



Twelve arguments on
Coriolanus

sources
opinions
dramaturgy



The first lesson a leader must learn is that he is a doomed man.

Too many so-called leaders have been made into celebrities destroyed by mass media. They become Hollywood objects and lose touch with reality. The task is to transform society; only the people can do that.

– Huey Newton

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Great Man Theory



Historians bicker over whether history is made by a few Great Men, or whether the People move human life forward from below.



Even within Marxism, this is a problem.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks scorned the passivity of reformist “economism.” The Party can’t just sit back and let events take their course, they said. Capitalism won’t overthrow itself. But if the People have to be led, what remains of the democratic pretensions of the Revolution? This leads to the same hero-worship that fascism indulges in.

If the People make history, why all the statues to Lenin?

Psychopaths in command



It is never advisable to inquire too closely into the mental health of a nation's military commanders. Sanity is for the politicians.

– Thucydides

Americans love a winner and will not tolerate a loser.

Battle is the most significant competition in which a man can indulge.

It brings out all that is best and it removes

all that is base. We don't want yellow cowards in the army. They should be killed off like flies. Kill off the goddamn cowards and we'll have a nation of brave men.



- George S. Patton

War is cruelty. There is no use trying to reform it. The crueler it is, the sooner it will be over. My aim, then, was to whip the rebels, and make them fear and dread us. Fear is the beginning of wisdom.



There will soon come an armed contest between capital and labor. They will oppose each other, not with words and arguments, but with shot and shell, gun-powder and cannon. The better classes are tired of the insane howling of the lower strata and they mean to stop them.

- William Tecumseh Sherman



Killing Japanese didn't bother me very much at that time. There are no innocent civilians. It is their government and you are fighting a people. So it doesn't bother me so much to be killing the so-called innocent bystanders. I suppose if I had lost the war, I would have been tried as a war criminal. But all war is immoral and if you let that bother you, you're not a good soldier. I'll tell you what war is about, you've got to kill people, and when you've killed enough they stop fighting.

- US Air Force Gen. Curtis Lemay

Mother love

**РОДИНА-МАТЬ
ЗОВЕТ!**





*A man who has been
his mother's favorite
keeps for life the
feeling of a conqueror.*

*Sigmund Freud,
A Childhood
Recollection*

Letter from Lady Jennie Churchill to her son
Winston, June 12, 1890

Dearest Winston-

I have much to say to you, I'm afraid not of a pleasant nature. You know darling how I hate to find fault with you, but I can't help myself this time. Yr father & I are both more disappointed than we can say, that you are not able to go up for yr preliminary exam: I daresay you have 1000 excuses for not doing so—but there the fact remains.



... Dearest Winston you make me very unhappy—I had built up such hopes about you & felt so proud of you—& now all is gone. My only consolation is that your conduct is good and you are an affectionate son—but your work is an insult to your intelligence. If you would only trace out a plan of action for yourself & carry it out & be determined to do so—I am sure you could accomplish anything you wished. It is that thoughtlessness of yours which is your greatest enemy ...

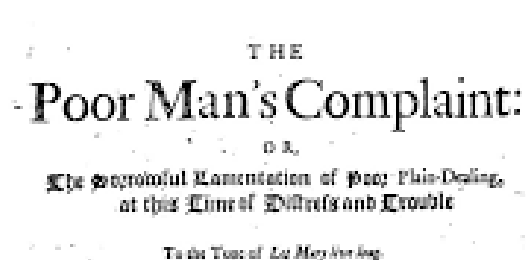
I will say no more now—but Winston you are old enough to see how serious this is to you. Stop & think it out for yourself & make a plan before it is too late. You know dearest boy that I will always help you all I can.

Your loving but distressed
Mother

Rats in the grain

*the rich 'ne'er cared for us / yet: suffer us to famish, and
their store-houses / crammed with grain.'*

Coriolanus is probably the play in the canon most clearly written in response to current events. The play was written in 1608. The previous three years



had seen steep hikes in the price of wheat and barley, famine, and food riots. In May 1607, several thousand peasants gathered at meetings in the Midlands, especially Shakespeare's

own Warwickshire. The disturbances, known as "The Midland Revolt," were led by a tinker named 'Captain Pouch', or John Reynolds, who tried to organize a resistance by men, women and children to recent land enclosures. He told the protestors he had authority from God and the King to destroy enclosures and promised to protect protesters by

the contents of his pouch, which he carried by his side, which he said would keep them from all harm. The response of the authorities, under orders from James I, was to impose curfews, erect gibbets, and send in the Deputy Lieutenants to quell the rioters.

In early June, over a thousand protesters had gathered in Northamptonshire to protest against the enclosures of Thomas Tresham, known as “the most odious man in the county.” Tresham was enclosing common land that had been part of Rockingham Forest. Women and children were part of the protest. Edward Montagu, one of the Deputy Lieutenants, had spoken against enclosure in



Parliament some years earlier, but was now placed by the King in the position effectively of defending the Treshams. The local armed bands and militia refused the call-up, so the landowners were forced to use their own servants to suppress the rioters on 8 June 1607. The Royal Proclamation was read twice. The rioters

continued in their actions and the gentry and their forces charged. A pitched battle ensued. 40-50 were killed and the leaders of the protest were hanged and quartered.

After his execution, Captain Pouch's bag was opened. It contained a chunk of green cheese.

The True Levellers Standard ADVANCED:

O R,
The State of Community opened, and Presented to the
Sons of Men.

By

*William Everard,
John Palmer,
John South,
John Courton,
William Taylor,
Christopher Clifford,
John Barker.*

*Ferrard Winstanley,
Richard Goodgroome,
Thomas Starre,
William Hoggrill,
Robert Sawyer,
Thomas Eder,
Henry Bickerstaffe,
John Taylor, &c.*

R.

Beginning to Plant and Manure the Waste land upon
George-Hill, in the Parish of *Walton*, in the
County of *Surrey*.

Full belly, empty mouths

Abundance was created not by public sacrifices to 'the common good,' but by the productive genius of free men who pursued their



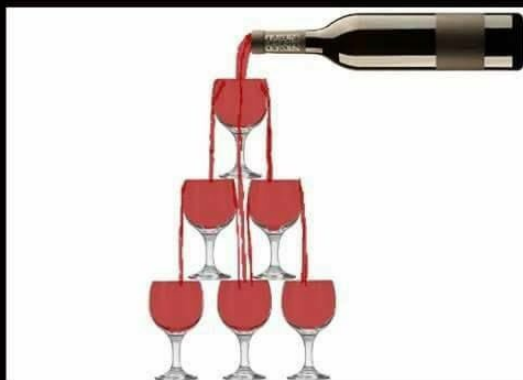
own personal interests and the making of their own private fortunes. thus the whole country was moving forward and profiting, not suffering, every step of the way. -- Ayn Rand



If you feed the horse enough oats, some will pass through to the road for the sparrows.

Trickle down economics

How we're told it works



What actually happens



LEFT WING UK

The Nazi Shakespeare cult



Hitler Youth dressing for performance of *Coriolanus*, 1941

Troubling fact: the Nazis loved Shakespeare. On April 23, 1940, as Hitler's armies were preparing for their westward drive, the leading lights of German cultural life assembled at the National Theatre to commemorate Shakespeare's birthday.

Nazi playwright Gerhart Hauptmann delivered a keynote address: *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.* -Rodney Symington, *The Nazi Appropriation of Shakespeare: Cultural Politics in the Third Reich*

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 despised the corrupt democracy in Rome. *Coriolanus* exalted the Nazi view that “a democratic government is corrosive and true order in a state can be guaranteed 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 Rome can be “overcome only by a great idea, propagated by the leader and supported by the masses.”

Brecht and Mao

Bertolt Brecht struggled to rescue Coriolanus from its Nazi past. His adaptation *Coriolan*, produced in East Germany in 1952-55, revealed the influence of Mao Tse-tung's treatise *On Contradiction*.

Brecht alluded to this text and discusses his development on the original and his ideas for its staging in an essay entitled "Study of the First Scene of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*", which is written in the form of a dialogue with his collaborators at the Berliner Ensemble theatre company.



To be one-sided means not to look at problems all-sidedly, for example, to understand only China but not Japan, only the Communist Party but not the Kuomintang, only



the proletariat but not the bourgeoisie, only the peasants but not the landlords, only the favourable conditions but not the difficult ones, only the past but not the future, only individual parts but not the whole, only the defects but not the

achievements, only the plaintiff's case but not the defendant's, and so on. This is what we mean by looking at a problem one-sidedly. Or it may be called seeing the part but not the whole, seeing the trees but not the forest.

When Sun Wu Tzu said in discussing military science, "Know the enemy and know yourself, and you can fight a hundred battles with no danger of defeat", he was referring to the two sides in a battle. Without life, there would be no death; without death, there would be no life. Without "above", there would be no "below." without "below", there would be no "above." Without misfortune, there would be no good fortune; without good



fortune, these would be no misfortune. Without landlords, there would be no peasants; without peasants, there would be no landlords. Without the bourgeoisie, there would be no proletariat; without the proletariat, there would be no bourgeoisie. Without imperialist oppression of nations, there would be no colonies; without colonies, there would be no imperialist oppression of nations. It is so with all opposites; in given conditions, on the one hand they are opposed to each other, and on the other they are interconnected, interpenetrating, interpermeating and interdependent, and this character is described as identity.



Electric football

Coriolanus joins *Taming of the Shrew* and *Merchant of Venice* as one of Shakespeare's most indigestible plays for the modern liberal. It cannot be denied that the reactionary speeches of Menenius are his actual voice. New historical research shows he was a wealthy grain hoarder who sold grain at inflated profits during the 1597-98 famines in Warwickshire. There is little doubt that the speeches in *Coriolanus* belittling the people are Shakespeare's own attitudes to the bread riots of the Midlands Revolt.

But this would only taint the play if Shakespeare were a hack propagandist. Jocinda Davies argues that Shakespeare was uninterested in dramatic imperatives like linear plot and formal moral structure. Instead, he set his characters up to run their own course, like a little boy playing electric



football, lining everyone up and turning on the switch to see the unexpected diversions and pas-de-deux they spin off to, driven



by the rhythm of verse and human experience, ending up in places that a propaganda narrative would never have allowed them.

So even if he was a scummy upper-middle-class grain hoarder, and even if he saw the people as rats, that doesn't stop the play from working through its own logic, and its characters from ending up in their own dramatic destinies, Great Men falling, brought down by hubris and the cunning of the people's tribunes. As though Shakespeare watched his own characters spin out of his control, into something like their own personal destinies.



Tribunes of the people



LIBERTAD



Soldiers of fortune

Machiavelli, *The Prince*:

Mercenaries are useless and dangerous; and if one holds his state based on these arms, he will stand neither firm nor safe; they have neither

the fear of God nor fidelity to men, for in peace one is robbed by them, and in war by the enemy. The fact is, they have no other attraction or reason for keeping the field than a trifle of stipend, which is not sufficient to make them willing to die for you.



For the ruin of Italy has been caused by nothing else than by resting all her hopes for many years on mercenaries. You cannot trust them, because they always aspire to their own greatness by oppressing you; but if the captain is not skilful, you are ruined in the usual way.



Experience has shown mercenaries do nothing except damage; and it is more difficult to bring a republic, armed with its own arms, under the sway of one of its citizens than it is to

bring one armed with foreign arms.

The Milanese enlisted Francesco Sforza against the Venetians, and he, having overcome the enemy at Caravaggio, allied himself with them to crush the Milanese, his masters.



For if he became the soldier of their enemies they

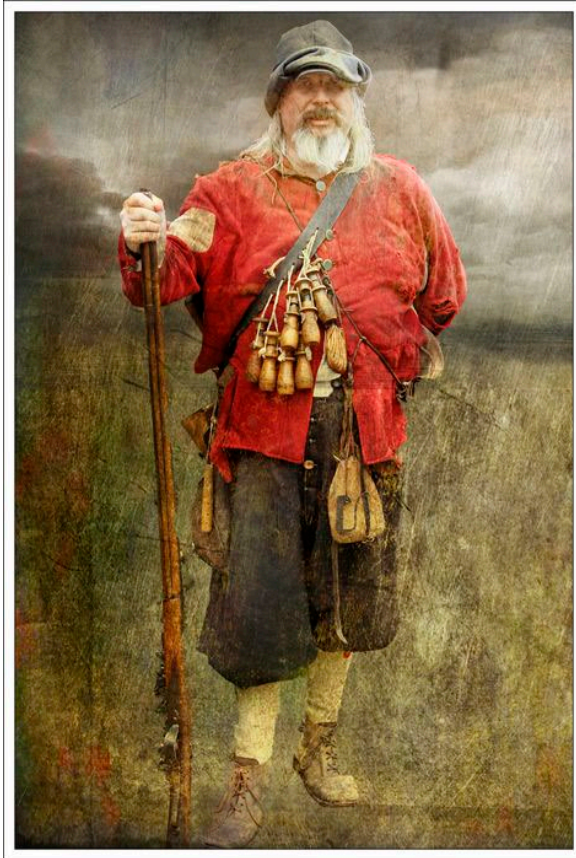


had no means of resisting, and if they held to him they must obey him. Thus they have brought Italy to slavery and contempt.

Switching sides

Throw me to the wolves and I return leading the pack

-- Seneca



“Turncoat” comes from the siege of Corfe Castle during the English Civil War 1645. Cromwell's common soldiers turned their coats inside out to match the colors of the Royalist army. They were let into the castle and waited inside to attack when the main force arrived.

In Athens in the early 410s BC, Alcibiades advocated war but fled to Sparta after his enemies accused him of sacrilege. Alcibiades soon made powerful enemies and defected to Persia. He served as an adviser to the satrap Tissaphernes until his Athenian allies brought about his recall, but his enemies succeeded in banishing him a second time. He died in exile.



Emmeline Pankhurst was a radical suffragette until 1914. When World War I broke out she stopped all



militant suffrage work, declaring that women were needed instead to “keep the country going, to carry on the industries.”

Pankhurst converted her suffragettes into the White Feather movement, which tried to shame men in to volunteering for the front lines. She stood for Parliament as a Conservative after the War.



Britain conquered India because of a single defection. At the Battle of Plassey in 1757, Robert Clive of the British East India Company induced Indian general Mir Jafar to join forces with the British. His mid-

combat betrayal allowed 3000 British troops to beat the Nawab's army of 50,000. The British captured Calcutta, then moved on to the rest of India.

Wang Jingwei started out as a left-wing member of the Chinese Nationalist Party, in the days of the Republic. This changed when the Japanese invaded in 1937. He accepted their invitation to set up a puppet government in Nanjing, with the slogan: "Oppose Corrupt Government!"



Farragut's homecoming



Union Navy
Commander David
Farragut grew up in
New Orleans.
He was the son of a
family of civil
servants, who didn't
own slaves.

Although he was the
most brilliant student
in his class, he was
ignored by the
debutantes, never
invited to their Scarlett
O'Hara dances.

He went off to college,
when a war broke out
over whether the
people who oppressed
him in high school get
to keep their slaves,
and that's not a hard
choice, is it?





In 1862, Farragut led a line of Federal gunboats up the mouth of the Mississippi, back into his hometown, blowing up plantations along the river.

Farragut must have stood at the helm, as his high school classmates' mansions burned:

"Wanna go to the prom with me now, Scarlett?"



