

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Shakespeare's Citizens and the 99%: Accommodating the Occupy Movement in Productions of *Coriolanus*

Kate Wilkinson
Sheffield Hallam University
Kate.Wilkinson@shu.ac.uk

Terence Hawkes writes that the function of Shakespeare's plays is to 'generate meaning'.¹ Hawkes argues that '[they] have become one of the central agencies through which our culture performs this operation. This is what they do, that is how they work, and that is what they are for'.² However, the meaning that is generated in performance would appear to be contingent on the particular context in which the plays are produced. In writing about Shakespeare and political theatre, Andrew James Hartley has observed that

theatre is an essentially experiential art form, and the meanings it generates ... tend to be limited to those who make up its audience. After it closes, the production may live on in memory ... but it loses its kinetic immediacy, its presentness. It becomes disconnected from that which defined it: a crucially interactive dependence on the live audience and a broader interactivity which locates both performers and audience in a particular cultural moment.³

Topical allusions to politics at the time of production have been a key aspect of the performance history of *Coriolanus* since its inception around 1608. Robert Ormsby gives an excellent account of the various allusions that scholars have found in the play, from the 1607 corn riots in the Midlands to Jacobean absolutism, and from the 'rhetoric

My thanks to the two anonymous readers, whose thoughtful comments have helped in the completion of this article. Thanks are due also to: David Quicksall; Hamilton Clancy; Richard Wood; and Sara Mills.

¹ Terence Hawkes, *Meaning By Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 3.

² Ibid.

³ Andrew James Hartley, *Shakespeare and Political Theatre in Practice* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 11.

of anti-theatrical tracts' to 'the question of military support for Protestantism on the Continent'.⁴ John Ripley observes that Nahum Tate's 1681 adaptation of the play was staged against the backdrop of 'seven of the most politically turbulent decades in England's history', and Ormsby states that through "'improving" Martius' behaviour', Tate sought to 'participate in contemporary debates'.⁵ This engagement with the social and political contexts of the time of production continued to be a feature of the play internationally: for example, the 1933 production at the Comédie-Française, Paris, resulted in 'tragic street demonstrations' related to public discontent with the 'economic tribulations' of the time.⁶ Rather than being used simply to comment on current contexts, however, the play has also been employed to further an oppositional politics: for example, the National Theatre's 1984–85 production (directed by Peter Hall) was a significant moment in the National's conflict with the Arts Council and the Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher, and was staged against the backdrop of the (sometimes violent) miners' strike.⁷

Writing in 2014, and in line with Hawkes's approach to meaning by Shakespeare, Graham Holderness argues that *Coriolanus* is 'very much a play for today, if anything more contemporary than it ever has been since the early seventeenth century'.⁸ He goes on to discuss the character of Coriolanus as a 'folk-hero for the third millennium' and finds the Coriolanus figure in the contemporary films *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *Skyfall* (2012).⁹ Yet, parallels can be found beyond the eponymous character and the militaristic masculinity of these films, and, indeed, the play has been used successfully in recent years to comment on or to seek to understand political movements that are rooted in the current moment. In 2011 there were a number of protests around the world under the banner of Occupy, a movement consisting of the occupation of public places to make a highly visible impact through which to create political resistance and change. Occupy Wall Street (the focus of this article) was arguably a highly theatrical protest: the camp included a theatre, and commentators have talked about the site as being 'the stage for dissidence'.¹⁰ In 2012 this movement directly influenced two American productions of *Coriolanus*, by the Seattle Shakespeare Company and The Drilling Company's Shakespeare in the Parking Lot. These productions referenced the Occupy

⁴ Robert Ormsby, *Shakespeare in Performance: Coriolanus* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), p. 2.

⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

⁶ Felicia Hardison Londré, 'Coriolanus and Stavisky: The Interpenetration of Art and Politics', *Theatre Research International* 11:2 (1986), p. 119.

⁷ Ormsby, p. 142.

⁸ Graham Holderness, *Tales from Shakespeare: Creative Collisions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 89.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *Contexts* 11:2 (2012), p. 13.

movement as a focal point of their interpretation, using it to shed light on *Coriolanus* and using *Coriolanus* to begin to understand what was happening on the streets.¹¹ In this article I seek first to elucidate the parallels between the Occupy movement and the citizens of *Coriolanus*, both in the play and the play in performance. In order to demonstrate the parallels between the play and the movement, I give a brief overview of what Occupy was, before discussing how the citizens in act one of the play-text can be aligned with the twenty-first century Occupiers. However, in line with Hartley's notion of the meaning of a production being reliant on the interactions of the play, the actors and the immediate contexts, I argue that in spite of *Coriolanus* being an 'unremitting study of the political landscape',¹² such current alignments are not inherent in the text and that the creation of meaning based on the parallels of *Coriolanus* and Occupy depended on both the particular theatre spaces used and the timing of the productions. These were crucial for the creation of present meaning. In support of this, I will examine how the Seattle Shakespeare Company and Shakespeare in the Parking Lot productions (and their reviewers) used Occupy to make explicit the contemporaneity of the play. As a coda to this, and in order to address the various points of comparison and divergence between American and UK interpretations, I conclude with a discussion of the Donmar Warehouse production of *Coriolanus* in London in the winter of 2013, which resisted such contextual engagement. Thus I demonstrate that in order to create such specific present meaning in the play, the political context being used must be current to the production.

Occupy

Initiated by an advertisement in *Adbusters* magazine asking people to turn up at Wall Street on the given date and 'bring a tent', the Occupy movement began in Zuccotti Park in the Wall Street financial district of New York, on 17th September 2011, with the intention of protesting through occupation of space. Influenced by other uprisings earlier in 2011 such as the Arab Spring protests in the Middle East, the 'revolt' in Madison, Wisconsin where protestors 'carried out a mass occupation ... huddled in their sleeping bags on the Capitol floor',¹³ and the Spanish *Indignados* movement which began in May 2011, the Occupy movement quickly gained momentum and spread to 1,500 cities around the world. Sarah Van Gelder has listed the causes of the protest as

¹¹ Interestingly it seems that this was only the case of productions in the USA. In London, the National Theatre's production of *Timon of Athens* also used Occupy as a cultural reference point but the use of Occupy and *Coriolanus* seems to have been a specifically American response.

¹² Peter Holland, 'Introduction', in William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, ed. by Holland (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 3.

¹³ Paul Mason, *Why it's Still Kicking Off Everywhere* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 184.

‘Wall Street banks, big corporations, and others among the 1% ... claiming the world’s wealth for themselves at the expense of the 99% and having their way with our governments’.¹⁴ Thus, proclaiming ‘We are the 99%’, Occupy grew out of continued frustration with governments who had bailed out banks during the economic crisis which began in 2008, the continued refusal of bankers to take responsibility for the crisis, and the austerity measures imposed by governments, which were perceived as a punishment inflicted on the poorest in society while the richest continued to grow richer. Many of the occupiers at Wall Street were also recent graduates whose ‘economic aspirations’ had been blocked as a result of the financial downturn.¹⁵

Referred to by Bernard Harcourt as ‘political disobedience’,¹⁶ the Occupy movement challenged previous conceptions of political uprising: it had no single leader or leadership structure; the different camps around the world were united under the banner of Occupy but were essentially separate protests; it did not issue a list of demands; and the movement was at once both local and global. There was no single issue at the heart of the movement; rather, a number of social, economic, and political issues were raised under the placards of the 99 percent. Occupy therefore can be contrasted with traditional political approaches because it did not offer an alternative ideology and resisted attempts to be contained under any particular political heading.

OWS has been read as being inherently theatrical: an Arts and Culture Working Group was part of the general assembly before the occupation of Wall Street, and spawned the direct action street-theatre Occupy Performance Guild.¹⁷ Christopher Wallenberg has described how the messages of OWS were ‘communicated by striking and often playful images — from the ubiquitous giant Lady Liberty puppet, to the money-sucking squid dressed as a Goldman Sachs spokesperson, to the movement’s first poster of a dancer on top of the Wall Street bull’. Wallenberg goes on to quote Benjamin Shepard arguing that ‘Art and cultural resistance have to be part of the movement to help make [the] point ... the play was the thing that Hamlet used to capture the attention of the king’.¹⁸ The extensive use of puppets, placards and banners at OWS lends itself very effectively to the idea of stage design — as can be seen from the set design of Shakespeare in the

¹⁴ Sarah Van Gelder, *This Changes Everything* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2011), p. 1.

¹⁵ Ruth Milkman, ‘Revolt of the college-educated millennials’, *Contexts*, p. 14. Many of the stories posted to the Occupy Wall Street Tumblr page also bear out this assertion (<http://wearethe99percent.tumblr.com/>) [accessed 26 September 2014].

¹⁶ Bernard E. Harcourt, ‘Political Disobedience’, *Critical Enquiry* 39:1 (2012), p. 33. Harcourt states that ‘political disobedience’ is different to civil disobedience in that it ‘fundamentally rejects the political and ideological landscape that has dominated our collective imagination ... since the cold war’ (p. 33).

¹⁷ Christopher Wallenberg, ‘To Catch the Conscience of a Nation’, *American Theatre* 29:4 (April 2012), p. 28.

¹⁸ Benjamin Shepard, quoted in Wallenberg, p. 27.

Parking Lot's production of *Coriolanus*, and the props used in the Seattle Shakespeare Company production, both of which are discussed below.



The Drilling Company's Shakespeare in the Parking Lot 2012 production of *Coriolanus* (photo: Lee Wexler).

In the same way that protest can be read as theatrical, so too can occupation. In his influential work *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook argues that he could 'take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and that is all we need for an act of theatre to be engaged.'¹⁹ While Brook acknowledges that 'when we talk about theatre this is not quite what we mean',²⁰ his opening statement does relate directly to Shakespeare in the Parking Lot turning that parking lot into a theatre, in a similar manner to OWS creating a theatre as a part of their camp in the park. This all relates to Josette F  ral's theory of theatricality as 'the result of a perceptual dynamics linking the onlooker with someone or something that is looked at' and is 'not limited strictly to the theatre, but can be found ... as well ... in the quotidian'.²¹ The presence on *YouTube* of videos from the various Occupy camps also attests to the theatricality of the movement in these terms, particularly in films that demonstrate the Human Mic at work: the use of hand signals and the way in which members communicate by repeating what is being said appears like abstract

¹⁹ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Touchstone, 1968), p. 9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²¹ Josette F  ral, 'Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language', *SubStance* 31:2&3 (2002), 94–108 (p. 97).

performance art.²² The existence of such videos on this kind of platform, while at once creating an historical record of the protest, also presents the protest as something to be observed: the protest is itself a kind of performance.

Occupy, then, can be seen as a theatrical movement through the emphasis on occupation of space, which was consolidated by visual aids in the form of banners, placards, and even the tents of the occupiers.²³ Harcourt argues that ‘Occupy Wall Street was politically disobedient to the core; it even resisted attempts to be categorized’.²⁴ It is this resistance to categorizations, coupled with its theatricality, which has made Occupy so amenable to dramatization in productions of Shakespeare, because it can therefore be used by directors to fit their interpretation of the given play. It is as though the absence of a solid aim underpinning the movement leaves it open to others’ interpretations, in the same way that producers interpret a play: to a certain degree, through reference to current political contexts, we can make it mean what we want it to mean.

But what about this makes it relate so specifically to *Coriolanus*? *Coriolanus* is a political play; as Peter Holland sees it, it is an ‘unremitting study of the political landscape’ which has ‘a subtle and ever-changing balancing of the possibilities of political change and the preferability of particular courses of social action’.²⁵ The play seems an ideal fit for a time of protest, when people are calling for political, economic and social change. Indeed, as John Drakakis has written:

To view [*Coriolanus*] ... without reference to current particular questions of political leadership or the nature of modern political violence in all its guises, is to fall into the very pit of abstraction in which much traditional criticism has wallowed for some time ... The play will, as it is resurrected, continue to be measured against new political yardsticks all of which will graft their own particularistic investments onto a ‘text’ whose language and social predicaments are open to constant reinvention and translation.²⁶

²² The human microphone (human mic) is a system by which speeches can be delivered to large groups of people without electronic amplification. The system was used by Occupy Wall Street when the use of electric amplification was banned. The system works by the speech giver speaking only a few words at a time which are then relayed word for word by people in the group so that the speech reaches all of the people listening. For a video of the human mic in action at OWS see:

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xIK7uxBSAS0>> [accessed 24 May 2016].

²³ The tents of the Occupy camps influenced theatrical responses: the pre-show for Nicholas Hytner’s *Timon of Athens* (2012) at the National Theatre, London consisted of the stage filled with tents which immediately made one think of Occupy, which was encamped outside St Paul’s cathedral during the performance run.

²⁴ Harcourt, p. 34.

²⁵ Holland, pp. 3, 2.

²⁶ John Drakakis, ‘Shakespeare as Presentist’, *Shakespeare Survey* 66 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 184.

This appears to be exactly the case for the American productions of *Coriolanus* discussed here: even when the use of Occupy was not overt, reviewers ‘grafted’ it onto the production to relate the themes of the play to their readership in an immediately accessible manner, as will be seen. That the play opens with a group of ordinary, anonymous citizens about to rise against the senate because of food shortages and general inequality between the rich and the poor also makes it an easy play onto which to graft Occupy. The very anonymity of these characters means that their voices, in spite of their refusal to grant them to Coriolanus in act two, scene three, are open to appropriation outside of the play-world.

Coriolanus

Robert Miola describes how the physical space, as opposed to the idea, of the city is very important to the play, writing that Rome is ‘sharply defined by outlying battlefields, rival towns, and its own vividly realized topography — its walls, gates, Capitol, Tiber, Tarpeian rock, forum, private houses, and streets’.²⁷ This is significant in thinking about this play in terms of its interpretation through the lens of OWS, which is so clearly about the occupation of a particular geographical and physical space. Miola goes on to assert that in *Coriolanus* Shakespeare’s attention was on ‘Rome itself, specifically ... the political organization of the earthly city ... [Shakespeare] seeks in *Coriolanus* to explore the purpose, nature, and problems of political order’.²⁸ Thus it is apparent that the focus on place becomes a way in which to talk about more abstract ideas, in a similar way to how physical occupation of Wall Street (although actually in Zucotti park) could be seen to be encouraging discussion of abstract concepts such as money and social exclusion.

The opening stage direction, ‘Enter a company of mutinous citizens, with staves, clubs, and other weapons’ (1.1.1 s.d.), is often highlighted as introducing what critics have referred to as a ‘mob’. Simon Palfrey writes about the ‘eloquence and individuation of *Coriolanus*’ mobs’ and Miola argues that ‘Shakespeare portrays the unreasoning violence of mob action’ in the opening scene.²⁹ Shakespeare does not use the term ‘mob’ — it was not in circulation until the late seventeenth century — but twentieth century critics’ use of the word creates a much more negative presentation of the group

²⁷ Robert Miola, *Shakespeare’s Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 164.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

²⁹ Simon Palfrey, *Late Shakespeare: A New World of Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 48, and Miola, p. 166.

than Shakespeare's own use of 'company', itself a theatrical term. 'Mob' suggests a sense of disorder and the potential for violence, making those of us who are not a part of the mob vulnerable. Such a distancing device attempts to dictate where audience sympathies should lie and thus, I would contend, invokes class difference by demonising those rising against the Senate. To read such a group as a mob and then, in performance, as modern protestors — as is the case in the productions I discuss below — problematically presents those protestors as violent and unruly in contrast to the peaceful, educated protestors of the Occupy camps.

Yet, in spite of Miola's assertion that this is an unreasoning mob, after this opening stage direction there are 49 lines of discussion between the citizens before Menenius enters, presenting a more sympathetic picture of the citizens than the term 'mob' suggests:

First Cit. Before we proceed any further, hear me speak.

All. Speak, speak.

First Cit. You are all resolved rather to die than to famish?

All. Resolved, resolved.

First Cit. First, you know Caius Martius is chief enemy to the people.

All. We know't, we know't.

First Cit. Let us kill him, and we'll have corn at our own price. Is't a verdict?

All. No more talking on't; let it be done.

(1.1.1–11)³⁰

The first spoken lines of the play thus suggest debate rather than violence, even though the first physical presence is that of armed citizens discussing the violence they are about to engage in. The citizens' discussion appears to be a democratic process: the First Citizen asks to be heard and the rest of the group respond by demanding to hear him speak. The third line of the play — 'You are all resolved rather to die than to famish?' — is significant because this question shows how the citizens appear to be making an informed choice, which is in fact no choice at all: die fighting or die from starvation. That the First Citizen asks again four lines later 'Is't a verdict?' reinforces the sense that the citizens are choosing their action democratically, rather than through force from a leader or acting mindlessly without any thought at all.

The use of repetition in this extract, while indicating that more than one person is speaking, also suggests momentum and impatience. This is reinforced later in the scene

³⁰ All quotations from *Coriolanus* are from Peter Holland's Arden edition (2013).

when we hear that a group has risen on the other side of the city (1.1.46-47). However, even though the group has asserted, ‘No more talking on’t’, a second citizen does talk — ‘One word, good citizens’ — creating more discussion in which Shakespeare presents the grievances of these citizens and allows the audience to make judgements based on their accounts, not, at this earliest point, on the versions of the Roman elite:

First Cit. We are accounted poor citizens, the patricians good. What authority surfeits on would relieve us. If they would yield us but the superfluity while it were wholesome, we might guess they relieved us humanely; but they think we are too dear: the leanness that afflicts us, the object of our misery, is an inventory to particularise their abundance; our sufferance is a gain to them. Let us revenge this with our pikes, ere we become rakes. For the gods know, I speak this in hunger for bread, not in thirst for revenge.

(1.1.14–24)

The citizens are starving while the elite are growing fat; indeed, the First Citizen indicates that what the ‘authorities’ have left over would be sufficient to relieve their suffering, a sentiment which resonates with the rhetoric of Occupy. The suffering of the people is underlined here: ‘our sufferance’ is juxtaposed with ‘their abundance’; ‘leanness ... afflicts’ the citizens; they are miserable; the use of the term ‘humanely’ also speaks about the inhumanity with which the citizens believe themselves to be treated by those in power.

The focus of this rebellion, then, is food and hunger: later in the first scene, the First Citizen details to Menenius how the patricians ‘Suffer us to famish, and their storehouses crammed with grain’ (1.1.79–80). Attention is again drawn to the fact that there is enough food to go around but that it is unfairly distributed — a central issue for the Occupy movement. Yet, it is not just hunger that the First Citizen tells Menenius about. He goes on:

[They] make edicts for usury to support usurers; repeal daily any wholesome act established against the rich, and provide more piercing statutes daily, to chain up and restrain the poor. If the wars eat us not up, they will; and there’s all the love they bear us.

(1.1.80-85)

Menenius follows all of this with his famous fable of the belly, but the speeches of the First Citizen in particular are where we hear the first, most obvious echoes of the Occupy movement. The rhetoric of the First Citizen can be found in that of Occupy.

Indeed, the above quotation seems to be directly echoed by Sarah Van Gelder in her introduction to the book *This Changes Everything*, in which she writes ‘We are seeing our ways of life, our aspirations, and our security slip away — not because we have been lazy or undisciplined, or lacked intelligence and motivation, but because the wealthiest among us have rigged the system to enhance their own power and wealth at the expense of everyone else’.³¹ And this is reiterated by the personal stories posted on the Tumblr blog ‘wearethe99percent’, which was established in August 2011; its subheading asserts

We are the 99 percent. We are getting kicked out of our homes. We are forced to choose between groceries and rent. We are denied quality medical care. We are suffering from environmental pollution. We are working long hours for little pay and no rights, if we’re working at all. We are getting nothing while the other 1 percent is getting everything.³²

There is a clear parallel here with the speeches of the citizens, especially as this asserts, as do the characters in Shakespeare’s play, that although there is a problem related to food, this is not the only issue at hand. The *Tumblr* blog also records testimonies of individuals making impossible choices and of systems that support the richest in society at the expense of the poorest, as shown in the two examples below:

I have had a job since the day I got my license at 16, I am responsible, I am intelligent, and talented, and yet, I still struggle to afford food and find myself going to bed hungry in the one of the richest and most bountiful countries in the world.³³

I don’t have \$3500 to spend on meds, so I take a daily aspirin ... I’m waiting on the word that I have renal failure. A vial of insulin, that used to cost \$15 a few years ago, now costs \$80. Big pharma is gouging [*sic*].³⁴

Here we find both a general statement and also the individual voices of the oppressed, which is arguably what we find in the first moments of *Coriolanus*. This seems to suggest that it would be easy to create a twenty-first century production of this play in which the voices of the citizens could be appropriated for those occupying various

³¹ Van Gelder, p. 3.

³² ‘We Are The 99 Percent’, <<http://wearethe99percent.tumblr.com/>> [accessed 26 September 2014].

³³ ‘We Are The 99 Percent’, <<http://wearethe99percent.tumblr.com/post/13453047717/my-father-has-been-the-sole-financial-supporter-of>> [accessed 26 September 2014].

³⁴ ‘We Are The 99 Percent’, <<http://wearethe99percent.tumblr.com/post/22120030338/i-got-my-first-job-mowing-lawns-when-i-was-13-i>> [accessed 26th September 2014].

spaces in cities around the world. Of course, the citizens of *Coriolanus* and the members of the Occupy movement do differ; for example, the absence of a leadership structure in Occupy contrasts with *Coriolanus*' citizens' reliance on their leaders and the processes of government, which leave them open to manipulation. However, the similarities were sufficient for theatre companies and reviewers to, in the words of Drakakis, 'graft their own particularistic investments' on to the play, as I will now discuss.³⁵

Occupy in production

In 2012 there were four productions of *Coriolanus* in the USA that were seen to be, to some degree, relating *Coriolanus* to the Occupy movement.³⁶ Not all of these productions directly referenced the movement (at least not in a very obvious way). However, reviewers used Occupy as a way to read the productions and as a filter through which to understand the events of the play.

The Seattle Shakespeare Company staged their production of *Coriolanus*, directed by David Quicksall and starring David Drummond as Caius Martius Coriolanus, in January 2012, only a month after the Occupy Seattle camp had been evicted from its site at Seattle Community College. Quicksall views the play as both a political and psychological text, arguing that 'no other play of [Shakespeare's] creates such an intense fusion of the psyche of its main character and his political fortunes'.³⁷ Yet, in spite of his attempt to stage this fusion, reviewers of the production tended to read it as focusing on the character of Coriolanus rather than the political situation: Misha Berson in *The Seattle Times* observed that 'there is no more jaundiced portrait of a warrior in the canon than in "Coriolanus"' before talking about Drummond's presentation of the character as 'a growling, brutish hulk ... bloodstained and butchering'.³⁸ The characterisation of Coriolanus was also the focus for Michael Shurgot in *Shakespeare Bulletin*, who stated that '[t]wo performance choices - the set and the casting of David Drummond as Coriolanus - signalled the production team's vision for this play'.³⁹ However, although Shurgot's review hardly touches on the citizens in the production, Berson read them explicitly as 'protestors', noting in parentheses that they were 'not

³⁵ Drakakis, p. 184.

³⁶ The two productions not discussed here were St Louis Shakespeare's production which ran from July 20th to July 29th 2012 and the Commonwealth Shakespeare Company's 'Free Shakespeare on the Common' production.

³⁷ David Quicksall, Pers. Comm. 5th August 2015.

³⁸ Misha Berson, "'Coriolanus': A Roman warrior, warts and all", *The Seattle Times*, 13th January 2012.

³⁹ Michael W. Shurgot, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 30:3 (2012), p. 369.

surprisingly portrayed here as a kind of Occupy Rome contingent'.⁴⁰ Sandrine Georges, in a blog review titled 'The Other 99%', also made the link: 'In this *Coriolanus*, the plebeians are the 99%, and their cry of WE MUST HAVE CORN takes shape on the illustrated fists of Occupy signs [*sic*]'.⁴¹ Georges goes on to observe that 'there are many sad similarities between a stratified Rome, a feudal Britain, and an occupied Seattle'.⁴² Indeed, Quicksall has expressed that it was his intention to point out the parallels between the ancient Rome of the play's setting and the political pertinence of the play in the twenty-first century, and this was achieved through features of the production's design:

I was really captivated by the notion that the seeds of the Roman Republic's ruin were sown early in its history. ... I began looking at images of Roman ruins and really liked the look of how an entire culture now lies in ruins. I also knew that I wanted a contemporary look to the play but didn't want to use modern weaponry — so the design challenge was to create a theatrical world that could embrace both the old and the current. ... The ultimate design actually looked like a contemporary story played out on the ruins of Rome.⁴³

Thus the stage itself was relatively bare and stony grey, with blood-stained boxes and basic wooden benches used as props and seats.⁴⁴ Against this backdrop, the actors wore modern dress: grey and black suits or army fatigues. In themselves, such modern dress and more abstract stage design do not draw alignments to specific political contexts. Yet Quicksall was so determined that his audience would find the parallels with Occupy that not only did his citizens carry Occupy-like placards (in some cases, as detailed by Georges, portraying the illustration of a clenched fist with the words 'We Are Rome' written underneath, suggesting the phrasing of the Occupy movement's 'We Are the 99%'), he also wrote a short piece for the production programme in which he clearly underlines the relevance of the play to the Occupy movement specifically. Starting with the quote from 1.1.83–85, 'If the wars eat us not up, the rich will; and there's all the love they bear us', Quicksall states in his 'Thoughts from' piece that

The United States is a country at war. We are a country of polarized politics with a gulf between the rich and the poor that continues to grow wider. Some observers

⁴⁰ Berson, 13th January 2012.

⁴¹ Sandrine Georges, 'The Other 99%', *TeenTix Blog*, 9th January 2012, <<http://www.teentix.org/blog/the-other-99>> [accessed 30 April 2016].

⁴² Georges, <<http://www.teentix.org/blog/the-other-99>> [accessed 30 April 2016].

⁴³ David Quicksall, Pers. Comm. 5th August 2015.

⁴⁴ Images of the production, giving an impression of the production design and the Occupy-style placard, can be found at <<http://www.seattleshakespeare.org/shows/coriolanus-2012/>> [accessed 30 April 2016].

go as far as to say that “We are Rome” when they compare the United States to that ancient Republic. ... It takes no stretch of the imagination to connect this sentiment to the current “99%” and “Occupy Wall Street” movements. ... In my pessimistic moods, I strongly agree with the 1st Citizen’s blunt assessment of the status quo. Four hundred years later, Shakespeare’s plays continue to resonate – that’s why they matter to us. In this political year of 2012, his cautionary tale of a man’s tragic fall could not be more timely.⁴⁵

Echoing Hawkes’ notion of the function of Shakespeare’s plays as generating meaning for current audiences, and by including such a strong statement about how he views the play in relation to the political moment of 2012 and the Occupy movement in particular, Quicksall directly encouraged his audience to read his production, and by extension *Coriolanus*, in the light of Occupy.

Berson, however, in her review of the production, did not find such overt references to Occupy as Quicksall might have hoped (and as Georges did). Instead she found other political parallels, particularly with the American presidential election of the same year:

The ricocheting schemes to turn Coriolanus in to a popular hero, then a public enemy and finally an outcast, are clearly laid out [in the Seattle Shakespeare production] — and resonate with the backroom machinations, image-creation and fickle swings of public opinion in our current presidential race.⁴⁶

Although Quicksall mentions the ‘political year of 2012’, which presumably refers to the presidential election, he is clearly pointing to the issues that resulted in the occupation of Wall Street. However, Berson foregrounds her reading of this other current, but quite different, political context in the production, and in the play, beyond the Occupy movement.

It is not clear if Occupy was imposed on the production beyond the use of the protestors’ placards or if, after the first scenes and reading Quicksall’s notes in the programme, the audience were expected to find the parallels themselves. Nevertheless, reviewers used the Occupy movement as a means by which to make sense of the play for their readers, thereby using the modern political conflict as a context in which to interpret the seventeenth-century play. Quicksall wanted to present both the ancient Roman setting and the current moment through the design. In doing so he ensured that

⁴⁵ Quicksall, ‘Some Thoughts From David Quicksall’, Pers. Comm. 31st July 2015.

⁴⁶ Berson, 13th January 2012.

his *Coriolanus* was both an early modern play and an engagement with the socio-political moment of its production. Quicksall finds the parallels between *Coriolanus* and the Occupy movement obvious: ‘The “Occupy Wallstreet” movement was at its height when I started working on *Coriolanus*...so the immediacy to the situation in our own country couldn’t be ignored’. Yet, the fit is not necessarily easy or complete. Simon Palfrey observes of the play, ‘it is, *among other things*, an analysis of competing civic institutions, of their principles, suffrages, and origin’.⁴⁷ the play cannot simply be imposed on Occupy or vice versa because it is a complex play, which is in part rooted in its own historic moment.

Hamilton Clancy, artistic director of The Drilling Company and Shakespeare in the Parking Lot, observed this conflict in his production of the play:

Ultimately the crowd in *Coriolanus* is manipulated and in Occupy [it] was never manipulated it was [snuffed] out by police action. So the match was not perfect and in telling the story of *Coriolanus* in the end we were not reporting the story of Occupy but using the historical point of the now as a taking off point for the audience to engage in the story.⁴⁸

Launched in 1993, Shakespeare in the Parking Lot is an annual theatrical season of Shakespeare plays which is currently run by theatre company The Drilling Company and is staged in a municipal car park in Manhattan’s Lower East Side. The company presents ‘casual, bare-bones’⁴⁹ productions of Shakespeare’s plays free of charge; it is seen as a contrast to the Public Theater-produced Shakespeare in the Park which takes place in Central Park. The company moves into the parking lot, cars continue to come and go during performances, and patrons sit either on garden chairs or on the ground.

⁴⁷ Palfrey, p. 48, my emphasis.

⁴⁸ Hamilton Clancy, Pers. Comm. 8th September 2014.

⁴⁹ Pia Catton, ‘Shakespeare in the Parking Lot is Losing its Parking Lot’, *Wall Street Journal*, 9th July 2014.



The Drilling Company's Shakespeare in the Parking Lot 2012 production of *Coriolanus* (photo: Lee Wexler)

The parking lot, which, until 2015, was situated on the corner of Ludlow and Broome streets, is only a couple of miles from Zuccotti Park where OWS was staged in 2011. The proximity of the camp and its presence in the media suggests that the parallels between *Coriolanus* and Occupy would be apparent to audience members without any need for further enhancement. However, Shakespeare in the Parking Lot's production of *Coriolanus*, which ran from 2nd to 18th August 2012, made the similarities overt. Indeed, Clancy stated that '[Occupy] was a large part if not the absolute central pole of our production',⁵⁰ and this was evident within the staging of the play: the seating was on either side of the performance space, at one end of which was a small platform which had a banner behind it reading 'Occupy False Democracy Give us Corn or Give Us Death'. The link between the production, and thus by extension the play, and the Occupy movement was made absolutely explicit through this piece of set design, in the same way that Quicksall's fist placard made the link. That the parking lot was not disguised in any way meant the fact that the production was taking place in a government-run functional space in New York would always be apparent, linking performance directly to place in a way that is not so obvious in a more traditional, dark and enclosed theatre space where the actors and audience are separated from the outside world. This too enhances the link between the production of the play (and the

⁵⁰ Clancy, Pers. Comm. 29th August 2014.

interpretations found therein) and the actual protest which took place almost literally around the corner. In the same way that Miola argues that Rome is defined in the play through specificity of location, Shakespeare in the Parking Lot's production becomes about New York because of the ever present location — complete with sounds, smells and precipitation.

The production was not widely reviewed but the review in the *New York Times*, coupled with the write-up on the company's website, gives an insight into how the production interpreted the play in relation to Occupy and the presidential elections of the same year. The writer on the company's website states that the play was 're-envisioned as a modern day "election fable"' and that it was 'set during an election year, when money can buy power and working class citizens feel threatened by a dwindling patrician class'.⁵¹ Furthermore, by invoking the election, this seems to promote a different kind of present political engagement from that which the design's emphasis on Occupy would suggest. However, the writer of the piece does go on to quote Clancy, who states that 'We chose the play, first and foremost because of the strong conflict between the rich and the poor and the political fervour of the citizenry. It reminded us of the Occupy This movement'.⁵² Occupy, then, was the motivating factor behind this choice of play, and its place as the 'central pole' comes across strongly in Catherine Rampell's review in the *New York Times*, which was headlined 'Angry Romans Occupy Ludlow Street'.⁵³ This title, on first glance, does not suggest a review but rather a news article suggesting that the play had a particular present urgency. The present nature of theatre performance, coupled with the open space in which the performance took place, blurred the lines between play-world and real-world.

In her review Rampell begins by pointing out that there is a link between this play and the theatre company itself, arguing that 'The new production of "Coriolanus," Shakespeare's drama about an election that pits disdainful elites against the 99 percent, would seem to be a perfect fit for both our time and the inherently populist theater series to which it belongs, Shakespeare in the Park(ing) Lot'.⁵⁴ Rampell thus, at the opening of her review, makes the links between the play and the movement as much as the play and the type of theatre that Shakespeare in the Parking Lot represents (presumably, Rampell is pointing out that, because of the absence of fees, this is Shakespeare for those who cannot afford to see Shakespeare in conventional settings — perhaps those proclaiming themselves one of the 99 percent on the Tumblr blog). She then makes explicit, in a

⁵¹ *Our 2012 Season: "The Merry Wives of Windsor" and "Coriolanus"*
<www.shakespeareintheparkinglot.com/2012> [accessed 30 April 2016]

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Catherine Rampell, 'Angry Romans Occupy Ludlow Street', *New York Times*, 8th August 2012.

⁵⁴ Rampell.

single-line paragraph, the link between the play and Occupy, stating that the play had been ‘recast as an Occupy movement tale’ in Clancy’s production.⁵⁵ However, Rampell suggests that ‘here the Occupiers don’t come out looking so good’, going on to argue that ‘the pocked concrete and the bugs and the foot traffic seem especially poignant in this particular play at this particular time, given the fresh memories of real mob outrage and unruliness, also staged outdoors, just a couple of miles away’.⁵⁶ The language here, as discussed earlier in relation to literary critics’ use of the term ‘mob’, suggests that the real-life Occupiers didn’t come out of the protest ‘looking so good’ either, a stark contrast to Clancy’s assertion that the protest was ‘snuffed out’. Nevertheless, Rampell raises some essential points about the importance of timing and setting for this production because both were central to the production’s interpretation of the play and the audience’s interpretation of the production.

***Coriolanus*, politics and the UK**

In the winter of 2013, the Donmar Warehouse in London staged a high profile production of *Coriolanus* directed by Josie Rourke and starring Tom Hiddleston in the title role.⁵⁷ Staged eighteen months after the Occupy London camp had been evicted from its site outside St Paul’s Cathedral,⁵⁸ Rourke’s production was much more oblique in its references to current political movements than the American productions referred to here. Indeed, this production may be seen as representing something of a swing away from the political left, and sympathy for the plebs, in favour of the right in its almost fetishistic focus on the body of Coriolanus at the expense of the citizens.⁵⁹

This was in spite of the production beginning with two citizens daubing the legend *Annona Plebis* (‘the grain share of the plebeians’) on the exposed rear wall which was covered at various points with light-projected graffiti. Reflecting lines that were spoken by the characters, the graffiti included phrases such as ‘Grain at our own price’, ‘dogs must eat’, and ‘meat is for mouths’ in the opening scene. This might suggest a similar use to the banner in Clancy’s New York production, but in reality it only seemed to pay lip service to the political conflicts of the play. Indeed, the first scene was cut in such a way that much of the citizens’ discussion of their motivation was lost and the overall

⁵⁵ Rampell.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ This production was broadcast internationally in conjunction with National Theatre Live.

⁵⁸ The Occupy London camp outside St Paul’s was established in October 2011 and ended with eviction in February 2012.

⁵⁹ Anna Blackwell, ‘Adapting *Coriolanus*: Tom Hiddleston’s Body and Action Cinema’, *Adaptation* 7:3 (2014), 344–52.

impression was that they wanted to kill Caius Martius chiefly because of his arrogance. Such an approach to the citizens was evident throughout the production, a result of the decision to ‘focus on character, and all the contradictions and complexities in each character we see.’⁶⁰ However, the result of this was not actually to focus on the complexities of the citizens, but in fact to shift attention away from them and the reasons for their conflicts with the senate, so that sympathy could be placed more fully on the character of Coriolanus — much as was found in the reviews of Quicksall’s production.

As part of the NT Live Encore screening of the production which I attended, a short film was shown before the performance: titled ‘The People Will Have Their Voices’, the film featured comments from Rourke, Hiddleston, designer Lucy Osborne, and actor Mark Gatiss (who played Menenius). The title of the film suggests the foregrounding of the people, yet the viewpoints expressed suggested otherwise. For example, there were references made to the ‘mob’ throughout, which, as we have already seen, is problematic in creating a particular reception of the citizens. Gatiss also commented that although Coriolanus may be seen as a ‘proto-fascist’, the people behave ‘disgracefully’ to the ‘man who saved them’. This negative approach was confirmed in the production itself, in its mockery of, and the disdain shown for, the citizens. In critiquing the approach of NT Live, Peter Kirwan has written that the screening of these ‘explanatory ... features’ is an ‘attempt to ensure interpretation is as homogeneous as possible’,⁶¹ and, indeed, airing such a conservative view directly before the screening helped create for the audience a particular view of the people — much like Quicksall attempted with his programme notes for the Seattle Shakespeare production.

In the *Behind the Scenes* booklet, made available on the theatre’s website, the author, Hannah Price, addresses politics in the play and in the production, observing that the Donmar production

[gave] a strong sense of the contemporary nature of the themes of the play. Where else in history can we find a wall, used to highlight and expose political machinations? Where else in history do we find the poorer section of society rioting or acting in protest against those that have much more?⁶²

⁶⁰ Hannah Price, *Coriolanus: Behind the Scenes*, Donmar Warehouse, <<http://www.donmarwarehouse.com/~media/Files/Coriolanus%20Behind%20the%20Scenes%20Guide.ashx>> p. 7.

⁶¹ Peter Kirwan, ‘Coriolanus’, *Shakespeare Bulletin* 32:2 (Summer 2014), p. 276

⁶² Price, p. 7.

By asserting the contemporaneousness of the themes of the play, Price leads us to think, perhaps, about Occupy, but also conflates this with any other such protest over history — it is an ambiguous assertion that is determinedly non-specific in the allusions that may be drawn, and, again, in talking about the poor ‘rioting’ (as opposed to protesting), although referring to the play, also casts the poor in the negative position. This was reflected in the production itself: although the preshow film used images of modern protest (both graffiti and rioting), the use of Latin for the enduring graffiti on the wall meant that, although arguably it placed the action in Rome, the impact of it was diminished for a (presumably) largely non-Latin reading audience. The impact of blazing ‘the grain share of the people’ was negated because the use of Latin distanced the audience from what were then shown to be aggressive and stupid citizens. Furthermore, in another section of the booklet, assistant director Oonagh Murphy describes how the company took part in workshops run by scholars of Shakespeare and Classics, and by Stewart Wood, a political advisor to the last two Labour governments. Again, such detail suggests an awareness of contemporary politics but there was no obvious engagement with this in the production. Instead, the production focussed on the personal fall of Coriolanus rather than seeking to reflect on or inform current political debate, as is evident from reviews of the production.⁶³

An interview with Hadley Fraser, who played Aufidius in Rourke’s production, is also included in this booklet, in which, on being asked about *Coriolanus* being ‘one of Shakespeare’s most political works’, Fraser responds that ‘different productions down the ages have suggested different things in terms of where our sympathies should lie, whether with Martius or with the mob. I hope our production comes in fairly down the middle and allows the audience to make up their own minds’.⁶⁴ This approach — taking a path down the middle — leads us into the ‘pit of abstraction’ that Drakakis argues we fall into when we view the play ‘without reference to current particular questions of political leadership or the nature of modern political violence in all its guises’. I would contend that, in spite of discussions with scholars and political advisors, Rourke’s production did not make these references. Consequently, the play in this production, especially viewed on a cinema screen long after the actual event, lacked the ‘kinetic immediacy’ necessary to generate meaning in the way that Terence Hawkes argues is the function of Shakespeare’s plays.⁶⁵ However, the differences between the American

⁶³ See for example: Charles Spencer, ‘*Coriolanus*, Donmar Warehouse, review’, *The Telegraph*, 18 December 2013 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/10524062/Coriolanus-Donmar-Warehouse-review.html>> [accessed 30 April 2016]; and Michael Billington ‘*Coriolanus* – review’ *The Guardian* 18 December 2013 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/dec/18/coriolanus-review-donmar-warehouse>> [accessed 30 April 2016].

⁶⁴ Hadley Fraser, *Coriolanus: Behind the Scenes*, Donmar Warehouse publication, p. 23.

⁶⁵ Hartley, p. 11.

productions discussed here and the Donmar production are striking. Shakespeare in the Parking Lot was absolutely explicit and proactive in its attempts to link *Coriolanus* to the Occupy movement and, while the Seattle Shakespeare Company may have been less overt, the links were apparent enough to reviewers of their production. In contrast, the Donmar did not attempt to reference any specific political movement. The American productions were performed between six months and a year after the movement was evicted in their areas, while the Donmar production took place eighteen months after the eviction of the Occupy London camp. What this shows is that location of performance (both in terms of geography and theatre space) and timing of production is central to interpretation of the play, by both the producers and the audience, in relation to any given current political issue. Clancy observed in August 2014, two years after his Occupy production of *Coriolanus*, ‘Ironically I don’t think we could do that production now and succeed because it is far away from people’s minds, but at the time it was clear as day’.⁶⁶ The absence of the physical presence of Occupy seems to have made the links between the play and the movement somewhat redundant, even though the issues that influenced and motivated Occupy (and thus these Occupy productions) remain current for many people.

⁶⁶ Hamilton Clancy, Pers. Comm. 29th August 2014.