

READING SHAKESPEARE POLITICALLY: THE BERLINER ENSEMBLE PRODUCTION OF BRECHT'S *CORIOLAN*

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RESUMO: Análise da adaptação da *Tragédia de Coriolano*, de William Shakespeare (1564-1616), por Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), bem como da encenação do texto do dramaturgo alemão, realizada em 1964 pelo Berliner Ensemble. Tanto o trabalho de adaptação quanto a sua posterior encenação descartam qualquer neutralidade estético-política na retomada do drama histórico do general romano do começo da República.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES: Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956); William Shakespeare (1564-1616); Coriolano; Berliner Ensemble; Performance; Teatro Político.

ABSTRACT: *An analysis of Bertolt Brecht's (1898-1956) adaptation of William Shakespeare's (1564-1616) Coriolanus and its staging by the Berliner Ensemble in 1964. Neither the adaptation nor its theatrical realization aimed at a neutral aesthetic or political rendering of this political tragedy set at the Early Republican period of Roman History.*

KEYWORDS: Bertolt Brecht (1898); William Shakespeare (1564-1616); Coriolanus; Berliner Ensemble; Performance; Political Theatre.

Rome without Marcius, Rome without victory!¹
(*Coriolan*, the play-text)

He is indispensable.
(Brecht, *Coriolanus*, 94, 2437)

This way of reading the play, which can be read in more
than one way, might in my view interest our audience.
(Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre" §68)

Brecht was uninterested in translation and probably incapable of it. Anything he touched became inalienably his own.
(E. Bentley)

When we come to analyse Brecht's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and the subsequent production of the Berliner Ensemble that heavily relies on Brecht's

¹ Every time a line is quoted in italics, it means that it is from the Berliner Ensemble play-text and cannot be found in Brecht's adaptation. I translated those lines. The two numbers before all other quotations refer to Ralph Manheim translation and the original in German respectively. Manheim uses "indispensable" for *Unersetzlich* that actually means "irreplaceable".

own ideas, although with a critical point of view, it is important first to determine how their reading of the play differs from that of the German bourgeois theatre of the beginning of the last century.

Brecht was radically against the practice of bourgeois theatre of de-historicizing Shakespeare and the classics. For one thing, Brecht did not subscribe to the idea that Shakespeare's theatre conveyed eternal values. Because it believed in that myth, German bourgeois theatre of the 1920's and 1930's deprived the classics of all the relevance they could have for modern times. For Brecht the only way of rescuing the classics from the "culinary" use bourgeois theatre had made of them since the nineteenth century was to adopt "*un point de vue politique*" (BRECHT, 2000, p. 95). "Shakespeare's great plays", Brecht writes, "were followed by three centuries in which the individual developed into a capitalist, and what killed them was not capitalism's consequences but capitalism itself" (BRECHT, 1998, p. 20). Brecht's aim was to change the classics, Shakespeare included. For Brecht Shakespearean drama could only make sense to modern audiences if it was staged not as the drama of the exceptional individuals that heroically live to the full a destiny that ends in destruction and solitude, but as the dramatic portrait of an age of crisis. The individual, even the exceptional one, must be understood as a product of his own time.

The view of *The Tragedy of Coriolanus* as representing a historical period of acute change and social turmoil, that is, a period of crisis and revolution, is what makes Shakespeare's play relevant to modern times. Brecht sees Shakespeare's play as raw material to be re-processed so that what is alive in it should become evident to modern audiences. In order to make the play alive it should not be treated as a sacred object which nothing can be added to or subtracted from. The "original" text in Brecht's theatre is not to be worshipped but used according to a rigorous ideological program.

But one must be aware of not losing the sense of historicity, otherwise the distance between the play and the audience will be effaced and again a false universalism will re-invade the stage. Keeping the sense of history, Brecht implies, allows the audience to perceive that everything in human history is ever mutable; and that the mechanisms that make history change are not in any way supernatural but produced by men and women in their social interactions. Brecht does not invite the public to the theatre to identify with the hero and pity his destiny, but to become more aware of the social causes of his destiny. By beholding Coriolanus' drama with a deep sense of history, the audience can perceive that it is possible to defeat other Coriolanus in their own world. It is with these ideas in mind that I want to analyse Brecht's adaptation of *Coriolanus* and the *Berliner Ensemble's* pro-

duction, focusing mainly on the characterization of the hero and his main antagonist, the Roman plebs.

The Berliner Ensemble, the theatrical company created by Bertolt Brecht when he went to live in East-Germany after the Second World War, staged *Coriolan*,² Brecht's unfinished adaptation of Shakespeare's play eight years after his death in 1956. Brecht worked in the adaptation between 1951 and 1953, but even after he had put the work on Shakespeare's play aside and embraced other projects, his interest in this particular play did not diminish.

The differences in plot between Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and Brecht's *Coriolan* are not very radical. Brecht maintained most of the structure of the fable, although his version is one third shorter than the "original". The great differences refer to the characterization of the hero and of the Roman plebs and the Tribunes. Brecht wanted to focus his adaptation on the relationship between Coriolanus and the Roman citizens (having the Tribunes as their true leaders, and not as the scheming politicians they can be construed as in the original).

The decision to adapt Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* seems now obvious. The clash between an aristocratic war hero and the Roman plebs with the subsequent fall of the hero who is banished from Rome by those who once worshiped him as a God could not fail to interest Brecht. In the first place, for the possibility of making of the Roman people, a collective character, the true protagonist of the play; secondly because Brecht could once again deal with the theme of the "utility" of a hero as he had done in one of his most famous plays, *The Life of Galileo* (also known as *Galileo Galilei*, 1937-39, 1945-47).

Some ideas developed in the adaptation and in the production were first sketched by Brecht and his collaborators in "Study of the First Scene of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*", a text in the form of a dialogue, dated from 1953. Two important ideas in respect to the first scene of Shakespeare's play are developed throughout the dialogue. The people's main dramatic function is not to serve as "a mere background preparation for the entrance of the hero" (BRECHT, 1998, p. 257), as is somewhat the case in Shakespeare's text where Coriolanus is characterized in contrast with the Citizens. As a consequence the role of Coriolanus as the sole protagonist is challenged.

It is clear from the theoretical dialogue that it was not the intention of Brecht and his collaborators to produce *Coriolanus* as the tragedy of the proud war hero,

² In order to distinguish Shakespeare's play from Brecht's adaptation, I will use the German title for the latter. Thus every time I use *Coriolanus* I will be referring to Shakespeare, and every time I use *Coriolan* I refer to Brecht's adaptation or the Berliner Ensemble's production. In quotes, when I refer to "Brecht's *Coriolanus*" I mean the English translation by Ralph Manheim, and *Coriolan* refers to the German original.

who, hated by the pathetic fickle masses and their scheming representatives and not properly supported by weak patricians, is banished from his country, for that is exactly the reading of the play that bourgeois theatre favoured. But Brecht is not simply proposing the opposing reading, the one that would represent the interests of the working class or of a socialist society, for that would be simply preaching to the converted. Most importantly Brecht and his collaborators wanted to show the “field of forces” in which the characters operate and let the spectators make their own judgements. Let us now take some time scrutinizing the way Caius Marcius Coriolanus is presented in Brecht’s text.

“Rome without Marcius was [stronger] not [weaker]”, says Brecht (1998, p. 260).³ Coriolanus would not agree with such words. In both Shakespeare’s and Brecht’s texts Coriolanus considers himself irreplaceable and indispensable. Brecht wrote his adaptation categorically to deny the hero’s self-reliance, whereas Shakespeare maintains certain ambivalence not showing the destiny of Aufidius and the Volscians after Coriolanus’ death.⁴ In Shakespeare, Marcius’ banishment is a dubious victory for Plebeians and Tribunes.

In Shakespeare, Coriolanus’ reputation as an unbeatable warrior is never questioned; nobody ever thinks that the force of arms can ever defeat him. After his death, perpetrated by scheming and persuading tongues skilful enough to kindle the fatal fire of his pride, his heroic status is nevertheless re-established. Shakespeare’s play ends with Aufidius, Coriolanus’ killer, pronouncing the dead hero’s eulogy. If the armies are unable to defeat Marcius, the political use of language can.

Brecht, on the other hand, does not subscribe to the idea that Coriolanus dies for an abstract sense of honour or by the fatal yielding to inviolable blood ties. In Brecht, Coriolanus’ tragedy derives from his final awareness that he is not irreplaceable or indispensable.

For Brecht, Coriolanus can only be fully understood in relation to the role(s) he plays during war and peace. This explains the way Brecht renders Aufidius’ lines, “So our virtues/Lie in th’ interpretation of the time (IV, 7, 49-50) from Shakespeare’s text. In Brecht’s “translation”, the line becomes “*Und unser Wert hängt ab von dem Gebrauch/Den unsre Zeit macht von uns*” (“Our merit/Depends upon the use our

³ John Willet translated the original “*Rom ohne den Marcius war nicht schwächer, sondern stärker*” (*Schriften* 2 881) for “Rome without Marcius was weaker, not stronger” (*Brecht on Theatre* 260), thus the brackets.

⁴ Plutarch writes that after Marcius’ death the Romans overcame them in battle (*The Life* in Brockbank 368). Livy writes that Romans killed Tullius in battle and so defeated the Volscians (*The Early History* 151).

epoch makes of us” 2480, 132). The Brechtian version of Aufidius’ line underlines the idea that it is society (here “our epoch”) that determines an individual’s merits.

To focus on social rather than on the individual contradictions, Brecht had to deconstruct Coriolanus’ heroism; therefore, he eliminates the rivalry between Marcius and Aufidius. When the Berliner Ensemble restored those scenes, they gained a political overtone that can hardly be found in Shakespeare’s text. It is written in the program of the production that “the ‘duel’ between Caius Marcius and Tullus Aufidius – at the expense of the people – is the force that sets the story in motion. It is the need of the two “great men” to prove their valour and value that becomes the main cause of the war between Romans and Volscians” (THE BERLINER ENSEMBLE, 1965). Manfred Wekwerth, the director (with Joachim Tenschert) of the 1964 Berliner Ensemble’s production of the play, affirms that by restoring those scenes they, nevertheless, maintained Brecht’s intention. “The axis of Brecht’s adaptation”, Wekwerth wrote, “the belief in the ‘irreplaceableness’ of the hero was maintained; the people’s role (the responsibility?) in the construction of the hero’s cult was reinforced” (WEKWERTH, 1975, p. 203). For Wekwerth and Tenschert Coriolanus becomes dangerous when his warring skills and the charisma derived from them enable him to conquer absolute political power. In the spectacular battle scenes the directors had the opportunity of showing Coriolanus “not as an ordinary irascible warrior (therefore, not interesting) ... but as a master of the rules, as a specialist in slaughtering, as an expert in murdering (hardly irreplaceable in those barbaric times)” (WEKWERTH, 1975, p. 205).

However, the battle scenes could only be meaningful for Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble if, writes Wekwerth, “we succeed in showing them as the big proof of the usefulness of our hero. In other words, here is the place where the spectator can witness the production of a hero... Coriolanus is a hero because in his veins flows heroic blood” (WEKWERTH, 1975, p. 204). In order to create in the audience a critical distance in relation to the heroic deeds of Marcius, the three military episodes – the Corioli assault, the fight between Marcius and Aufidius and the scene in which Marcius acquires his military agnomen – were intercut with two civil sequences: 1) the extract from Shakespeare’s 1, 3 in which Valeria arrives and narrates the episode of Marcius’ son chasing the butterfly; and 2) the beginning of Shakespeare’s 2,1 (with lines added by Wekwerth and Tenschert) comprising a conversation between Brutus and Sicinius, on one side, and Cominius, on the other, in which Marcius’ virtues and faults are discussed according to the points of view of both tribunes (the leaders of the plebs) and patricians. These interpolations had the aim to estrange both the battle scenes and the civil scenes (RIPLEY, 1998, p. 309), for they made patent, first, that Coriolanus heroic persona was due a great

to deal to “the formidable influence of matriarchy on maleness [and] militancy” (PATTERSON, 1986, p. 120), and, second, the political significance of his victories.

Coriolanus’ heroism has to be exalted so that the plebs’ ambivalence towards him become clear to the audience. Wekwerth points out that Coriolanus’ heroism must not be presupposed, but produced. “That is the only way to explain the Roman plebe’s change of opinion. In the first scene they call him ‘the chief enemy of the people’, and in the sixth they say ‘There is no better man for Consul’ ” (WEKWERTH, 1975, p. 204).

The key to understand Brecht’s and the Berliner Ensemble’s stance in relation to Coriolanus is perhaps the way they interpret the following line from Shakespeare’s. After the violent confrontation between Coriolanus and the Tribunes, when the latter eventually accuses him of treason, Menenius sadly exclaims: “His nature is too noble for the world” (III, 1, 253). Trying to find the character’s right attitude (*Haltung*),⁵ Wekwerth and Tenschert propose a formula that Coriolanus “doesn’t fit into this world”. Thus, reversing Shakespeare. Wekwerth writes that: “Differently from Shakespeare, to whom the world is too low for a man like Coriolanus, a man like Coriolanus is for us too expensive for the world” (WEKWERTH, 1975, p. 209).

Coriolanus becomes a danger when he extends the war towards his fellow-citizens. In a word, he is unable to stop the war. This authoritarian personality permanently at war is always running the risk to become a totalitarian leader, and conquer “a power tyrannical” (Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* 3, 3, 65). In the Berliner Ensemble production of the play, Ekkehard Schall, the actor who plays Coriolanus, with his stocky figure, his crew-cut hair and dark tight war-gear, exults in the aggressive and deeply destructive masculinity of the greatest Roman warrior.

Besides, in the Berliner Ensemble’s production the main conflict of the play is not the rivalry between Coriolanus and Aufidius that serves, as was said above, to point out to the narcissism inherent in Coriolanus’ self-image, but the one between the plebs and the patricians. Thus the need the people have to defeat the warring hero in the political arena. The plebs can only achieve such victory by acquiring a new political consciousness. If in Corioli, Aufidius replaces Marcius, in Rome the people replace the hero, therefore becoming the new hero of the play.

In Shakespeare, Rome can only count on this exceptional warrior to defend itself against its enemies, for the people are coward and devoid of any sense of honour. War means to them a way of conquering, through booty, material gain. This image of the people is in part constructed by Coriolanus himself. But it is also

⁵ It seems to me that Wekwerth uses another term for Brecht’s *Gestus*.

present in some of the people's actions. In Brecht (as was to a certain extent also the case in Shakespeare), Coriolanus is defeated because he is unable to change. He is always the same, constant in his inability to perceive the new times of Roman history. He cannot understand the arguments of his opponents. Because he does not know how to negotiate, the only way he has to assert his will is by force. The plebs, on the other hand, is becoming true citizens. At the beginning of the play they do not know if they have a role in the community, and some of them think of leaving the city. They only know that they are oppressed and starving. Differently from Shakespeare (and even from Brecht who maintained in his adaptation the violent entrance of a group of rebellious citizens with clubs and knives), the group of citizens (*Burger*) enters unarmed on the stage in the Berliner Ensemble production. To force the patricians to recognize some of their rights, they use the only political means they have: they refuse to take arms in the war against the Volscians. In order to give the reader an idea of the changes made by Wekwerth and Tenschert in the first scene of Brecht's adaptation, I will reproduce the beginning of both versions. In Brecht's adaptation (translated into English by Ralph Manheim) one reads

Rome. A public square.

Enter a group of rebellious citizens to whom clubs, knives, and other weapons are distributed; among them a man with a child; the man is carrying a large bundle.

FIRST CITIZEN Before we go any further, let me speak.

CITIZENS Speak, but be brief.

FIRST CITIZEN Are you all resolved to die rather than starve?

CITIZENS Resolved, Resolved.

FIRST CITIZEN Are you prepared to stand fast until the senate agrees that it's us citizens who decide the price of bread?

CITIZENS Yes. Yes.

FIRST CITIZEN And the price of olives?

CITIZENS Yes.

FIRST CITIZEN Caius Marcius will meet us with force of arms. Will you run away or will you fight? (59, italics in the original)

And in the Berliner Ensemble's play-text (translated into English by me from the text of *Der Inszenierung des Berliner Ensembles*) one can read:

Rome. Before the gates.

From the city comes a group of citizens.

VESTITOR Before you go any further let me speak.

RESTIO Speak.

VESTITOR Are you all resolved to die rather than to starve?

FABER Resolved.

VESTITOR Are you prepared not to go back to the city, and also not to enlist in the wars until the senate agrees that it's us citizens who decide the price of bread?

HORTULANUS And the price of olives!

RARUS (coming from the city) In the other side of the city they also refuse.

VESTITOR Caius Marcius will force us with the force of arms to join the army. Are you rather resolved to die for our own cause here rather than for his in the battlefield?

As one can see in the Berliner Ensemble's play-text, the citizens do not carry weapons, each citizen has got a name, and the theme of the war is given prominence.

The idea now is not to show the citizens as a mob staging an uprising without definite aims, but as a heterogeneous class of individuals trying to defend their interests. To endow each member of the plebeian class with a unique personality and identity, names corresponding to their specific occupations were chosen. Thus, the dress-maker was called Vestitor, the merchant, Lätus, the gardener, Hortulanus, the shoemaker, Sutor, the construction worker, Faber, etc.

The well-succeeded strategy of refusing to enlist in the Roman army to combat the Volscians was nevertheless only the first step towards a full citizenship of the plebs. The right to have tribunes of the people in the senate was also important as a form of conquering political representativeness in the senate. But it is going to be with the full development of the fable that the Roman masses will acquire far-reaching consciousness of their political weight. The main test for the plebeians on the road for their political autonomy will be their capacity to overcome the ideology that promotes the cult of the hero.

The first encounter of the plebeians with Marcius is, as in Shakespeare, marked by deep hostility. Coriolanus' entrance (not, as Brecht imagined, escorted by armed men, but alone) almost coincides with the news of the creation of the tribunate. And the menacing words of Menenius emphasise what is at stake in the plebeians' strike. While in Brecht's version, much closer to the original, it is the citizens' arms that are threatening, in the Berliner Ensemble's production it is the plebe's refusal to take arms that causes Marcius' violent reaction. While in Brecht, Menenius angrily tells the armed plebs: "...very well, swing your clubs!/Rome will make war upon its rats" (BRECHT, 1972, p. 63). In the Berliner Ensemble's production, he says "Good, no war for Rome? /Then Rome will make war upon its rats" (THE BERLINER ENSEMBLE, 1964), words which, due to the much more pressing attitude of the plebeians, sound like an impotent cry of rage, for, as Menenius tells Marcius a few minutes later, "No grain, no war". It is clear for Menenius that the greatest danger now is the attack by the Volscians. The enemy without forces an agreement with the enemy within.

Differently from Shakespeare the entrance of the tribunes does not go unnoticed. They are hailed by the citizens, which may signify that they are known to the people and probably members of the popular classes. A change in the characterization of the tribunes was inevitable to permit later a more mature stance of the citizens in relation to their role in the community and their duty to defend it against external menaces. If the citizens finally accept to fight for Rome it is for two main reasons: a retribution for the acceptance on the part of the senate of their demand for political representativeness, and a way of defending their own interests that in many moments coincides with national interests.

Endowing the tribunes with a true concern with the plebeians' social misery represents a radical distancing from the bourgeois view of the play. In the Berliner Ensemble's production they are not the scheming demagogues who are mainly interested in maintaining their hold on power. In conservative readings of the play they usually are the mediocre counterparts of Coriolanus' heroic (albeit faulty) personality. Although deeply concerned with the danger that Coriolanus represents to the unity of the Roman community, the tribunes are able to recognize his qualities and usefulness as a military commander. At the end of 1, 1, in Shakespeare's play, when both tribunes are left alone on the stage after the exit of citizens and patricians on their way to the war, Brutus and Sicinius in their private conversation show that their view of Marcius is contradictory, and not a homogeneous condemnation. In the Berliner Ensemble's version the scene is a bit shorter but not so much different from Brecht's adaptation (in the following quotes, the parts in italics are the lines added to the play-text that was actually staged in 1964 by the Berliner Ensemble).

BRUTUS (goes to Sicinius) The war consumes him.

Have you seen Marcius' look

When we, the tribunes of the people, approached him?

SICINIUS Brutus, a man like him's a greater

Danger to Rome than to the Volscians.

BRUTUS I don't believe that. The valor of his arm⁶

Outweighs his vice and makes good their harm. (BRECHT, 1972, p. 67)

When the Roman army comes back from the war and Coriolanus enters the city carried on a triumphant stool, Brutus and Sicinius begin to realize the danger he represents to the political harmony of the polis.

BRUTUS Now listen, how Rome drunk with triumph

Echoes the praises to that lawless man.

⁶ The original German word is *Schwert* (sword) (Cf. *Coriolan* 2407).

Today every saddler is boasting to his
Woman that he has received Corioli
As a bonus. They plan where
They want to accommodate two,
Three marble villas in their cellar.

SICINIUS His orders were to beat off the Volscians
And nothing more. You could as well order the
Wolf to scare the fox away from the henhouse
But no more. He took Corioli.

BRUTUS And by so doing stirred the Volscians up against
Us for the decades to come. Before you
Know it, believe me, he will be consul.

SICINIUS For us tribunes it will be good night.

It is important to establish what worries the tribunes. First the reaction of the Roman people who, believing that the victory will signify great material gain, plunge uncritically into a hysterical hero cult. Second, the seizing of Corioles was directed more by Coriolanus' desire to prove himself as a great warrior than by any strategic consideration.

On the other hand, the hero cult is a necessity to the patricians' class. Through the glorification of the war hero they can regain their control over the masses with Marcius in charge of maintaining the plebs in their places by whatever means are necessary, a role that will become much easier, they believe, when he becomes a Consul. And the people, stirred by the spectacular victory over the Volscians, are willing to give Coriolanus their voices. In view of such situation, Brutus and Sicinius can do little to influence the decision of the masses.

BRUTUS We must prevent him speaking to the people.

SICINIUS To prevent! You've heard how Rome is glad
To make the wolf its shepherd. We are only spoilsports.

BRUTUS On the other hand,
He doesn't respect any games' rules.
I heard he doesn't want, should he condescend
To apply for the consul's dignity, to appear
In the market place to beg for the people's voices⁷
Dressed according to custom, that he won't wrap
Himself in a worn toga or show his wounds to
The people.

The tribunes can already envisage what behaviour Coriolanus will assume at the market place, and that the people will show an unexpected political maturity

⁷ In German the word *Stimme* means both "voice" and "vote".

when their votes are asked. The people at first recognize their duty to elect such a phenomenal warrior for the Consulship, but since the beginning of the scene there are voices among them that are aware of the danger his excessive pride and his unconcern with the public cause can represent to the commons.

COCTOR When we required grain, he has gone off with the sword to us, hasn't he?
VESTOR And with the sword he has conquered Corioli for us, hasn't he?

Indeed, soliciting votes becomes to Coriolanus, as the scene develops, an undignified action that he most reluctantly performs. He distances himself from the act and maintains an attitude of aristocratic aloofness. In an example of the famous brechtian alienating effect, Coriolanus sings to his "audience" of Roman citizens when they ask him to show his wounds in exchange for his votes.

CORIANUS I won't bother you to look at them [that is, his wounds]. But if you demand entertainment, I can sing you a song about the gratitude of the she-wolf. (To the tune of a bagpiper who has begun to play for small coins)
Here stands C. Marcus Coriolanus
Trying to please the common man
He is selling the Roman eagle here
(Don't fight over the feathers, children dear!)
Gentlemen, my wounds. These. And these.
Look closely. Touch them if you please.
I'll serve you for a penny; I'll dance
Attendance. Gather round! Step up! Last chance! (BRECHT, 1972, p. 98)

Coriolanus' purpose is to disqualify the Roman custom, and not allow his "audience" to assume a critical stance *vis à vis* the ritual of canvassing for votes. To the audience at the auditorium and the audience on the stage, however, Coriolanus' performance reveals what that ritual means to him and his class, a mere formality, a spectacle a member the upper-classes offers to the lower-classes in order to make them believe that they have power over important political decisions, but that really does not change a dot of the status-quo, but, according to Coriolanus, actually hurts the pride of the doer. The singing is a sign of the resentment he feels for being obliged by custom to perform such an action. Here, however, Brecht is not very far from Shakespeare. In this particular moment, Shakespeare likewise makes Coriolanus address the citizens parodying the style of a street peddler.

The next stage in the process of the people's conquest of self-reliance occurs in the scene of the banishment. In Brecht and in production the tribunes do not persuade the people to withdraw their votes, they only discuss the danger that electing Coriolanus consul can represent. Coriolanus' anger is stirred not by the

withdrawing of votes (as is the case in Shakespeare), but by the distribution of the spoils of war.

SICINIUS Coriolanus, ships from conquered Antium
Have just put into port. Their cargo is grain
Tribute and booty taken in the bloody
War with the Volscians. Noble Marcius, what
Will you do with this grain if chosen consul? (BRECHT, 1972, p. 100)

From then on the discussion can take a political-economic dimension without the need of changing Shakespeare much. It becomes clearer in Coriolanus' subsequent lines that the distribution of grain is not only an economical but also a political gesture.

CORIOLANUS You don't feed virtue when you give free grain.
You're feeding disobedience, fattening it
For insurrection, for with every wish
You satisfy, you give the filthy rabble
New wishes. (BRECHT, 1972, p. 100-101)

No longer at war with the Volscians, Coriolanus now wants to settle the political dispute around the distribution of grain. The battlefield is now the political arena. Coriolanus argues that, as the tribunate was created in time of unrest (that is, the eminent attack by the Volscians), after such time had passed there is no need to maintain that institution.

Identifying Rome with the patrician class, Coriolanus judges the tribunate a political and institutional excrescence and furiously proposes its abolition by force.

It is because he posits himself against the new political institutions of Republican Rome – the tribunate – and claims for its dissolution that he is deprived of the Consulship.

The people's greatest victory over Coriolanus, on the other hand, has consisted in both denying his view that the commons are

... churlish vassals, creatures made
To sell themselves for pennies, and to stand
Bareheaded in assemblies, yawning and
Scratching their heads in puzzlement when one
Of my rank stood up and spoke for peace of war. (SHAKESPEARE, 1996, p. 105).

and affirming that Rome was not the private property of one social class. In the Berliner Ensemble's production, Brutus' question to the patricians – “*Who is Rome? Is it you? Or it's the people?*” – eventually receives an all including answer by

Menenius: “*It’s you and us, us all*”. Menenius’ answer confirms the establishment of the tribunate as one of the institutions of Republican Rome after the patricians at first tried to back Coriolanus, but finally understood that to side with him would be a much greater danger for the whole community. Coriolanus’ banishment is the proof that Rome has become a true Republic.

The culmination of the process of the people’s self-assertion comes to pass with Coriolanus’ attack on Rome. When still working in his adaptation, Brecht wrote about this episode in a unpublished note that “the citizens shouldn’t change their opinions (as in Shakespeare) so as to regret Coriolanus’ banishment; the nobility, however, should be clearly shown to be afraid (not for Rome, but for their own lives)” (MANHEIM, 1972, p. 378). And Brutus tells the citizens: “It is just as I told you. The city fathers are leaving Rome to its fate” (BRECHT, 1972, p. 137). But Vestor tells Brutus that “The majority have reported for military duty. The ones who were still waiting to see if Menenius would get anywhere with Coriolanus will report now” (idem). In view of this situation, Cominius, a patrician general, decides to side with the people against his own class. “A few of us are with you”, says Cominius referring to a faction of nationalist patricians. “Arms will be distributed. On my responsibility” (ibidem). Even with the eminent danger of an invasion by an enemy army commanded by two skilful military man, Brutus is able to offer Cominius words of hope:

I have the feeling, shared, I’m told by many
Others, that Rome’s a better place
With that man gone, a city worth defending
Perhaps for the first time since it was founded. (BRECHT, 1972, p. 138)

When the news arrives that Coriolanus and the Volscian army have withdrawn, Brutus rejoices:

The stone has moved. The people takes
Up weapons, and the old earth shakes. (BRECHT, 1972, p. 143)

“Truth is concrete”, Brecht used to say (BENJAMIN, 1998, p. 108). In Brechtian Rome, Coriolanus withdraws not because he must be faithful to his idea of honour, but because he realises that his irreplaceability is a mere illusion.

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