution of wealth and power, Coriolanus links a philosophy, a value judgement regarding the worth of individuals. That is perhaps the point in which the adaptation deviates in essentials from its source; Brecht insists on gearing value judgements to the factual class struggle — the worth of a man is a function of his use to society.

This conception leads once again straight to the core of the adaptation, namely the preoccupation with the individual’s irreplaceability, in particular the position of that servant of the state, Coriolanus. For Shakespeare, the irreplaceability of Coriolanus resides in his uniqueness as an individual. Unambiguously, Brecht adopts a different standpoint from either Plutarch or Shakespeare, for he categorically denies that Coriolanus was necessary to Rome, and hinges the drama on the hero’s mistaken belief in his indispensability:

This represents a significant alteration in attitude to the tragic theme, for on this new conceptual basis the dramatic function of the plebs undergoes a qualitative dialectical change. The people are no longer a foil to Coriolanus, a stone that makes him stumble or on which he sharpens his blade, they are instead equal to him in importance and potential value. Whereas Shakespeare handled the plebs as an unavoidable element in his massive concentration on the lone hero, Brecht reorganized the dramatic pattern so that in place of the single axis of the hero’s path, around which everything moves, the adaptation
is shaped as a system of co-ordinates mutually interacting to produce an independent resultant — namely, a view of social structure. Hence Brecht can make observations on audience interest in the hero, revealing his view that events are explicable in terms of conscious mental attitudes and judgements, and not to be left to the arbitrary vagaries of individual characteristics of personality. Pride may be a feature of Coriolanus but is not to be taken as the dominant motive to vindicate his actions; the collective fate also demands recognition and must be presented so that the audience experiences it as the price paid for Coriolanus’s rise to power, leading ultimately to defiance of this hero:

Und was den Helden betrifft, ist die Gesellschaft an einem andern Aspekt interessiert, der sie unmittelbar angeht, nämlich dem Glauben des Helden an seine Unersetzlichkeit. Diesem Glauben kann sie sich nicht beugen, ohne den Untergang zu riskieren. Das setzt sie in unabdingbaren Gegensatz zu diesem Helden, und die Art des Spiels muß ihr das gestatten, ja muß das erzwingen.

One of Brecht’s most direct and abruptly effective methods for scaling down the sheer size of the traditional hero to dimensions that will minimize his apparent indispensability and the undiscriminating, purely emotional involvement of the audience in his life, is the device of underplaying the magnitude of the single deed or situation. Brecht’s resistance to individual greatness is motivated in part by the conviction that the community is only viable as a true collective of mutually enhancing efforts and in part by the knowledge that the accompaniment of celebrity is the expendable small person, the object of injustice and exploitation, an outrage to the dignity of man. Brecht found his technique for deflating the great man in what can be termed the Icarus syndrome, from the brief notes he made (about 1939) analysing the ‘narrative’ elements figuring in a number of paintings by Pieter Bruegel, especially the Landscape with the Fall of Icarus. This painting closely follows the account in Ovid’s Metamorphoses, but Bruegel offsets and firmly neutralizes the mythical occurrence by various means such as the minute space to one corner of the canvas actually taken up by the plunge into the sea (only the legs appear above the surface), and the sailors on the merchant vessel, the ploughman, shepherd and fisherman in the foreground going about their tranquil daily tasks, looking away from and totally unaware of the tragedy:


It must be made clear that the dispersal of attention involved in this
narrative' process does not disparage the colossal deed, but sets it in a total configuration of simultaneous events each of which can be assimilated rationally as well as affectively by the observer. This is the distance induced by concurrent focuses. Brecht inserts a fine example of the Icarus syndrome into Coriolanus by subordinating to his own ends Shakespeare's IV, 3, in which a Roman informer betrays the valuable knowledge of Coriolanus's banishment to a Volscian spy. Bullough censures Shakespeare for this 'not entirely necessary scene, intended to bridge the few days during which in Plutarch Marcius was in a turmoil of indecision and choler'. The small incident does in fact prefigure the greater betrayal by Coriolanus — Shakespeare knew his business better than Bullough. But whether or not Brecht also thought that Shakespeare had nodded with this scene, he replaced it by a completely new text:

RÖMER: Warum kehrt Ihr um? Ich komme aus Rom, aber ich bin kein Räuber!
VOLSKER: Wenn das nicht der Gerber Lätus aus der Gasse der Sandalenmacher ist!
RÖMER: Piger! Sieht man sich endlich wieder?
   *Sie umarmen sich.*
RÖMER: Wie geht es der Frau? Bäckt sie noch die kleinen Hirsefladen?
VOLSKER: Immer noch; sie kann die Rosinen bekommen, aber mir fehlt in der Seilerei der Hanf. Deshalb gehe ich nach Rom, Alter.
RÖMER: Und ich gehe nach Antium, zu sehen, ob sie dort meine Lederhocker brauchen können.
VOLSKER: Bist du durch Corioli gekommen, das ihr uns gestohlen habt? Wie ist es dort?
RÖMER: Du wirst es sehen. Es hat sich kaum geändert. Man isst, schläft und zahlt Steuern. Wie ist es in Antium?
VOLSKER: Man schläft, isst und zahlt Steuern. Und in Rom?
RÖMER: Man isst auch, schläft auch und zahlt auch Steuern. Aber wir haben einen Aufstand gehabt und den Coriolan vertrieben.
RÖMER: Ich verließ es mit geringerer Furcht.
VOLSKER: Mensch, daß endlich wieder Friede ist!
RÖMER: Gute Reise, Piger, und glückliche Geschäfte in Rom!
VOLSKER: Gute Geschäfte in Antium, Lätus!

Here are all the elements Brecht detected in the alienating epic painting of Bruegel: the unknown small artisans, the trivial details of daily life with its repetitions and sameness in different places, the strong sense of unassuming idyll, and above all the attenuation of what should be the central, all-absorbing fact — the banishment of Coriolanus — that has been shrunk to the effect of a minor ripple on a placid pool. This is the view from below of massive, world-shaking events that are relativized in the perspective of the common man. It may appear that this scene is identical in function with the well-known Shakespearian technique of inserting brief episodes in his tragedies that give humble people a chance to comment on the doings of their masters — as in the conversation (omitted by Brecht) among Aufidius's serving-men after
their master has made Coriolanus welcome as an ally. The significant difference is that the Shakespearian remarks from the common people still have their focus entirely in the lives of their superiors, while Brecht, aiming at an all-embracing 'historical' assemblage of situations, ascribes at least the same weight to the private circumstances of the two artisans as to the calamity that has befallen Coriolanus and will find a place in the history books. As Brecht noted in the *Fall of Icarus*, the catastrophe and the idyll are dialectically reciprocal and throw each other into relief.

From being a minor scene in *Coriolanus* this meeting on the highway between Volscian and Roman becomes a king-pin in the dramatic conception of Brecht. It is backed up by the vital closing scene in the Senate added in the adaptation to provide the final blotting-out of the aggressive hero who has dominated so much of the action:

KONZUL: Der Antrag der Tribunen, Ländereien
Nach der Erobrung eingezogen, den Bewohnern
Coriolis zurückzugeben, ist Gesetz.

SENATOR: Antrag, betreffend eine Wasserleitung
Vom dritten Hügel zu den östlichen Gärten.

*Ein Bote bringt eine Nachricht.*

KONZUL: Hier eine Meldung, daß in Antium
Am gestrigen Vormittage Cajus Marcius
Erschlagen wurd.

STILLE.

MENENIUS: Antrag: Sein Name, nunmehr, da er tot
Der ihn einmal so groß trug und einmal
So wenig glücklich, sei am Kapitol
Als eines Römers und als eines...

BRUTUS: Antrag:
Daß der Senat fortfahre mit der Sichtung
Der täglichen Geschäfte.

KONZUL: Eine Frage:
Die Marcier bitten, daß, nach der Verordnung
Numa Pompilius' für die Hinterbliebenen
Von Vätern, Söhnen, Brüdern, doch den Frauen
Erlaubt werd öffentliches Tragen
Von Trauer für zehn Monde.

BRUTUS: Abgeschlagen.

*Der Senat setzt seine Beratungen fort.*

Parallel with the everyday tasks and cares of the tanner and sandal-maker is the day-to-day, somewhat dull business of the Senate; again the news of Coriolanus's death scarcely stirs the surface. It is possible that Brecht went beyond the bounds of the psychologically probable in not allowing even a hint of relief to enter at the disappearance of this dangerous man. The naked directness of juxtaposition practised by Brecht in this scene poses with brutal frankness the question of fame and greatness — not the less powerful for being only implied — although the complete obliteration of Coriolanus in the public memory was avoided in the Ensemble production by omitting
the Konsul's request and therefore Brutus's curt 'Abgeschlagen'.

The alienating effect of these two scenes stands in startling contrast to their relative insignificance among the properly dramatic nodes of the play. They represent nothing less than the regrouping of the historical molecules to give a new pattern and quality to our understanding of past events, and a revaluation of accepted norms of fame, prestige, value. For this reason the figure of Coriolanus is subjected to a rigorous investigation, his possible motives are scrutinized within Brecht's fresh conceptions of the causal concatenation of events rather than the erratic outbursts of personality. Wilson Knight entitles his essay on Coriolanus 'The Royal Occupation', this being indeed a traditional idea of the kingly qualities: pride, bravery, skill in war, indifference to pain and injury, delight in battle and success in slaughter. Coriolanus is 'a slaying-machine of mechanic excellence', and his son, too, is being reared to fit into this mould of military prowess. Brecht, and later in production the Ensemble, was concerned with the application and target of Coriolanus's abilities. War-making is the only value for the warrior, but it is a value, especially in the context of the emergent Roman republic fighting for survival. Hence the need to recognize the important function of the battle-scenes in establishing the general's initial worth to Rome, justifying the acclamation of the masses and determining his rough-shod methods in a civilian situation.

The heart of the matter, for Shakespeare as well as Brecht, lies in the relationship of the individual to society: 'People of the Renaissance were fascinated by the problem of absolute power; the mechanism by means of which a good prince is transformed into a tyrant. To them it was an everyday affair. It was one of the great Shakespearian themes.' Such a theme can be extrapolated from Shakespeare's drama and is obviously a strong subconscious undercurrent pressing right through it from the opening lines. Brecht brings it to the surface as an issue for open debate, and while in the early stages of considering how to adapt Shakespeare's play he had thought of turning the war of defence into one of aggression, he soon discarded this in favour of Coriolanus's 'Streben nach der Monarchie' that explains his attitudes and bid for power more cogently:

Beiseitegelassen werden muß das Motiv Angriff oder Verteidigung. Angriffs- oder Verteidigungskriege waren in dieser historischen Situation immer fortschrittlich, da sie zur Errichtung des römischen Imperiums führten.

Coriolan jedoch will die Monarchie wieder aufrichten, d.h. zu einer überlebten Gesellschaftsordnung zurückgehen, war also persönlich reaktionär. Dieses Motiv macht ihn zum Gegner sowohl Roms als auch Antiums. Er muß aus Rom fliehen, und in Antium versagen.

By this means Brecht implants a coherent dialectic in Coriolanus that operates outside the purely personal attributes of pride and expertise in war. The individual may be useful but is not essential to society, and the energy built up by the confluence of achievement and ambition reaches the critical explosive point where the virtues of Coriolanus (his military successes on behalf of
Rome) become evils (his attempt to attain despotic power by usurpation). The vast quantity of violence massed in the service of the state undergoes the qualitative change to danger that basically alters and nullifies the social value of Coriolanus.

Brecht's adaptation pivots largely on this question of appropriate and false ends; he emphatically refuses to see the hero's tragedy in terms of a personal choice between pride and patriotism, duty to himself and to his mother. Coriolanus's sword is valuable if devoted to an acceptable purpose; if abused, it becomes reprehensible. The Programmheft explains how important it is to show that Coriolanus's greatness is measurable and that the acclamation of the people is in recognition of his usefulness:


Pursuing its ramifications in the actions of the parties involved, Brecht elaborates this theme in all its consequences. In a note dated 20 May 1951 he stated the basis of Coriolanus's position:

Die Tragödie des einzelnen Mannes interessiert uns natürlich weit weniger als die des Gemeinwesens, veranlaßt durch den einzelnen Mann. Wir müssen aber zugleich nahe beim Shakespeare bleiben, wenn wir nicht seine Vorzüge gegen uns mobilisieren wollen. So scheint es uns am besten, aus dem verletzten Stolz des Coriolan eine nicht allzu shakespeareferne andere bedeutende Haltung zu machen, nämlich den Glauben des Coriolan an seine Unersetzlichkeit. Sie ist es, die ihn zugrunde richtet und das Gemeinwesen eines wertvollen Mannes beraubt.

This change in 'Tendenz' was reaffirmed in July 1952: 'Das Individuum erpreßt die Gesellschaft mit seiner Unentbehrlichkeit... Die Lösung muß positiv für die Gesellschaft sein, das heißt, sie hat es nicht notwendig, sich von einem Individuum erpressen zu lassen.' Consistent with his denunciation of the 'personality cult' Brecht arranges a crucial encounter in II, 3 (absorbing elements from Shakespeare II, 3 and I, 1) between the victorious general attempting to bludgeon his way to the Consulship with a hail of vituperation and accusations of blackmail, and the populace who stand up to him with irony and counter-charges. Coriolanus brushes aside the restraining pleas of Menenius and Cominius:

CORIOLAN:... Denn mit jedem Wunsch
Den ihr der schmutzigen Brut erfüllt, erzeugt ihr
Die neuen Wünsche.
FÜNFTER BÜRGER: Oho!
MENENIUS: Laßt es gut sein...
BRUTUS: Allwo
Das Volk nicht nur auf dem Papier befragt wird!
CORIOLAN: In Griechenland! Warum geht ihr nicht
COMINIUS: Genug.
SI CINIUS: Genug im Übermaß.
CORIOLAN: Nein, nehmt noch einiges
Für die Klienten mit! 's ist gratis. Mir ist
Bekannt, daß, als der Krieg die Stadt bedrohte
Mit jähem Untergang, sich das Geschmeiß
Der stinkenden Bezirk’ am untern Tiber
Korn ausbedungen für den Waffendienst.
Gewisse Leute sahn die Zeit gekommen
Für einen kleinen Fischzug durch Erpressung
Des Staats.
COMINIUS: Nicht weiter, Herr, ich bitt Euch.
VIERTER BÜRGER: Gewisse andere erpressen nicht, sie stehlen.
Wo bleibt die Beute von Corioli? . . .
CORIOLAN: Jetzt
Wo Rom nicht mehr den äußern Feind am Hals hat
Und das durch mich, kann Rom von seinem Aussatz
Sich lachend waschen.66

In the first act, too, Coriolanus had challenged the rabble to leave the city if they were not satisfied: 'Als ich dann einschritt | Schrien sie im Gehn “Wir wandern aus!” Ich rief | Ihnen ein “Gute Reise” nach.’67 By omitting whole stretches of Shakespeare’s text Brecht succeeds in reducing the effects of Coriolanus’s courage, patriotism and nobility; the speech on dust-laden custom (Shakespeare, II, 3, 111–23) becomes squalidly contemptuous doggerel:


*Zum Spiel eines Sackpfeifers, der angefangen hat, für kleine Münzen, etwas aufzuspielen:*
Hier seht ihr Cajus Marcius Coriolan
Bei dem Versuch, sich Hinz und Kunz zu nahn.
Er hat römische Adler zu verkaufen
(Bitte die lieben Kleinen, sich nicht um die Federn zu raufen!)
Ich bitte die Herrn, von Amtes wegen
Die Finger in meine Wunden zu legen.
Gegen ein kleines Almosen bin ich bereit
Zu jedwedem Dienst. Tretet heran! Letzte Gelegenheit!68

The violence done to Shakespeare’s text is for Brecht a necessary step towards diminishing the glamour of Coriolanus in readiness for the demonstration that he is not indispensable, and the climax of this endeavour is reached when the people of Rome, after an initial moment of panic, take up arms against the threat of the mighty general.

Certainly, Brecht bends the legendary story in order to devise an action that is congruent with his modern view of historical situations and his intention
of relativizing the importance of the individual *vis-à-vis* the communal achievement. The Icarus syndrome in Brecht’s thought is reinforced by his championship of the anonymous hero, the unnamed individual whose mark can usually be detected only in collective effort.\(^6^9\) Needless to say, in advocating the democratic principle — the city equals the citizens, a man’s worth is a function of his value to society — Brecht is really positing a new absolute in place of one felt to be antiquated, unjust, and unsuited to the conditions of his own contemporary world. The chief goal of the adaptation — to demonstrate that society must not allow itself to be blackmailed by an apparent dependence on the qualities of a single man — cannot be attained simply by censuring the peremptoriness of Coriolanus. He must be negated and surpassed in a real collision with a force that can prove itself capable of providing an alternative ethos for the common weal.

The counterpoising of forces necessitates a two-pronged approach to Shakespeare: the deflation of the hero, and the upgrading of the populace. One decisive point in this clash between the single and the collective hero is reached when Coriolanus demands the capitulation of Rome: by taking up arms in answer, the people show not only that there exists a positive force in Rome despite Coriolanus’s absence, but also that they would have been ready to defend themselves against the Volscians in the earlier war even without their general. There is no doubt of Brecht’s partisanship for the people. He insisted in the germinal stage of his version that the plebs should be depicted as the positive, progressive faction in Rome from the very first scene — the subject of a long analysis and discussion in 1953:

> Hier spielt das Volk die Hauptrolle. Hier muß dem Volk der andere gewünschte Charakter gegeben werden. Erhalten bleiben muß die Rede "Was macht die Patrizier zu Patriziern?" denn aus ihr folgt sich der Entschluß zur Auswanderung. Ob die 'sogenannten' 'humoristischen Lichter' erhalten bleiben sollen, ist fraglich. Irgendwelchen Wert besitzen sie nicht. Es fehlt mir an Urteil, wie sie hier wirken. Falls sie die Rüpelhaftigkeit des Volkes unterstreichen, sind sie wegzulassen und zu ersetzen.\(^7^0\)

In handling the function of the plebs Brecht had to carry out a dual operation: in order to invest them with dignity and acumen he first had to strip them of the image encrusted since Shakespeare’s day that the lower orders were pithy, coarsely witty, somewhat dull in mind, and a source above all of comic relief.\(^7^1\) Much comment has been made on Shakespeare’s virulent descriptions of the noxious, stinking, vacillating, stupid populace in *Coriolanus*, yet it is usually ignored that the contemptuous epithets issue from the disdainful lips of the patricians. MacCallum talks of ‘Shakespeare’s inability to conceive a popular rising in other terms than the outbreak of a mob’, yet claims that Plutarch attributed to all classes of citizens in the young republic an ‘intuitive political capacity’.\(^7^2\) Brecht indeed makes no bones about endowing his plebs with a political sagacity that is anachronistic (since it derives from a maturity acquired over a century of working-class struggle) and idealistic. He was quite aware of this incongruity:
Es ist selbstverständlich ein Fehler, wenn das Volk, bei der Rolle, die es im Coriolan spielt, irgendwie etwa an Shakespearesche Rüpelszenen erinnert. Auf der anderen Seite kann aus historischen Gründen die römische Plebs nicht ohne weiteres als ein fortgeschrittenes, klassenmäßig stark bewusstes Proletariat geschildert werden. Wenn auch die Klassengegensätze im alten Rom durch ihre gesetzliche Verankerung schärfer sind als im modernen Kapitalismus, wo sie nur halb gesetzlich, halb ökonomisch und halb gewohnheitsrechtlich fixiert sind, so kann man doch von einer antiken Masse in Italien im 5. vorchristlichen Jahrhundert zwar Würde, aber nicht politische Klarheit verlangen.73

Brecht suggests that with some caution the dignity of the people and its revolutionary will could be emphasized. Nowhere in Brecht’s work is a stupid peasant or worker to be found, or one incapable of learning. The extent of Brecht’s bias leads him to replace the alleged idealization of the aristocracy in Coriolanus with the idealization of the plebs, despite his stated desire to avoid doing so. In this Roman play several of the plebs display exactly the same political acumen as Rauert, Der Breitschultrige, Sganarelle in other adaptations. The self-possessed meeting of the Roman and the Volscian artisans, the political awareness of the gardener and others, the tactics of the tribunes, the final scene in the Senate, all rightfully belong to a modern context. Indeed, Dieckmann criticizes the artificial flatness of Brecht’s last scene precisely because it is an idealization coming after the one which closed Shakespeare’s play. The Ensemble created a violent finale out of Coriolanus’s death, and, coming after it, Brecht’s scenic coda

hat die Harmlosigkeit des Hinterbliebenen-Sextetts, mit dem, nach dem feurigen Verschwinden des Helden, der Don Giovanni schließt, und kommt aus demselben, nur eben säkularisierten, Geiste, der alle individuelle Dramatik in einen höheren Zusammenhang, eine unverrückbare Ordnung einbettet, die den Sieg des Guten von vornherein garantiert und vor der das Einzelschicksal episodal wird.74

The classical Christian ‘Lobet Gott den Herrn’ becomes ‘Am Ende siegt doch das Volk’, and Dieckmann concludes that though the practicability of Brecht’s Utopian dream is questionable, the impulse towards it deserves respect.

Within the framework of his ideologizing tendency Brecht imparts clarity, irony, dignity and resistance to his citizens. Although functioning in the dramatic happening on stage as a collective, these men are differentiated and endowed with ‘die sorgfältig durchgeformten, individuell aufgewiesenen Verhaltensweisen des einfachen Mannes, in denen sich Coriolan nach anfänglichem Triumph verstrickt’.75 The simplest method of improving the image of the populace was, of course, to divest it of such menial traits as the cowardice and scrabbling greed of the soldiers.76 More effective dramatically than such face-lifting are the distinctions made between the citizens. As the curtain rises Brecht puts among the mutinously-minded crowd a man holding a child and carrying a large bundle, thus contrasting the First Citizen — who incites to action — with the inertia and frightened evasion of other plebeians:

DER MANN MIT DEM KIND: Ich will sehen, was ihr erreicht. Wenn ihr nichts erreicht, werde ich mit denen vom dritten Bezirk auswandern.

ERSTER BÜRGER: Obwohl die Ebene, wo sie sich niederlassen wollen, unfruchtbar ist wie eine Steinplatte?


Kind nickt.

ERSTER BÜRGER: Seht ihr, solche Leute haben wir unter uns. Der fürchtet den Caius Marcius mehr als die wilde Natur in den Allegibergen. Bist du nicht ein römischer Bürger? ...

DER MANN MIT DEM KIND Zum Kind: Terzius, sag, daß du in einer solchen Stadt nicht Bürger sein willst.

Kind schüttelt den Kopf.

ERSTER BÜRGER: Dann hau ab, und schnell, du feiger Hund, aber das Kind laß da; wir werden für Terzius ein besseres Rom erkämpfen.

The submissive acceptance of the status quo by such citizens — despite an ironical insight into its workings — is accentuated later when Coriolanus roughly requests his vote and the man points out the general’s toga to his child:


From this easy conquest Coriolanus turns to notch up a further success with a cobbler in a bantering exchange plagiarized from the opening scene of Julius Caesar. The Fourth Citizen assures Coriolanus that he can rely on the cobbler’s vote ‘weil der Krieg den Schuhpreis hinauf treibt und Ihr eine wahre Personifikation des Krieges seid, Herr’. The sting in the tail here condemns such commoners as the cobbler who cannot see beyond their private, immediate gain to the contradiction inherent in it: the war which is making him rich will debilitate the city, lay it open to possible conquest and ultimately deprive him of his profit. On the heels of the cobbler’s acquiescence comes the intelligent metaphor of the rose and the cabbage; the gardener is careful not to commit his vote, as is the Sixth Citizen, whereas the Third and Fourth Citizens are intent only on appeasing Coriolanus. In this way divergent or conflicting views among the plebeians are synoptically and economically adumbrated: fear of Coriolanus, awe before his deeds, and the profit motive on the one
hand — scepticism, hard common sense, trenchant questions about his policies and the booty of Corioli on the other.

Since the plebeians are now the mainspring of action in Brecht’s reading of their historical situation, the motives for any modifications of their attitudes and conduct have to be carefully sifted and functionally determined within the limits of the drama. The wavering irresolution and fickleness of Shakespeare’s citizens serves largely to confirm — and so enhance — the packed determination and hard courage of Coriolanus; they are extensions of the bulking consciousness of his own self, and as a foil to him are used as material for the construction in dramatic terms of his figure. Brecht seeks to make the play epic by dispersing this concentration of dramatic movements in the one individual. In his version the plebeians are invested with a dramatic function at least equal to that of Coriolanus; in this way an over-saturation of energy does not occur at any single point since contradictions exist throughout and neutralize each other continuously. However, in unreservedly admitting his partisanship for the plebs, Brecht ran the risk of swinging the axis of the drama into a different but as extreme a position as he implied that Shakespeare had done. In other words, he tended to substitute the idealization of the people undiscriminatingly for the idealization of the nobility. When it came to staging the adaptation, the Ensemble foresaw the pitfalls and shortcomings of this intention of Brecht’s. The rehearsal notes in the Programmheft indicate the importance of showing a qualitative change in the attitude of the plebeians from hero worship to defiance of Coriolanus:

The problem was one of differentiation: if the plebs were to be adequate to their function in the reorganized dramatic economy of the play, their reactions had to be resolved into stages that displayed a change — and a progress — in the quality of their actions, resulting from insights gained in dealing with Coriolanus and the patricians. On these grounds the Ensemble graded the role of the plebeians into three phases: unreflecting initial acclamation of the general (who has served Rome well); a growing apprehension of the danger of tyranny inherent in his very qualities; the final progression from blindness to insight and preventive action. This structure entailed particularly the discarding of Brecht’s ‘idealistic’ justification of the disorganized arming of the citizens in the opening scene, in order to throw into relief the subsequent
changes in quality. The problem then was to show how the plebeians had progressed in political consciousness by deliberately taking up arms later:


The principal keystone of the adaptation — and this is retained by the Ensemble — lies squarely in the decision of the plebeians to defend their city against the menace of Coriolanus (by inverting the order of v, 3 and v, 4 Brecht significantly makes this vital scene (v, 3) precede the confrontation of Coriolanus and Volumnia, by which it is thus uninfluenced). Collaborators’ notes describe how the plebeians act while the nobles talk:


In der Verteidigung Roms liegt der Kern der Bearbeitung, der Anlaß für die Umwandlung des tragischen Punktes: Rom wird nicht gerettet, weil Coriolan umkehrt, sondern Coriolan kehrt um, weil Rom entschlossen ist, sich selbst zu retten. Die Plebejer bewaffnen das Volk vor der Unterredung Mutter-Sohn: Der Ausgang des Krieges hängt nicht von dem Ausgang des Gespräches ab. Sie lassen Volumnia nur gehen, um Zeit zu gewinnen. Coriolan wartet zu lang. Als der Krieg nicht ohne Volk ging (Anfang), machte man ihm Konzessionen. Coriolan irrt sich aber, als er glaubt, daß der Krieg nicht ohne großen Mann geht.80

The gap between Brecht’s conception and Shakespeare’s depiction yawns wide: the latter’s panic-stricken citizens had at once repented the banishing of Coriolanus and turned on their leaders to vent their guilt and fear. The disconcerted Sicinius is warned by a messenger (v, 4, 35–9):

Sir, if you’ld save your life, fly to your house:
The plebeians have got your fellow-tribune,
And hale him up and down; all swearing if
The Roman ladies bring not comfort home
They’ll give him death by inches.

Alarm and recrimination evaporate from among Brecht’s plebeians, dismay is reserved only for the patricians:


1. Müssen die Bürger feststellen, daß es besser ist, daß ein Geier wie Coriolan gegen sie ist, als in den eigenen Reihen kämpfen.
2. Der Adel muß in Panik ausbrechen, wie kopflose Hennen, denen der Hahn auf den Nachbarhof geflogen ist. Sie zittern vor ihrem Standesgenossen, daß ihnen die Waffen aus den Händen fallen, die sie aufsammeln.81

The active plebeian rebound to meet the challenge of Coriolanus is master-minded and steered by the tribunes. These two men are the leaders of the popular resistance, and in the adaptation they are subjected to a thorough overhaul that totally transforms their image. Shakespeare's portrayal of them is not flattering, for it becomes clear that much of their enmity towards Coriolanus stems from personal envy and spite. Dr Johnson spoke of their 'plebeian malignity and tribunitian insolence', and many commentators see them delineated as 'utter scoundrels' in agreement with R. W. Chambers that Shakespeare 'hated and despised the tribunes in Coriolanus with a bitterness which he rarely felt towards any of his creatures'.82 Enright says that 'the conversations of the tribunes reveal a plain jealousy of Coriolanus as a man which has nothing to do with their jealous concern for the people's rights. At least, we feel, he is more of a man than they are',83 and Brents Stirling maintains they are 'the real villains of the Shakespearean story'.84 A careful comparison with Plutarch's descriptions of Brutus and Sicinius led MacCallum to the conclusion that Shakespeare blackened their characters,85 and they do indeed figure as abject jackals snarling at the hero's heels. They do incite the mob, they are afraid of losing office, they do blench at the thought of Coriolanus menacing Rome, they are cowardly when the mob howls for revenge on them. Yet there is in them too a nugget of devotion to the public weal, the possibility of self-sacrifice for the advancement of their class, as Jan Kott colourfully suggests:

It is these two indolent half-wits, proud, violent and petulant, who represent the people in Coriolanus. They are 'the herdsman of the beastly plebeians' and stink just as the populace does. They suffer from scabies and have to scratch themselves all over their bodies. They are like mongrels. But these mongrels know how to defend their herd. These two ridiculous tribunes, Brutus and Sicinius, short and misshapen, envious and suspicious though they are, possess a class instinct.86

More clearly than some critics Palmer understands that Shakespeare's tribunes are not simply base and vile, that they do represent the outlook on the world of an ill-used class and they do fight for a cause. Faint shadowings of modern worker movements are perceptible in Shakespeare's pair of probing trouble-makers: 'For better or worse, these tribunes are Shakespeare's counterfeit presentment of two labour leaders. They are the natural products of a class war in the commonwealth. They use their wits to defend the interests of the popular party and to remove from power a declared enemy of the people.'87 And when Brutus suspects ulterior motives in Coriolanus's promptness to serve under Cominius, 'the tribunes are right and they are giving proof of precisely that “realism” and precisely that suspicion of their political rulers which are characteristic of popular leaders in all times and places.88
The glimmer of political stresses and configurations that properly belong to a later century is painstakingly uncovered by Brecht and fanned into a glow that colours every feature of his interpretation. And the central axiom of this interpretation is the transfiguration of the tribunes into alert and altruistic public officials, solely taken up with the welfare of the citizens. From the very first scene Brecht takes care to throw into relief the calmness and wisdom of the tribunes as they exercise a benevolent watchfulness over the interests of their charges. Brutus advises the plebeians to enlist with Coriolanus in a justified war of defence against the Volscians who are intending to attack Rome ‘Auf die Nachricht großer | Teurung und Rebellion hier’:

**BRUTUS:** Geht, Freunde, folgt ihm! Schreibt euch in die Listen! Seid gute Krieger für ein gutes Rom! Und was den Kampf in seinen Mauern angeht Um Korn, Olive, Pacht- und Zinserlaß Wir schauen aus, dieweil ihr für es fechtet.

It is Brutus who tempers Sicinius’s blunter assessment of the hero with a hint that he might be used to protect the interests of the plebeians, at least in the face of foreign aggression:

**SICINIUS:** Solch ein Mann ist Gefährlicher für Rom als für die Volsker.

**BRUTUS:** Das glaub ich nicht. Solch eines Mannes Schwert Ist mehr, als seine Laster schaden, wert.

It would, in fact, be a misrepresentation to identify these prudent and deliberate tribunes of Brecht’s with Shakespeare’s turbulent fomenters; paradoxically, they show ‘die Arbeiterklasse als Verteidigerin der bürgerlichen Demokratie’ and are not at all ‘Anwälte des Umsturzes, sondern Wahrer der Rechtsordnung wider den Über-Anspruch der Besitzenden’.

In his antagonistic appraisal of Brecht’s version, Günter Grass shows a tinge of scepticism towards the unashamed partisanship of his endeavour to instil class-consciousness into the plebeians:

Die erste Szene des zweiten Aufzuges bestätigt, beim Vergleich beider Fassungen, Brechts Vorhaben, das Original — und sei es unter Verzicht auf die blühendsten Dialogpassagen — zu einem Tendenzstück umzuformen, in welchem sich Coriolan mehr und mehr zum Kriegsspezialisten vergröbert, der weise Narr Menenius zum reaktionären Kasperle wird und beide Volkstribunen sich zu Klassenkämpfern wenn nicht erster, dann zweiter Güte mausern.

In the scene mentioned Brecht omits or curtails Brutus’s poetic description of the popular acclaim that greeted Coriolanus’s victorious return, the enumeration of his wounds, and the tribunes’ plan to stir the mob against him.

As a result of cuts and judicious additions, the tribunes emerge as clear-sighted politicians with the makings of statesmen, unswervingly analytical as they assess each new situation in turn:

**SICINIUS:** Die guten Priester beehren mich nicht mit mehr Vertrauen als dich, Brutus, aber ich weiß, es sind schlechte Nachrichten.
BRUTUS: Warum unter allen Umständen schlechte?
SICINIUS: Weil entweder die Volsker gesiegt haben, dann sind sie Herrn in Rom, oder Cajus Marcius, dann ist er Herr.
BRUTUS: Das ist richtig. Da kommt Menenius Agrippa.

MENENIUS tritt auf:

MENENIUS: Wie geht es, ihr Hirten des Plebejerviehs?
SICINIUS: Das Essen ist etwas knapp am Tiber, aber Ihr sollt neue Nachrichten haben?
MENENIUS: Ja, von Cajus Marcius, aber den liebt ihr nicht . . .
BRUTUS im Abgehen zu Sicinius: Jetzt wissen wir, wie die Nachrichten sind, die sie haben. Marcius hat gesiegt. Der Bursche wäre sonst nicht so frech.

When Sicinius predicts a runaway election of Coriolanus to Consul, Brutus answers ‘Das hieße Gute Nacht mit uns Tribunen’ — but this remains the only allusion to a private interest in office on their part. They switch at once to a consideration — demanding some vision — of future eventualities and the psychology of the citizens’ shallow insight:

SICINIUS: Sein Auftrag war, die Volsker abzuschlagen
Nicht mehr. Genausogut kannst du dem Wolf
Befehlen, er soll dir vom Hühnerstall
Den Fuchs verscheuchen, doch nicht mehr tun!
Er nimmt Corioli.
BRUTUS: Und hetzt uns so
Die Volsker für Jahrzehnte auf den Hals.
SICINIUS: Und horch, wie jetzt ein siegbesoffnes Rom
Vom Ruhm des Unbotsamen widerhallt!
Heut kündet jeder Sattler seinem Weib
Er hab Corioli hinzubekommen
Sie planen, wo sie zwei, drei Marmorvillen
In ihrem Keller unterbringen wollen.
Wir sind nur Spielverderber.

Concluding from their estimation of the circumstances that the onus of action devolves upon them, Brecht’s tribunes quickly display their tactical skill in varying the pace and pressure of their political struggle. In the forum, the most public place, they insist on clear words from Coriolanus on his policy and attitude if he is elected Consul:

SICINIUS: Eins vielleicht
Verbliebe noch zu tun: vor allem Volk
Den Kandidaten nach Programm und all-
Gemeiner Haltung zu befragen.
MENENIUS: Halt!
Dies steht nicht in der Charta.
SICINIUS: Die Tribunen
Stehn auch nicht in der Charta. Neues Recht
Erfocht das Volk im Krieg und mag’s nun nützen
Im Sieg, Ihr Herrn . . . Coriolanus
Soeben liefen in den Hafen unsre
Kornschiffe ein aus dem besiegten Antium.
Die Fracht ist Korn. Tribut und Beute aus
Dem blutigen Volskerkrieg. Was, edler Marcier
Würdest du als Konsul tun mit diesem Korn?

Having soon after provoked Coriolanus's ire and compassed his banishment, Brutus and Sicinius stand firm and cool-headed when news is brought of his destructive advance on the defenceless city. Shakespeare (iv, 6) shows them gripped by panic and the agitated citizens repenting they have exiled him, while the nobility find nothing reprehensible in Coriolanus's threats. Brecht attributes panic only to the patricians, and a few extra lines establish the bond of trust uniting the plebeians and their imperturbable leaders:

SICINIUS: Seid nicht entmutigt. 's gibt
Ein Pack in Rom, das gern bestätigt sähe
Was es zu fürchten vorgibt. Leute, geht, und
Ich sag nicht lauft, in die Bezirkslokale
Und zeigt, daß ihr nicht Furcht habt.
ZWEITER BÜRGER: Lieber zeigt ich
Als Mut jetzt eine Waffe. War es klug
Ihn zu verbannen?
SICINIUS: Ja.

This solid class front proceeds from steadfastness to action; in place of Menenius's refusal to attempt to intercede with Coriolanus on behalf of Rome:

Go you that banish'd him;
A mile before his tent fall down, and knee
The way into his mercy.

(v, 1, 4-6)

Brutus castigates the patricians' alacrity to capitulate — Brecht ironically gives him Menenius's lines for his scorn — and orders the arming of the citizens. Words become hard facts:

BRUTUS: Ihr hingegen
Wißt, wie Rom billig wird! Laßt doch den Rauch
Vom Kapitol aufsteigen, daß der Vetter
Erfährt, er ist willkommen. Fallt aufs Knie
Vor seinem Zelt, nein, eine Meile vorher
Und rutscht auf Eurem Knie in seine Gnade!
Heraus mit dem Beschluß: wer will den Rauch sehn?

Pause.

Gut, keiner. Dann verteilt die Waffen, sonst
Wird, wer den kleinen Rauch nicht sehen will
Den großen sehen, in dem Rom aufgeht!

With the focus of attention narrowing to defence — defence against aggression, defence of a community worth fighting for — the definition of the values which shape that community is outlined by Brecht in the key scene v, 3 when all the Senators but Cominius leave:

EIN BÜRGER: Die Mehrheit hat sich zum Kriegsdienst gemeldet. Wer noch wartete, ob Menenius etwas bei Coriolanus ausrichten würde, wird sich jetzt melden.

BRUTUS: Gut. Wenn diejenigen, die von Rom leben, es nicht verteidigen wollen, werden wir es verteidigen, von denen Rom bisher gelebt hat. Warum sollten nicht die Maurer die Mauern verteidigen?

COMINIUS: Rechnet einige von uns dazu. Ihr sollt die Waffen ausgehändigt bekommen, ich nehms auf meine Kappe.

BÜRGER: Es lebe Cominius!98

The faith of the citizens in their leaders’ judgement is justified when Brutus, in disagreement with his more impetuous colleague, allows Volumnia to undertake her momentous appeal to Coriolanus. Brutus is not swayed by emotional considerations of filial piety, but by two real facts: the need to warn Coriolanus that the people are now in control of their city and ready to defend it, and the need to gain time for forging weapons. A citizen brings Volumnia’s request to be allowed to parley with her son:

SICINIUS: Die Bitte ist abgeschlagen.

BRUTUS: Ist bewilligt.

SICINIUS: Willst du die Verräterbrut aus der Stadt lassen?

BRUTUS: Einige Familien, Patrizier, leben jetzt in Furcht, wegen ihrer Verbindungen mit ihm gesteinigt zu werden. Sie scheinen sich an die Marcier gewandt zu haben. Ich glaube nicht, daß die Alte uns fürchtet, aber ich denke nicht, daß sie dafür ist, daß in Zukunft der volskische Senat auf dem Kapitol sitzt. Sie ist in ihrer Art eine Patriotin, indem sie uns Plebejer lieber von Römern geschunden haben will als von Volskern... Das Gespräch kann uns einen Aufschub verschaffen. Heute nacht und morgen den Tag über sind die Mauern schwach besetzt. Zum Bürger: Sie können gehen. Aber schick eine der Frauen des Gesindes mit, auf die du dich verlassen kannst, daß wir erfahren, was gesprochen wurde. Einverstanden?


BRUTUS: Mir scheint, und manchem, wie ich hör, dies Rom Ein besserer Platz, seit dieser Mensch nicht mehr In seinen Mauern geht, wert zu verteidigen Vielleicht zum ersten Mal, seit es gegründet.99

Finally, after the success of this stratagem, the tribunes move forward to the concluding stage of their political battle — the fulfilment of peaceful power in the Senate meeting with which the adaptation closes, after the intervening stages of action and achievement.

There can be no doubt that Brecht set about reorganizing the matter of Coriolanus with the premeditated intention of achieving twin aims: to display the danger to society of an individual’s abuse of power, and to demonstrate the healthy energies latent in the lower classes that can be harnessed to nullify such threats and create a desirable society. This is perhaps the tenor of a comment Brecht made on Shakespeare’s achievement for his time, and the
necessity on the modern stage of going beyond it — from the individual to society, from personal freedoms and passions to integration in a collective organism. Dieckmann analyses fundamental differences in the treatment of the hero between original and adaptation, describing how Shakespeare set out to show Coriolanus’s value in war and dispensability in peace. The drama is not so much a ‘tragedy of pride’ as an excursus on ‘die Grenzengerechtigkeit zwischen Politik und Heerführung, ein Plädoyer wider den Militärstaat, soziologisch konkretisiert durch die Aufdeckung des Klassenhintergrundes’.100

In this conception of the warrior-hero Shakespeare had vividly in mind the ever-present threat in post-medieval times that the condottieri — mercenary leaders like Colleoni, Sickingen, Sforza — would prove tyrannically oppressive if they ever diverted their valuable services from military ends to the acquisition of power as peacetime heads of state. Dieckmann suggests, with Otto Ludwig, a comparison of Coriolanus and Wallenstein, since the tragedy of each is generated by an overreaching of himself and of the social structure, coupled with an inability to create a ‘new order’ out of his own nature. This tragic failure ensues because Coriolanus (‘der Gewalt- und Willensmensch in seiner klassischen Gestalt, der leibhaftige Kriegsgott’)101 oversteps the bounds of his proper sphere of activity, and — in a sense — is untrue to himself.

In the Ensemble production the ‘natural’, ‘mythical’ attributes of the hero are drained from him — there remains only a vicious, menacing, frenzied beast: Nicht in schimmernder Wehr, mit wehendem Helmbusch steht Coriolanus auf der Bühne, sondern als ein Gladiator und Schlagetot, ein wüster Draufgänger, unzähmbar und blutdampfend . . . er ist (in der Darstellung Ekkehard Schalls) im Ganzen zum Berserker, zum losgelassenen Rüpel herabgedrückt und dem Zuschauer wird kein ästhetisches Moment zur Ergötzung am Helden gelassen.102

This degraded image of Coriolanus that was handed on by Brecht is taken by Dieckmann to be the reflection of a modern condottiere figure, the sinister distortion of the charismatic idol in Nazi Germany. Brecht had already achieved an artistic formulation of this spurious hero in Der aufhaltsame Aufstieg des Arturo Ui. Dieckmann discusses two ‘explosion’ scenes: Ui’s hysterical, declamatory, hollow eruption is part of his artificiality in contrast to the genuine, spontaneous outburst of unbridled self-assurance possessed by Shakespeare’s hero. This critic implies that Ui is an impressively adequate satirical expression of the strident bastardized hero, and that Brecht, in pursuing his quarry — the debased counterfeit of the truly predatory beast — too vehemently, actually destroys the pristine image he wishes to restore. In other words, though Brecht’s polemic is with the present, he joins issue with Shakespeare:

Form aufzuheben trachtet, gibt sie sich den Anschein, das anzugehen, was sie im Grunde verteidigen will: die von der faschistischen Verwechselung mit dem Zerstörerischen bedrohte Natur, die sich hier noch in diesem bekundet. Kunstmittel, die gegen den Verfall des Schönen geschaffen sind, werden hier gegen dieses selbst, das intakte Urbild, gerichtet.103

Dieckmann goes further and detects in Brecht’s method of modernizing the language as well as the premisses of Coriolanus the danger of the anti-cliché and techniques of alienation hardening into just another dogmatic system.

Dieckmann’s sensitively argued strictures on Brecht’s adaptation are cogent and very pertinent if it is assumed that Brecht was trying to oust Shakespeare with his version; but it needs to be proved that such actually was his resolve. A more positive assessment of the relationship of original and adaptation can be reached through some remarks of another rebel playwright, namely Schiller. In his preface to Die Räuber Schiller enunciates certain principles of dramatic creation that underlie more than his own maiden play and are recognizably present in Coriolanus. He first acknowledges the advantages inherent in dramatic treatment generally ‘die Seele gleichsam bei ihren geheimsten Operationen zu ertappen’, and proclaims with specific reference to Franz Moor: ‘Das Laster wird hier mit samt seinem ganzen innern Räderwerk entfaltet.’ Shakespeare, like Schiller, lays bare the secret processes of the soul, and for him too the irrational, emotional, inexplicable motivations of men are an intrinsic part of the dramatic artifact. The characters in Coriolanus — the warrior, his mother, the tribunes, the rival general Aufidius, and others — are knit together by subterranean forces that draw their energy from deep pools of the personality on a level of response inaccessible to purely logical elucidation.

Schiller’s second point — his main concern in this preface — relates to the portrayal of the ‘wicked’ character. He makes three assertions: no human being is an outright villain since all are made in the likeness of God; the playwright must give due prominence to the virtues that even the most depraved man possesses; finally — on a cautious note — there ought to be sufficient reasoning thought present for the playwright not to make vice so intellectually and aesthetically pleasing that the spectator is seduced or lulled into overlooking its ugly source: ‘Wenn es mir darum zu thun ist, ganze Menschen hinzustellen, so muß ich auch ihre Vollkommenheiten mitnehmen, die auch dem bösesten nie ganz fehlen. Wenn ich vor dem Tyger gewarnt haben will, so darf ich seine schöne blendende Fleknhaut nicht übergehen, damit man nicht den Tyger beym Tyger vermisse.’ Schiller is, of course, eager to justify his bandits to an eighteenth-century audience, and his notes are determined on the one hand by an idealistic view of the ‘salvation’ of the human being, on the other by a realistic insight into his diversity.

Shakespeare too, perhaps more resourcefully than any other dramatist, endows his characters with subtle gradations of faults and qualities that demand a matching complexity of response from the spectator. Coriolanus is a bundle of contradictions — pride and submission, loyalty and betrayal,
partnership and rivalry, ambition and disdain, love of Rome and contempt for her citizens, private desires and public deeds— that in their delicate equilibrium induce in the audience the final effect of ‘a balanced judgement, moral and intellectual rather than passionate, for the paradoxes of the hero’s character are seen to cohere in a credible personality which excites admiration and dislike, disapproval and pity without engaging us as totally as do Hamlet, Lear and Othello’.104

Crucial, too, to Schiller’s conception of the hero is his extraordinary stature. He speaks as heir to the wave of Shakespeare worship in the eighteenth century; hence his insistence on the presentation of all aspects— good and bad— of a hero, if the dramatist is to be ‘der getreue Kopist der wirklichen Welt’ (Unterdrückte Vorrede); hence also the sheer magnitude of his characters, their huge potential either for good or for evil. Coriolanus, like Karl Moor, has a dynamic capacity for action, but whereas Shakespeare leaves his creations as monuments of themselves absorbed entirely in their own reality, Schiller is drawn into the ethical undertow of contemporary aesthetics and his final word subordinates realistic depiction to an overall moral: ‘Der Verirrte tritt wieder in das Geleise der Gesetze. Die Tugend geht siegend davon.’ The sketch of Karl Moor provided by Schiller in his Avertissement zur ersten Aufführung is true in all essentials of Coriolanus:


This expresses the Aristotelian principle that is the bond between the Shakespearean and Schillerian hero; his orbit is determined by a philosophical premise which qualifies the reactions of both character and audience. Whether the outcome is tragic death or return to virtue, the hero acts according to rules of belief that are consonant with aesthetic effects.

The Marxist Brecht rejects the isolated greatness of the individual as well as secret promptings of the soul that have no source in external motivation. Within the all-important social framework he does discover utter villains, colossal and ominous through their total dedication to evil. One such is Arturo Ui. Nowhere in Brecht’s work is hugeness of stature a criterion of the dramatic personage; his characters are never cast in the heroic mould, since they are designed to be congruent to and answer the needs of our modern sensibility. Characters who might possibly operate in vast dimensions, a Galileo or a Puntila, are reduced by their own furtive pettiness or by the opposition of a defiant antagonist, while Brecht’s positive heroes are drawn almost exclusively from the humble ranks of unassuming men and women whom nothing marks as outstanding. Brecht converts the Schillerian tenets into modern terms, confirming Dürrenmatt’s answer to Brecht’s own question about the presentation of the world in drama: ‘Mit einem kleinen Schieber, mit einem Kanzlisten, mit einem Polizisten läßt sich die heutige Welt besser
wiedergeben als mit einem Bundesrat, als mit einem Bundeskanzler.105 For this reason, if Brecht wished to adapt Coriolanus, he was bound to drag the hero down from the pinnacle of fame.

It is important to consider carefully in this connexion the implications of Brecht's definition of a realistic manner of writing: 'den gesellschaftlichen Kausalkomplex aufdeckend|die herrschenden Gesichtspunkte als die Gesichtspunkte der Herrschenden entlarvend|...|konkret und das Abstrahirieren ermöglichend.' Brecht is not at all realistic in the manner that Shakespeare and the early Schiller were realistic, for he would refuse to be a faithful copyist of the 'real' world (this he would disparagingly term 'naturalist'). His realism is an abstraction, a schematic rendering of the reality that confronts him in an effort to convey an insight into that reality. This is an abstraction and a restriction because certain aspects are excluded from the vision so that it may gain in coherence, density and impact. Brecht abstains from depicting the 'dazzling' beauty of the tiger's 'Fleckenhaut', which is an aesthetic phenomenon divorced from the tiger's claws — a victim being mauled by the beast would have little appreciation for its 'fearful symmetry'. The dazzle per se is spurned by Brecht; as soon as externals are used to an end, however, as soon as they affect the lives of those around and therefore society, they become motivations and of gestic significance. Thus Brecht could say, speaking of Don Juan, that he was concerned not with the 'Glanz des Parasiten' but with 'das Parasitäre seines Glanzes'. In the same way, he does not allow Coriolanus a single atom of gratuitous greatness. The language of Shakespeare — and with it the deeds of the hero — is reduced to a level flow of hard argument and counter-argument; and the adaptation closes in a muted minor key with the almost total obliteration of the hero, his fame being equated with his worth to the community and so shrinking to nothing.

Dieckmann describes the versions of Coriolanus by Shakespeare and by Brecht as being like warring partners, 'deren jeder nur wirksam wird, indem er den andern retardiert: der Verfremdungsduktus den klassischen Jambus, der durchschneidende Impuls die Distanz der Analyse'.106 The two dramas are certainly not to be weighed against each other, as they belong to such different epochs. Brecht has not aimed at producing a version to usurp Shakespeare's unique creation; what he has done is to re-structure the exploits of Coriolanus in such a fashion as to inject a twentieth-century consciousness of drama and of history into a legend so clearly pervaded by a political theme. That Brecht's adaptation does not shrivel into a dramatized political tract is due to the qualities that also inform his original work: a cold and fearless intelligence, sensitivity to the multiple and contradictory forms of human community, and, above all, compassion for the suffering and under-privileged.
NOTES

2 Published in Akzente, 11 (1964), 194–221.
3 BBA 672/68.
4 BBA 672/69 f.
5 J. Dover Wilson, Coriolanus (Cambridge, 1960), pp. xix ff. No critical purpose is served by writing of Shakespeare in such blurred terms: dramatic art is not an entity that can be isolated, nor is there room in great plays for speeches that are only interesting.
10 GW, 17/1253.
11 Käthe Rülicke-Weiler, Die Dramaturgie Brechts (Berlin, 1966), p. 147. Coriolanus is, of course, perfectly actable in any age. The word ‘spielbar’ therefore requires some elucidation: for Brecht and his collaborators it connotes an interpretation meaningful, as they see it, in terms of a modern audience.
12 G. Bullough, Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare (London, 1964), v, 494.
14 Ibid., p. 20.
15 Ibid., p. 90.
17 Phillips, op. cit., p. 11.
18 Palmer, op. cit., p. 255.
20 GW, 6/2400.
21 GW, 6/2440 f.
25 GW, 6/2479 f.
26 GW, 6/2480.
27 GW, 6/2488 f.
28 Palmer, op. cit., p. 301.
29 GW, 6/2491 f.
30 BBA 650/24.
31 Op. cit., p. 193. Compare also p. 155: ‘... there is here a swift channelling, an eddying, twisting and forward-flowing stream; ice-cold, intellectual, cold as a mountain torrent and holding something of its iron taste. We are in a world of hard weapons, battle’s changing contacts, civic brawls about “grain” and “corn”; a town-life somewhat limited and provincial, varied with the sickening crashes of war. There is little brilliance, little colour.’
35 Die Dramaturgie, p. 149.
36 Ibid., p. 153.
37 ‘Die Tragödie des Coriolan’, Sinn und Form, 17 (1965), 466.
38 See Palmer, Political Characters, p. 250: ‘Shakespeare in Coriolanus takes for his theme a recurrent political problem of all times and places... Politics are a predominating interest in scene after scene... in this particular tragedy the individual men and women are passionately concerned with their rights and wrongs as citizens in a community... the virtues and vices of the principal characters are all related to their place and function in the commonwealth; their actions and passions are almost wholly governed by their conceptions of what is due to them or expected of them as belonging to an estate of the nation.’ Kott, with his Marxist background and his thesis that Shakespeare is our ‘contemporary’, goes even further, op. cit., pp. 151, 164, 167 ff.:
'But the history that breaks Coriolanus is not royal history any more. It is the history of a city divided into plebeians and patricians. It is the history of class struggle. History in the royal chronicles, and in Macbeth, was a Grand Mechanism, which had something demonic in it. History in Coriolanus has ceased to be demonic. It is only ironic and tragic. This is another reason why Coriolanus is a modern play... In this drama of class hatred Coriolanus is such as the plebeians see him, but the plebeians also conform to Coriolanus's view of them... At the Capitol and at the Forum, laws of revolution, attitudes and conflicts, are all exposed, sharply like formulas, condensed in bits of dialogue. Opposite each other stand: "top" and "bottom", Jacobins and Girondists, revolutionary democrats and liberals... History has proved the plebeians right: the enemy of the people has become the enemy of Rome. In the first three acts of Coriolanus a bare drama of class attitudes has been played out. One could call it also a drama of historical inevitability. There is in it no discrepancy between social situation and action, or psychology. Coriolanus could be nameless, just as the First, Second, and Third Citizens are nameless. He is just an ambitious general, who hates the people and has gone over to the enemy camp when unable to achieve dictatorial power.'

39 BBA 672/69.
40 'Die Tragödie des Coriolan', p. 471.
41 Shakespeare's Roman Plays, p. 547.
42 BBA 672/67.
44 GW, 6/2493.
45 GW, 6/2487.
46 The State, pp. 146 ff.
47 BBA 93/25.
48 BBA 650/03.
49 Shakespeare our Contemporary, p. 163.
52 Ibid., p. 154.
53 BBA 650/01.
54 GW, 17/1252 f.
55 Verfremdungseffekt in den erzählenden Bildern des älteren Breughel, GW, 18/281.
57 GW, 6/2465 f.
58 GW, 6/2496 f.
59 Compare the tone of grand solemnity with which Shakespeare closes his play, and the temper of comments on 'a conclusion that proposes no enigma and inflicts no pang, but even more than in the case of Macbeth satisfies, and even more than in Antony and Cleopatra uplifts the heart, without troublesome questionings on the part of the reader' (MacCallum, Shakespeare's Roman Plays, p. 462). Wilson Knight, op. cit., p. 198, also enthuses over the tremendous spirit of the finale and wonders 'whether any speech gives a more exquisite thrill of delight than this final cry of triumph at the hour of his death. Like Hamlet, this play of death ends with a dead march. But long after that there rings yet Coriolanus's final cry, a note of triumph never struck in Hamlet, the cry of mighty value, vanquished indeed by a mightier, yet itself a thing of royal integrity and splendour.'
60 R. W. Leonhardt, op. cit., says of Brecht's ending and the alteration to it: 'Das ist ein schlechter Schluß, denn: da taucht unvermittelt eine unbekannte Verordnung eines bis dahin nie genannten Mannes auf; da entfernt man sich von Shakespeare (in dessen Stück die Frauen ja als Retter Roms geehrt werden) weiter, als nötig ist; da wird der Tribun Brutus als unerbittlicher Fürsprecher einer über den Tod hinausreichenden Sippenhaft unsympathisch — nachdem es doch ein Ziel der Bearbeitung gewesen war, die Volkstribunen als weise Männer guten Willens (was sie bei Shakespeare gewiß nicht sind) erscheinen zu lassen. Ich weiß nicht, ob Mut dazu gehörte, den vom Meister hinterlassenen Schluß zu streichen; auf jeden Fall verrät die Streichung tiefe künstlerische Einsicht.'
61 The Imperial Theme, p. 163.
62 Brecht's scepticism of the need for great rulers and their bloody deeds is summed up in the ironical close to his sonnet Über Shakespeares Stück 'Hamlet', an attitude to Hamlet's decision to slaughter:
So daß man finsternickt, wenn man erfährt
Er hätte sich, wär er hinaufgelangt
Unfehlbar noch höchst königlich bewährt.

63 Kott, op. cit., p. 150.
64 BBA 1824/95. The phrase is by Rülicke-Weiler.
65 BBA 650/07 f.
66 GW, 6/2444 ff.
67 GW, 6/2403.
68 GW, 6/2441 f.
69 The poem Fragen eines lesenden Arbeisters is the simplest expression of this attitude and
the inevitable enquiry it provokes, and its ideology is to be met at countless points in
Brecht.
70 BBA 672/69.
71 See Programmheft: Zur Inszenierung, which opens with a bitter attack on the tradition
of presenting a great individual against a background of knaves and petty scum so
that the hero’s glitter was enhanced: ‘Der Zuschauer sollte seinen Shakespeare auf
Anhieb haben, und er bekam ihn mit der blechernen Größe eines Gyges und dem
traurigen Humor der Mundartstücke. Er rülpste, furzte, randalierte auf der einen Seite,
damit auf der anderen Seite um so edler und einsamer herumstolziert werden konnte
wie aufgeputzte Hähne.’
72 MacCallum, Shakespeare’s Roman Plays, pp. 525 and 518.
73 BBA 672/67 f. Compare the more aggressive criticism of Grass, op. cit., p. 201 f.: ‘Denn jene, bei Shakespeare von der ersten Szene an wankelmütigen Empörer schult Brecht, bevor sie überhaupt auftreten, also vorgefaßt und nicht im Verlauf der Hand-
lung, zu handfesten Revolutionären um, die ihm mit seiner Schlußszene den Beweis erbringen sollen, daß die klassenbewußten Plebejer — wie Livius andeutet — bei ihm
ganz gewiß siegen werden. Dem Schema dieser Tendenz folgend, benehmenseine
Tribunen: zeigt Shakespeare zwei verwechselbare Nullen, intrigant und feige, gibt
Brecht zwei listenreichen und fortschrittlichen Funktionären mehr und mehr die
Macht.’
75 Ibid., p. 475.
76 See notes on the unfinished scenes of Act I, BBA 650/07: ‘(zu 4.): bleibt. Stärker
herauskommen muß das “ohne uns” der Soldaten, die Marcius zwar wegen seiner
Tapferkeit loben, aber nicht für Rom kämpfen wollen.
(zu 5.): Das Plündern hielten wir für uns ohne Bedeutung, es muß nicht gezeigt
werden, d.h. nur soweit, als es Coriolan Anlaß zu Beschimpfungen gibt. Dann Über-
gang zu der Beschimpfung in [6].’
77 GW, 6/2397 f.
78 GW, 6/2439.
79 GW, 6/2440.
80 BBA 650/23.
81 BBA 1769/06.
82 R. W. Chambers, Shakespeare’s Hand in the Play of Sir Thomas More (Cambridge,
83 The Apothecary’s Shop, p. 34 n.
85 Op. cit., p. 501: ‘They are described as “seditious tribunes” when they oppose the
colonisation of Velitrae and the renewal of the war; but Plutarch shows they had good
grounds for doing so. Even their action against Coriolanus for opposing the grant of
corn and advocating the abolition of their office, was from their own point of view, and
perhaps from any point of view, perfectly legitimate.’
86 Shakespeare our Contemporary, p. 166.
87 Political Characters, p. 259.
88 Ibid., p. 260.
89 GW, 6/2405 f.
90 GW, 6/2407. Compare Grass, op. cit., p. 204: ‘Bei Brecht halten zwei selbstbewußte
Funktionäre die Position.’
93 GW, 6/2426 f. Compare BBA 650/09: ‘Neu eingeführt am Anfang kurzes Gespräch
zwischen den Tribunen. Es zeigt, daß das Volk immer am Kriege verliert.’
190

94 GW, 6/2430.
95 GW, 6/2442 f.
96 GW, 6/2478. Compare the helpless disarray into which tribunes and plebeians fall in Coriolanus, iv, 6, 139–61.
97 GW, 6/2481 f.
98 GW, 6/2486 f.
99 GW, 6/2487 f.
100 'Die Tragödie', p. 470.
101 Ibid., p. 467.
102 Ibid., p. 472.
103 Ibid., p. 486.
104 Bullough, op. cit., p. 495.
105 Theaterprobleme (Zürich, 1955), p. 44.