William Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*, a political drama set in ancient Rome, chronicles a military hero’s rise to power and his eventual downfall. It is, arguably, Shakespeare’s most political work and as such, has been used as a tool for political propaganda. Written after the Midlands Revolt of 1607, the social circumstances surrounding Shakespeare’s writing of *Coriolanus* explain, in part, why later politicians were fascinated with the appropriation of the play with the purpose of underscoring a specific political agenda in a particular historic moment. By showing both sides of the political struggle equally, Shakespeare’s script is adaptable to any political ideology. Shakespeare never forces the audience to choose sides and, as a matter of fact, both sides are shown as strong, yet flawed. In addition, the character of Coriolanus is ambivalent as a hero. Stanley D. McKenzie argues in “Unshout the Noise that Banish’d Martius”: Structural Paradox and Dissembling in *Coriolanus* that the play is “riddled with betrayals, fickleness and contradictions, all contributing to the sense of paradox and uncertainty.”¹ Coriolanus does not have a clear function as tragic hero because of his abrupt transformation in Act IV as well as the absence of an explanation for why he becomes a traitor.² Not only the character, but the play itself has perceived as ambivalent in terms of its message. Lee Bliss concurs in his introduction to the New Cambridge edition of the play, “*Coriolanus’s*

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²McKenzie, 191.
actual ambivalence about the politics it stages, its willingness to air each side’s case, made it suitable for appropriation and, via excision and addition, retooling into propaganda.”

The power of the script to portray political ideology has been evident throughout its history, as George C. D. Odell noted, “Coriolanus seemed destined to be launched, with new trimmings, during or after each of England’s politico-civic upheavals.” Productions were mounted in England after the Popish Plot of 1681 and the Jacobite Rebellion of 1715, and just before the French Revolution of 1789. I will focus on a brief period in mid-twentieth century Europe. In Nazi Germany of the 1930s and 1940s, Coriolanus and other plays by Shakespeare were used to exemplify the ideals of the “fatherland.” In sharp contrast, Bertolt Brecht created an adaptation of the play in the early 1950s that would further the political agenda of Communism. This paper explores how the two different versions of Coriolanus reflect historically unique events and political and social climates in twentieth century Europe. I will argue that the dangerously volatile socio-political climate of Europe during this time period, a highly adaptable script by Shakespeare, and innovative presentation techniques, combined to produce a thirty year period where one play, Coriolanus, provided consummate propaganda for two opposing political ideologies.

My analysis of Shakespeare’s work as contrasting propaganda begins with the play itself. The plot of Coriolanus is a fairly simple story of betrayal and revenge. Caius Martius is a decorated warrior who almost single-handedly wins the battle for the city of Corioles, defeating his arch enemy Aufidius in the process. For his deeds, he is awarded the name Coriolanus and returns triumphantly to Rome. In gratitude for his valor, the upper-class patricians of Rome seek

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to make him consul, the highest office in the Roman republic. Unfortunately, Coriolanus has a tragic flaw which makes him a less than perfect choice for the post of consul: he has a complete lack of regard for the common people that borders on contempt. The idea of Coriolanus as consul is particularly offensive to tribunes Sicinius Velutus and Junius Brutus who are the representatives of the common people. They set out to discredit Coriolanus and are so successful in stirring up resentment against him that he is declared a traitor and banished from the city. Coriolanus turns to his old enemy Aufidius for aid and together they prepare to attack Rome. He ignores the pleas of his supporters and friends at home, but a visit from his mother, Volumnia, and his wife, Virgilia, convinces him to sign a peace treaty. This infuriates Aufidius, who declares Coriolanus a traitor and has him killed.

According to Krystyna Jujawinska-Courtney, in the world of Coriolanus, “all values, all realities are in flux; both characters and audience are accordingly decentered, adrift in contingency.” The audience is never given the opportunity to focus on any fundamental truth within the play because “the characters constantly shift in the flux of the play’s moral world, any mimetic situation may be modified at any moment.”

The most obvious example of ambiguity is manifested in the character of Coriolanus himself. He begins the play as Rome’s deliverer, valiantly crushing its enemies with patriotic fervor. By the end of the play, his desire for revenge has consumed him and he has joined his most bitter enemy and become Rome’s murderous foe. There is no hero in this chronicle, only dubious equivocation. More importantly, he never doubts any of the choices he makes. He has absolute certainty in the virtue of his convictions.


6Jujawinska-Courney, 92.
His mother, Volumnia, is similar in the fervor of her convictions and their equivocations. She enters the play in act one as the absolute epitome of the military wife and mother. As Virgilia, Caius Martius’s wife, pines and worries, Volumnia boldly states: “had I a dozen sons each in my love alike, and none less dear than thine and my good Martius, I had rather had eleven die nobly for their country than one voluptuously surfeit out of action.”

She becomes Rome’s savior in act five by convincing Caius Martius not to fight, but to become a man of peace. She states:

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The Volsces whom you serve, you might condemn us
As poisonous of your honour. No, our suit
Is that you reconcile them, while the Volsces
May say ‘This mercy we have showed’, the Romans
‘This we received’, and each in either side
Give the all-hail to thee and cry ‘Be blest
For making up this peace!’ Thou know’st, great son,
The end of war’s uncertain, but this certain,
That if thou conquer Rome, the benefit
Which thou shalt thereby reap is such a name
Whose repetition will be dogged with curses,
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Convincing her son to become a man of peace will save her own life and the lives of her fellow Romans. She has completely abandoned her military convictions which she held so dear at the beginning of the play.

The character of Menenius approaches the mass of protestors as “my masters, my good friends, mine honest neighbors,” however, as a patrician, it is very unlikely that he is good friends or neighbors with any of the rabble he addresses. He quiets their rage with a story:

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There was a time when all the body’s members
Rebelled against the belly, thus accused it:
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7William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, act 1, scene 3.
8Shakespeare, act 5, scene 3.
9Shakespeare, act 1, scene 1.
That only like a gulf did it remain
I’th’midst o’th’body, idle and unactive,
Still cupboarding the viand, never bearing
Like labor with the rest, where th’other instruments
Did see and hear, devise, instruct, walk, feel,
And, mutually participate, did minister
Unto the appetite and affection common
Of the whole body. The belly answered –

As he continues his story, the crowd begins to quiet as they absorb his words and their meaning.

As he spins the tale of the ungrateful limbs and their rebellion against the belly, the crowd never senses the subtle reprimand of his words. They are swayed by his manner and his reputation, and accept the final portion of the story:

The senators of Rome are this good belly
And you the mutinous members. For examine
Their counsels and their cares, digest things rightly
Touching the weal o’th’common, you shall find
No public benefit which you receive
But it proceeds or comes from them to you
And no way from yourselves. What do you think?
You, the great toe of this assembling?

He calls them the lowest part of the body and yet they peacefully disperse.

In Menenius, Shakespeare creates an “everyman” for the other characters in the play. He is portrayed as the epicenter of stability and yet we can’t be sure where his loyalties truly lie because they are never consistent in their application. Is Menenius loyal to Caius Martius? The Senate? Rome and its people? He is hailed whenever there is issue to resolve. By the end of the play, he harshly reprimands Brutus and Sicinius for the danger and destruction they have caused Rome; but then he pleads their case to Coriolanus with the statement: “I was hardly moved to come to thee, but being assured none but myself could move thee, I have been blown out of your
gates with sighs and conjure thee to pardon Rome and thy petitionary countrymen.”

Even the general populace is guilty of wavering. Late in the play, the Third Citizen protests: “though we willingly consented to his banishment, yet it was against our will.”

**Shakespeare in Hitler’s Germany**

The Nazi propaganda machine that furthered the interests of Adolph Hitler and his cronies was well established even before Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in 1933. The manipulation of culture for political gain was a particular specialty of the Nazis. Hitler’s goal was to create a European empire under German control. Coriolanus portrayed the empire of ancient Rome and the strength of the Roman leaders which Hitler could use for propaganda. His appropriation of England’s Shakespeare seemed illogical to those outside Germany, but was systematic in its function in German culture.

*Coriolanus* played an important role in the education system of the Third Reich. Coriolanus epitomized the German spirit: he was a strong leader whose military skills were unmatched and who questioned the corrupt form of democracy that existed in Rome. *Coriolanus* exalted the view that “a democratic government is corrosive and true order in a state can be guaranteed or restored only by a strong leader, whose morally exalted, heroic personality towers above the masses.”

Hitler presented himself as Germany’s Coriolanus, but he took it a step further. Coriolanus’ tragic flaw is his lack of affinity for the masses, therefore he will never be a true “Führer” like Hitler who is a man of the people, beloved by all. The chaos that erupts in

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12Shakespeare, act 5 scene 2.

13Shakespeare, act 4, scene 6.


Rome (and that could erupt in Germany) can be “overcome only by a great idea, propagated by the leader and supported by the masses.” Coriolanus is manipulated to fit the agenda of a power-hungry madman under the guise of love for his people.

The play begins with a near riot by a group of citizens over the unfair distribution of grain to the lower classes. Menenius diffuses the situation by telling the riotous masses the fable of the belly. The fable illustrates that the body as a whole has to work together to function. The limbs can’t function if the belly isn’t nourished. The story was an analogy to the Roman Republic. If all the parts, all the classes don’t work together there will be chaos.

Caius Martius is a legendary Roman figure, although we don’t know if he was an actual historical figure. This would not have mattered to the Nazis. His brave acts in the city of Corioles supposedly happened early in the fifth century BC, sometime after the Romans had overthrown and banished the last of their kings, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus around 510 BC. In the play, the character Cominius describes young Caius Martius meeting Superbus on the battlefield during the former king’s last attempt to regain power. It is never stated if they fought each other face to face.17

The government of the Roman Republic was led by two consuls. The rest of the government followed very distinct class lines. The upper class patricians controlled the Senate, the army, the legal system and the supply of grain. The lower classes, or plebians, are represented in the Senate by elected tribunes. The Roman Republic lasted until 27 BC when

16 Symington, 161.

Octavius Caesar (Augustus) became emperor and the Republic was replaced by an empire. This strict order of power appealed to the Nazis.

When Hitler became Chancellor in 1933, he viewed the control of the arts and cultural matters as essential to the strength of the Nazi party. Through legislation, coercion and sometimes violence, German culture was completely controlled by the party. In the Fall of 1933, Hitler created the Reichskulturkammer (Reich Chamber of Culture) and appointed Joseph Goebbels to oversee its operations. Goebbels was also propaganda minister which illustrates Hitler’s view of the arts in relation to government. Theatre was particularly targeted for its propaganda potential. The Nazis had complete control over all performance and content.

In the nationalistic fervor of creating a truly German artistic experience, one major contradiction became glaringly obvious. Germans loved William Shakespeare. Shakespeare’s plays were performed more often in Germany than any other playwright. He was so popular in the nineteenth century that he became regarded as the greatest dramatist on the German stage. Soon, they came to consider Shakespeare part of German culture. It wasn’t long before they just considered him German. They believed he meant more to German culture than to English.

Günther Erken, a leading German, Shakespeare scholar stated:

In no other country on the continent (of Europe) has Shakespeare achieved such paradigmatic significance as in Germany, and no foreign writer has become here such an inspiration, a model and a myth as Shakespeare. His name was a watchword, before his works were known, his “genius” a reference point before his art had begun to be studied thoroughly. The recognition of his achievement released productive forces, while at the same time it allied itself with a cult in which admiration and enjoyment lay close together.

19 Spielvogel, 156.
20 Symington, 7.
This lavish praise comes partly from the translation of Shakespeare used in German performance created by August Wilhelm von Schlegel which focused not only on Shakespeare’s words, but also the sound, rhythm and feeling of the language from which he was translating. Instead of strictly following iambic pentameter, he tried to create the same poetic feeling in German that gave the verse a flow. He also didn’t try to modernize the language. His translations recreated his interpretation of the text. As Schlegel became interested in other projects, his work was continued by Ludwig Tieck. He followed most of the same procedures for translation and so the translations became known as the “Schlegel-Tieck” versions of Shakespeare plays. Over the next century the Schlegel-Tieck Shakespeare became a “central work of German culture.”

Germans embraced the translations and believed they were superior to the original Shakespeare in English.

Germany’s adoration for Shakespeare continued throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. However, by 1914, their love affair with Shakespeare was becoming embarrassing. The greatest cultural icon of the German stage was actually English and England was the enemy. By this point, they were not willing to give up their “homegrown” hero, so an argument began to develop that would keep the Shakespeare cult in Germany through World War I and into World War II. In 1915, Alois Brandl, president of the German Shakespeare Society simply stated that the, “naturalization of Shakespeare must survive. Shakespeare belongs to our spiritual armament; the soul of our nation must not lose all that he has become for us over the past two centuries.” The Society then made a substantial loan to the war fund.

21Symington, 81.

22Symington, 15.
At the same meeting, Gerhart Hauptmann, a leading German playwright of the day, delivered a keynote address where he argued that “great works of world culture – such as the Bible, the works of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Bach, Beethoven, etc., plus works of science and art belong to the whole world.”

Shakespeare may belong to whole world, but Hauptmann made it very clear where Shakespeare belonged by stating:

There is no nation, not even the English, that has acquired the right to claim Shakespeare as the German nation has. Shakespeare’s figures are a part of our world, his soul has become one with ours: and even if he was born and is buried in England, Germany is the land where he truly lives.

Shakespeare was ingrained in German culture. His works became an integral part of performance and education in Germany.

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, their goal was control all aspects of German life including the arts. The only art that was acceptable was “pure” and unstained by foreigners and Jews. They considered themselves patrons of the arts, they just had to make sure it was the right kind of art. It had to further their political ideals and hamper independent thought. 

Goebbels went even further to describe the Nazi leadership as artists themselves:

As politicians we also think of ourselves, so to speak, as artistic people. I would go as far as to say that politics is the highest form of art, for the sculptor shapes only the dead stone, and the poet shapes only the word, which is also dead in itself. But the politician shapes the masses, gives the masses law and structure, so that from the masses the Volk may emerge. This captures the essence of art so succinctly, that from now on the discussion will be closed once and for all.

The Nazi definition of art always came wrapped in a threat.

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23 Symington, 16.
24 Symington, 17.
25 Symington, 31.
As the war continued, more attention was paid to the sciences in school. The arts and education suffered from the loss of staff to the army and a fundamental change in attitude as to what is important to a society trying to win a war. The Nazi cultural ideals were still there, and the Nazi elite still treated the arts as their personal playground, but the masses were expected to concentrate on winning the war. As the war ended and the “Iron Curtain” fell over parts of Europe, new interpretations of the arts and their place in society were being considered. One man who would ponder that idea was Bertolt Brecht.

**Brecht and Coriolan**

Bertolt Brecht focused on two histories when writing his adaptation of *Coriolanus* titled *Coriolan*: the early seventeenth century of Shakespeare’s England and his own personal history as a Marxist. In doing so, he forged a political version of *Coriolanus* that reflected the period in which the play had been written.

In contrast to the Nazi appropriation of *Coriolanus*, communist East German audiences embraced Brecht’s new adaptation of the play that focused predominantly on class warfare. Developed with the Berliner Ensemble in the early 1950s and first produced in Frankfurt in 1962, Brecht included additional text to emphasize the decision of the plebian masses to end the corruption and tyrannical rule of a power hungry Coriolanus. His version was completed sometime between 1952 and 1955. Life in East Germany during that period was harsh. The Soviet Union demanded war reparations from their new ally, and the struggling East Germans experienced shortages of food and rationing. The situation came to a head on June 16, 1953 as approximately 10,000 angry demonstrators took to the streets. Only the threat of Soviet military mobilization dispersed the crowds and restored order.²⁶

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It was during this difficult time that Brecht wrote *Coriolan*. His adaptation promoted the Marxist ideology and was dedicated to advancing the proletariat. With *Coriolan*, Brecht, “planned to represent and champion Germany’s working class by celebrating the communal empowerment of the plebeians depicted in the play.”

It was a somewhat dangerous stance to take. By championing the working class who had just rioted, he was aligning himself against the Soviets. He secretly circulated a sarcastic, propaganda-laced poem titled “The Solution” which illustrates Brecht’s devotion to the working class:

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After the uprising of the 17th of June
The Secretary of the Writer’s Union
Had leaflets distributed in the Stalinallee
On which one could read, that the people
Had forfeited the trust of the government
And could win it back only
By redoubled efforts. And so, would
It not be easier if the government
Dissolved the people
And selected another?28
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*Coriolan* attacked the rulers that mistreated the people and forwarded the idea that the masses needed to remove corrupt leaders and promote their own agenda.

The events of June 17 closely mirror the events of the Midlands Revolt in England in 1607. Scholars believe that Shakespeare wrote *Coriolanus* sometime during the winter of 1607-1608. It is generally believed that Shakespeare’s source material for *Coriolanus* was Plutarch’s *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, written around 75 AD, which was translated by Sir Thomas North in 1579. The story of Coriolanus is also told by the Roman historian, Titus Livius in *Ab Urbe Condita Libri*. He also drew from other sources such as Menenius’s fable of the

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27Hedrick and Reynolds, 108.

28Hedrick and Reynolds, 109.
belly. We know Shakespeare witnessed the Midlands Revolt, a series of disturbances throughout rural England over grain and land usage.\textsuperscript{29}

Scholars speculate that Plutarch, Titus Livius and Menenius Agrippa were identified as sources for the play to hide Shakespeare’s part in the riots. It’s believed that he was living in Stratford at the time of the revolt and, as one of the largest landholders in County Warwick, his land was enclosed; eliminating the common fields that were at the heart of the rebellion.\textsuperscript{30}

Brecht also downplayed his role in the June 17 events to prevent exposure to the Soviets.

Brecht’s personal background was also important to \textit{Coriolan}. He had grown into a Marxist and his personal life was always part of his literary pursuits. Brecht was German, born in Bavaria in 1898. When he was young his family relocated to Klaucke where he spent most of his childhood. His early years were fairly uneventful. He was an average student who excelled in literature. He got into his fair share of trouble as a boy which worried his mother, but for the most part he was an average child from a solid, middle class family. His writing was what set him apart from the other students. At age 15 he co-founded and co-edited a magazine for his school called \textit{Die Ernte (The Harvest)} and was soon writing for the local newspaper. He also befriended a man who would become a lifelong collaborator in his theatre work, Caspar Nehar, an artist and fellow student. Brecht’s early influences included Friedrich Nietzsche, Gerhart Hauptmann and Frank Wedekind and, of course, Karl Marx.\textsuperscript{31}

By the early 1930s the political climate in Germany was unfriendly to a Marxist like Brecht and he left Germany. He was an established playwright and was able to work throughout


\textsuperscript{30}Arthur Riss, ”The Belly Politic: \textit{Coriolanus} and the Revolt of Language.” \textit{ELH} 59 (Spring 1992): 55.

Europe during the war and immediately after. He even ventured to the United States to work in Hollywood although, in Brecht’s opinion, the House Un-American Activities Committee was no “friendlier” than the Nazis. Although granted citizenship in Austria, he eventually arrived in Communist-friendly East German to a hero’s welcome. He didn’t particularly agree with all aspects of East German and Soviet Communism, but he was allowed to work in relative peace and create his own company, the Berliner Ensemble. The company produced Coriolan in 1962, but Brecht never saw the production; he died in 1956.

**Conclusion**

By studying the text in conjunction with the history and culture of twentieth century Europe, ancient Rome and seventeen century England, a truly unique perspective on Shakespeare’s Coriolanus begins to emerge. This new historicist approach to studying the play has brought the first half of the twentieth into sharper focus, demonstrating that one play, when viewed through different political and cultural lenses can meet the propaganda needs of opposing political ideologies.

Shakespeare’s plays have always been subject to interpretation of time and space; it’s part of the genius of his work. Coriolanus, with its strong political message and ambiguous characters, is particularly suited to interpretation as seen in the two examples examined in this paper. Individual scholars have studied the various executions and variations, but it is only by looking at these versions side by side that the pattern of ambiguity truly emerges as I’ve demonstrated with the examples from a very brief period in the twentieth century when Coriolanus rallied believers to their fundamental political truth.

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32 Hayman, 309.
33 Hayman, 35.
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