'Vox' and *Coriolanus*:
Character, Language, and the Challenge of Adaptation:

An Interview with writer Jennifer McGregor…

I met with the writer of 'Vox', Jennifer McGregor, to discuss the play, and the challenge of adapting Shakespeare's original *Coriolanus*. …

(Interviewer Mark Bolsover: **MB**, Jennifer McGregor: **JM**).

MB: Did you have any previous knowledge of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, prior to working on *Sons of God*?

JM: I saw the RSC production with William Houston in 2007 and had read it a few times.

MB: Had you worked on the play before?

JM: No. I'd always hoped an opportunity to work on it would arise, but the idea of adapting it hadn't entered my head.

MB: What are the key difficulties/challenges of reading the play?

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MB: How would you describe the character of Coriolanus in Shakespeare's original? What kind of figure is he?
(—What are his defining characteristics, his motivations, and his key relationships?)

…

MB: Do you *like* Coriolanus? Is he a relatable character, do you think? If so, how do you relate to him, and how do you think audiences do?

JM: I love him. Personally I find him very relatable, but I can see why some people find him off-putting.

I relate to his impatience with social performance, and I think audiences get that too. He has no time for pretending to be anything he isn't.

MB: What have been the key challenges in adapting/portraying the character?

For me, it was keeping distance between Coriolanus and the audience. I love a good soliloquy and they can be really helpful in terms of giving the audience insight into a character's thoughts, but Coriolanus isn't that kind of character. Shakespeare didn't give him a single one, and I think that was the right decision so I didn't either.

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MB: What about Coriolanus's arch-nemesis, turned ally, Aufidius… —How would you describe the character of Aufidius? What kind of figure is he?
(—What are his defining characteristics, his motivations, and his key relationships?)

Do you *like* Aufidius? Is he a relatable character, do you think? If so, how do you relate to him, and how do you think audiences do?

JM: Aufidius grew on me throughout the writing process. My initial instinct was to dislike the character because he betrays Coriolanus, but the more time I spent getting to know the text, the more I began to realise that Aufidius feels just as betrayed. I think there's also a lot of envy on his part. Coriolanus has had all the advantages of being Roman, and no matter how hard Aufidius tries or how many victories he wins, that's the one thing he can never be.

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MB: Tell us a little about the world of 'Vox'… —Where are we, and what is happening? How do you feel your adaptation relates to the original?

I've set Vox in an alternate timeline where the Roman Empire never fell and has had to metamorphose again and again to retain its power. Rome is the dominant influence on all its many territories, but it's not a comfortable position. There's a lot of unrest, and the idea of breaking away from Rome has been gathering strength in territories like New Volsce. For the first time in a long time, there's a genuine threat of an uprising.

Of course, Coriolanus was actually set nearly 500 years before the Empire, so I'm taking liberties, but that's what alternate timelines are for. The important thing was to give myself a framework for examining the character of Coriolanus and his relationships with Aufidius, his mother Volumnia, and the people. In both the adaptation and the original, he's a public figure with very strict ideas about duty and honour.

Tell us about some of your key influences/sources in adapting the Shakespeare…

The general trend for futuristic dystopias in fiction was a significant influence. The idea of a world where technology is advanced, privacy is minimal and corrupt governments exercise excessive control comes up again and again… —*The Hunger Games, Divergent, The Maze Runner* and various other popular books and films. When Laura first approached me about this project she suggested that my adaptation should be set in that kind of world, so that was my starting point.

Another influence was the media coverage of the independence referendum in Scotland in 2014. Newspapers and TV channels took positions on the independence question, supporting either Yes or No, and it was really interesting to see how material was selected and presented to suit their cause. When I re-read Coriolanus in preparation for this project, I noticed how much of the play is about spin, manipulation and misrepresentation of facts – all things that were on my mind after the referendum. So I knew that I wanted to retain that element, that idea that everyone has an agenda and you have to remember that when you're deciding whether or not to trust them.

MB: 'Vox' includes references to and playing on (particularly) Reality television, social media, and rap. … —Tell us, what were the challenges of using/referencing these

media? How do they relate to the world/situation of the original? Why are they important/interesting here?

Both reality TV and social media interest me because they're all about constructing an image. Watch a "reality" show carefully and you'll see how choices made by the production team and editors shape the viewers' opinions – just like the way the Tribune in Vox manipulates people's opinions of Coriolanus by presenting him in particular ways. The language he uses when he's interviewing Coriolanus after the tournament subtly undermines him and make him sound more arrogant and dismissive than he really is, and of course he takes a quote out of context to bring him down. It's very similar to the way the Tribunes in the original turn the people against Coriolanus. The main difference is simply that in Vox it's done to a mass audience on camera and in the original the Tribunes are able to speak directly to the people.

As for rap, that was a suggestion that came from Laura. Fortunately I've been a rap fan since my teens and I'm really interested in the way that rap and hip hop grew out of disadvantaged communities. I knew that rap couldn't be the language of the great and the good of Roman society, but the idea of having an outsider who raps, someone running an illegal broadcast, that made more sense to me. I've used the rapper as a kind of chorus figure. There's no chorus in the original, but there are several nameless citizens whose lines informed the lyrics I wrote for the rapper.

What are the key differences between 'Vox' and *Coriolanus*? How, and how heavily, have you been influenced by the Shakespeare?

I tried to stay as true to the original story and characters as I could, so Shakespeare's play was my Bible throughout the writing process. The most significant differences, I would say, are the characters I've had to omit. I knew we would only have four actors, so I had to be ruthless. In the original play there are two tribunes, Brutus and Sicinius, and their private conversations give the audience a lot more information about why Coriolanus is hated and why they're determined to bring him down. Having rolled them into one character, I have to trust the audience to come to their own conclusions about these things.

MB: Both adaptations: 'Vox', and Duncan Kidd's 'Out', use contemporary English, as well as incorporating passages and lines from the original Shakespeare. …

—How does it feel to work between two different registers and to incorporate Shakespearian language into your own script? What are the challenges, and do you feel that the Shakespeare is accessible to modern audiences?—Does your adaptation and its incorporation of original Shakespearian English/pentameter help in this regard?

As long as the actors trust the text and speak truthfully, I don't see why Shakespeare shouldn't be accessible. I hope my adaptation serves to set up the passages of Shakespeare, establishing the situation and what's at stake so that by the time we hit the Shakespeare sections the audience is already clear on what's happening. That way they can listen to any unfamiliar language without having to worry that they're going to miss essential information.