



Oregon  
Shakespeare  
Festival

# 2024 Study Guide



## upstart crow collective

upstart crow collective was founded in 2006 when actors Betsy Schwartz and Kate Wisniewski were on a commute from Seattle to Tacoma, Washington, for a show they were both working on. They had been discussing the gender discrepancy in Shakespeare's canon and expressing their frustration at continually competing for the same few parts. The two felt inspired by their conversation to take agency and make a change, so they approached director Rosa Joshi about co-producing an all-female production of one of Shakespeare's most masculine-centered plays. In the end the newly formed collective chose *King John* because it exemplified a cynical political discourse that felt right at home in the politics of the mid-2000s.

Since 2006 upstart crow collective has produced project-based work rather than adhering to a scheduled season. As the discourse around gender representation has evolved, upstart crow collective has expanded to invite non-binary and trans artists into their creative space. Each of their productions are text driven and full of dynamic movement to create epic visuals and intimate revelations that reflect our present moment.

Presented by OSF and Portland Center Stage

## Coriolanus

by William Shakespeare,  
in modern verse translation by Sean San Jose  
Adapted and directed by Rosa Joshi  
Produced in association with upstart crow collective  
and Play On Shakespeare



Rosa Joshi is the Associate Artistic Director at OSF and *Coriolanus* is her directing debut in this role. This is Rosa Joshi's fifth time directing for OSF. She directed Shakespeare's *King John* in 2022, *Henry V* in 2018, *As You Like It* in 2019 and *Bring Down the House* in 2020.

Joshi is a director, producer and professor. She is a co-founder of the upstart crow collective, co-producers of *Coriolanus*.

2020 OSF production of *Bring Down the House*, adapted by Rosa Joshi, Kate Wisniewski and upstart crow collective.



## Shakespeare

- Born around April 23, 1564.
- Married Anne Hathaway at the age of 18. They had three children between 1583 and 1585.
- Became an actor and playwright for the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which became the King's Men when King James I was crowned in 1603. Wrote 37 plays, 2 epic poems and 154 sonnets over a 25-year career.
- *Coriolanus* was written around 1607.
- Died in his hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon on April 23, 1616.
- Buried in Stratford's Holy Trinity Church.

## Before seeing/reading the play

1. What is a republic? What are the similarities between the Roman Republic and our own political system? What are the differences?  
[https://www.worldhistory.org/Roman\\_Republic/](https://www.worldhistory.org/Roman_Republic/)  
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/republic>
2. What were patricians? What were plebeians? What was their relationship? What were tribunes? How were they chosen? What was their function?  
<https://www.livius.org/articles/concept/tribune/>  
<https://www.livius.org/articles/concept/plebs/>

**“I had rather have my wounds  
to heal again, Than hear say  
how I got them.”**

– Coriolanus, Act II, sc. ii

3. What was a consul? How was a consul elected? What were the qualifications? What were the responsibilities? What were the honors?  
<https://www.historyonthenet.com/the-romans-roman-government>  
<https://www.livius.org/articles/concept/consul/>
4. Research voting practices in the Roman empire. Who was allowed to vote? Who was excluded?  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elections\\_in\\_the\\_Roman\\_Republic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elections_in_the_Roman_Republic)
5. The play begins in a state of civil unrest because of a combination of famine and war. Research the famine that happened at the time of the historical Coriolanus and the political climate in England at the time Shakespeare wrote *Coriolanus*.  
<https://www.folger.edu/blogs/shakespeare-and-beyond/cursing-coriolanus-combating-cornhoarders/>  
<https://www.classicsandclass.info/product/100/>



6. At the time of the historical Coriolanus, what was the relationship of the Romans and the Volscians?  
<https://www.livius.org/articles/people/volsci/>
7. Research tragedy. According to classical writers, what elements are essential for tragedy? What makes a tragic hero? Create your own definition of tragedy.  
<https://www.britannica.com/art/tragedy-literature>
8. Research and explore the different gender roles and expectations in ancient Rome and Elizabethan/Jacobean England.  
<https://elizabethanenglandlife.com/Jacobean-Era/jacobean-gender-roles.html>  
<https://www.worldhistory.org/article/659/the-role-of-women-in-the-roman-world/>
9. Discuss historical and current protests. How are they organized? What is the difference between a protest and a riot? Who makes that distinction?  
<https://apnews.com/article/american-protest-paradox-israel-hamas-war-22b1325188e0808db7389c8c3f04c331>



2024 costume designs for *Coriolanus* by Sarah Ryung Clement.

## After seeing/reading the play

1. What issues and attitudes from the time of Coriolanus—the early Roman Republic, about 2500 years ago—have echoes in modern times? How does the play reflect or differ from our current political moment and how is it similar?
2. What events were happening when Shakespeare was writing the play that might have prompted him to choose to write a story of leadership, protest, and abuse of power?
3. How does Caius Martius acquire the name Coriolanus? Does this new name change his behavior? How so?
4. What are the wishes, likes, dislikes, and reasoning of the citizens? In what instances are the demands of the citizens reasonable and justified? In what instances are their demands influenced by someone else, and by whom?
5. For what virtues and actions is Coriolanus loved and respected? By whom? What are Coriolanus's strengths? What are his vulnerabilities?
6. Analyze the relationship between Coriolanus and his mother, Volumnia. Coriolanus and his son, young Martius. Coriolanus and his wife, Virgilia. Coriolanus and his friend, Menenius. How has each contributed to the man that Coriolanus has become? When does he demonstrate his maturity and independence? When does he reveal his immaturity?
7. Refer to your research on consuls. Why is becoming consul the appropriate next honor for Coriolanus? What steps must he take to win the consulship? Which steps are distasteful to him? Why?
8. In what respects do Coriolanus and Tullus Aufidius mirror each other? In what respects are they different from each other? What vices and virtues in each does the other emphasize? What does each like in the other? What does each hate in the other?
9. Themes of honor and patriotism run throughout the play. Compare what honor means to Coriolanus and what it means to the tribunes, Brutus and Sicinius. How do the events of the play change *Coriolanus's* sense of patriotism?
10. Refer to your research on tribunes. Describe the machinations of the tribunes. What do they hope to achieve? How successful are they?
11. In many of his plays, Shakespeare explored the traits of a good leader and ruler. What traits does Coriolanus possess that help him be a good leader? What traits does he lack that keep him from being a good leader?
12. Doubling is a common practice in theatre where one actor plays multiple parts. Sometimes this is simply for practical reasons, but often it illuminates something new about the story. In what ways did the doubling in *Coriolanus* change your experience of the play? How so?
13. Discuss the performance of gender throughout *Coriolanus*. How are the characters' actions influenced by their gender? What was your experience of seeing the actors portray different genders onstage?
14. upstart crow collective is known for bold theatrical choices in performance including abstract movement contrasted with hyper realistic violence, and arranging text so that scenes overlap and split. How did these choices influence your experience of the story?
15. In the 400+ years since *Coriolanus* was published in the First Folio, the play has been used by many opposing political factions to uphold their world view. Many have read this play through a Marxist lens, siding with the hungry citizens, while others upheld it as a militaristic and fascist story of a tragic war hero undone by crooked politicians. Considering our current political divide, how might this play be interpreted by both the far right and the far left?
  - a. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WmXeLdbG4AU>
16. If you are also seeing *Macbeth*: Both Volumnia and Lady Macbeth are powerful women who have carved out a space of control in a world dominated by men. Discuss their similarities and differences. What has each had to sacrifice to achieve greatness?
17. If you are seeing *Macbeth*: Coriolanus and Macbeth are both deadly warriors who move from the battlefield into political office. How do they each manage this shift in power? How might Coriolanus have responded to Macbeth's predicament? What would Macbeth have done in Coriolanus's situation?
18. We are indoctrinated with many opposing views of what it means to love one's country. In what ways does Coriolanus love Rome? What does he dislike about Rome? What does patriotism mean to you today? What would you change about our country? What do you wish to preserve?



# PLAY ON

● SHAKESPEARE

Play On Shakespeare began as a pilot program at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival under the direction of Lue Douthit, an OSF veteran of 25 seasons, and received its first commissions in 2012. Play On developed under the wing of OSF until it achieved 501(c)(3) status in 2019 and separated from the Festival to form its own organization. Over the past 12 years Play On has commissioned dozens of contemporary playwrights and translators to translate 39 Shakespeare plays into modern English, with a majority of the commissions helmed by BIPOC and womxn playwrights.

The mission of Play On is to “enhance the understanding of Shakespeare’s plays in performance for theatre professionals, students, teachers, and audiences, by engaging with contemporary translations and adaptations.” Far from a paraphrasing exercise, each playwright was tasked with matching Shakespeare’s linguistic rigor as they approached the text, preserving rhyme, rhythm, metaphor, meter, imagery, symbolism, rhetoric, and the structure that make Shakespeare’s plays engaging and accessible to today’s audience.

**Below is a side-by-side example of translation in action. As you can see, playwright Sean San José maintains much of Shakespeare’s more direct language while weaving in his own words and interpretations of thoughts.**

## Original Shakespeare

MENENIUS

A hundred thousand welcomes. I could weep  
And I could laugh, I am light and heavy.  
Welcome. A curse begin at very root on’s  
heart, That is not glad to see thee! You are  
three That Rome should dote on

CORIOLANUS [To VOLUMNIA and VIRGILIA]

Your hand, and yours:  
Ere in our own house I do shade my head,  
The good patricians must be visited;  
From whom I have received not only  
greetings, But with them change  
of honours.

VOLUMNIA

I have lived  
To see inherited my very wishes  
And the buildings of my fancy: only  
There’s one thing wanting, which I doubt not but  
Our Rome will cast upon thee.

CORIOLANUS

Know, good mother,  
I had rather be their servant in my way  
Than sway with them in theirs.

## Play On Translation- by Sean SanJose

MENENIUS

A hundred thousand welcomes! I could weep,  
And I could laugh; I am light and heavy. Welcome! Plant a  
curse in the root of anyone’s heart,  
Who is not glad to see you. You hold here  
Rome’s adoration threefold.

CORIOLANUS [to Volumnia and Virgilia]

Your hand, and yours?  
Before I truly return home and rest  
I must pay visit to our city nobles,  
Who have given me this homecoming here  
And too,  
these added honors.

VOLUMNIA

I have lived,  
To see my very wishes realized,  
And manifested just as I envisioned.  
Yet There’s one thing lacking, which I do not doubt  
Our Rome will create for you.

CORIOLANUS

Know this, dear  
Mother, I’d rather serve them in my way,  
Than sway others in their ways.

Members of Oregon Shakespeare Festival Education and Engagement created the 2024 Study Guide for *Coriolanus*. These suggestions were designed for students and teachers but may be enjoyed by audiences of all ages. They may be used without restriction for educational purposes. The Oregon Shakespeare Festival is not responsible for the content of any website listed above.

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