Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* as an Epitome of a Dysfunctional Family

Buket Dogan, Middle East Technical University, Turkey

*Coriolanus* has not been studied as extensively as Shakespeare’s other tragedies. Yet, with the change in sense of style with the turn of the twentieth-century *Coriolanus* is on stage more often and receives critical attention. *Coriolanus* seems rather a modern play in not evocating sympathy for any of the characters with whom the reader can identify himself with. Coriolanus has many distancing and disagreeable characteristics that may generate dislike for the protagonist, yet the skillfully adorned rhetoric and speech prove *Coriolanus* to be one of Shakespeare’s greatest tragedies, as T.S. Eliot puts it Coriolanus is “Shakespeare’s most assures artistic success” (in Brockman 50). Shakespeare for some time was engaged “writing plays about the destructive effects of excessive emotional attachments between children and parents”, for instance, in *Hamlet* or *King Lear* (King 14). The outcome of the parental repression is likely to produce the worst repercussions on Coriolanus, who is torn between his own identity and the identity that his mother trying to exert on him.

Coriolanus has been dominated by his mother ever since his early childhood. At the outset of the play, the main motive for Coriolanus’ services for Rome is mainly to please his mother rather than to ensure Rome’s well-being. The First Citizen asserts that: “though soft-conscienced men can be content to say it was for his country, he did it to please his mother” (1.1.37-9). Volumnia, as a strong and ambitious woman figure is after victory and success. She is ready to sacrifice her son for the honour and the accomplishment he brings in:

> [w]hen yet he was but tender-bodied, and the only son of my womb; when youth with comeliness pluckt all gaze his way; when, for a day of king’s entreaties, a mother should not sell him an hour from her beholding; I … was pleased to let him seek danger where he was like to find fame” (1.3. 6-10, 14-5).

She would rather have her son dead on the way to victory than relapse himself into joy or entertainment. However, Coriolanus is uneasy with his mother’s exertion of herself on him; he is even uneasy when his mother tends to praise him: “my mother, / Who has a charter to extol her blood, / When she does praise me grieves me” (1.10. 13- 5). Coriolanus is inclined to be embarrassed not only by her mother’s praise, but also being praised by others. He is disturbed by his mother’s overbearing attitude and he has a strong wish to relieve his mother’s pressure of over him.

Volumnia has great aspirations for her son. Upon Coriolanus’ return from the battle with the Coriolis, she is highly proud of her son’s wounds: “O he is wounded; I thank the gods for’t” (2.1.125). As the tradition suggests Coriolanus before being given the rank of consul, and pleading for the votes of the tribunes, he has to show his wounds to the citizens. For Volumnia, these wounds can only be the harbinger of the position he is to be assigned in the very near future: “I’the shoulder and i’the left arm: there will be large
coricatrices to show the people, when he shall stand for his place” (2.1.150-2). Saluting her son with pride and honour marching in the Rome’s streets, she has disclosed her deep-rooted fervour for her son’s advancement in the political arena as a consul as well as a warrior: “I have lived / To see inherited my very wishes, / And the buildings of my fancy: only there / Is one thing wanting, which I doubt not but / Our Rome will cast upon thee” (2.1.203-7). Yet, Coriolanus would prefer to act with his own principles and desires rather than be conformed to his mother’s dictations.

Coriolanus is a victorious and an accomplished warrior; he is adept at acting bravely and impulsively. Such a hero in the battlefield is not at peace with politics, in which he has to conceal his authentic identity; he is a man of action not of words. Coriolanus has a tendency not to be engaged with words, which he is scared of: “When blows have made me stay, I fled from words” (2.2.69). Although his mother has craved a political position for her son, Coriolanus’ character is incompatible with that of a politician. He does not hesitate to address the citizens and their representatives, the tribunes, with such degrading and humiliating adjectives: “the tribunes of the people, / The tongues o’th’ common mouth: I do despise them; For they do prank them in authority, / Against all noble sufferance” (3.1.14-7). Coriolanus, a candidate for the position of a consul, needs the votes of both the tribunes and the citizens, yet he does not conceal his genuine thoughts about them as a politician should do. Unlike Menenius, another politician, who salutes the plebeians as “good friends, …honest / neighbours” (1.1.61-2), Coriolanus addresses them as “dissentious rogues” (1.1.163). As Scragg points it out Coriolanus is engaged in “castigating them, in the most out-spoken terms” whenever he finds a chance to speak to them (171). The tribunes react to Coriolanus’ debasing attitude towards them and trigger the citizens to cancel the verdict for Coriolanus being a consul. Coriolanus is on the brink of losing his right to become a consul, still he acts with the dictations of his own character and questions “Why, then, should I be consul?” (3.1.55) as he regards the citizens as a “herd” (3.1.30) without having their own opinions.

Coriolanus tends to behave in a constant and unchanging attitude in his opinions even though he has to endure such great repercussions afterwards. Menenius, one of the nobles close to Coriolanus, is very much aware of Coriolanus’ character:

His nature is too noble for the world:
He would not flatter Neptune for his trident,
Or Jove for’s power to thunder. His heart’s his
mouth:
What his breast forges, that his tongue must vent;
And, being angry, does forget that ever
He heard the name of death. (3.1.253-9)

Menenius is cognizant of the fact that Coriolanus is rather a man of action and that he is such an honest warrior that he does not act as a hypocrite in any situation. As Wheeler suggests “Coriolanus does the things he does out of a sense of absolute moral righteousness, a righteousness he derives from privilege of birth” (xvi). At the same time,
Menenius admits that the requirements of being a politician are not congruous with Coriolanus’ character as a warrior:

- he has been bred i’the wars
- Since he could draw a sword, and is ill school’d
- In bolted language; meal and bran together
- He throws without distinction. (3.1.313-6)

Having being accustomed to fighting and spending a long time in the battlefield, but not to being an adroit negotiator; he cannot be the right man for the politics.

Volumnia insists on Coriolanus being successful in the field of politics as well; she, however, does not take into consideration that her son is not a man for rhetoric. When Coriolanus refuses to address to the tribunes and the plebeians moderately and to control his anger, he is about to lose the opportunity to become a consul. Volumnia immediately intervenes in the matter and begs her son: “Pray, be counsel’d: / I have a heart as little apt as yours, / But yet a brain that leads my use of anger / To better vantage” (3.2.27-30). She finds him “too absolute” to become a politician (3.2.42). Hence, she advises Coriolanus not to act with the dictations of his heart but with truisms and clichés that he does not believe in:

- Because that now it lies you on to speak
- To the people; not by your own instruction,
- Nor by the matter which your heart prompts you,
- But with such words that are but roted in
- Your tongue, though but bastards, and syllables
- Of no allowance to your bosom’s truth. ((3.2.59-64)

Volumnia is assured that she can affect Coriolanus to act in the way she desires and convinces herself that since he has already become a successful warrior with her dictations, now, he can become a politician, too:

- I prithee now, sweet son, - as thou has said
- My praises made thee first a soldier, so,
- To have my praise for this, perform a part
- Thou has not done before. (3.2.106-9)

Coriolanus has achieved to become a great warrior and saviour of Rome as his mother has longed for as Coriolanus’ character is congruent with that of a warrior; yet Volumnia is blind to the fact that the character of her son is not compatible with that of a politician. As King asserts, “Coriolanus is passionate but not imaginative; he transfigures nothing with the magic of poetry” (18). Aufidius, the general of Corioli and Coriolanus’ everlasting rival, is also aware of the reason for Coriolanus’ political problems experienced in Rome. He thinks that Coriolanus fails in consularship due to his nature “Not to be other than one thing, not moving / From the casque to the cushion, but commanding peace / Even with the same austerity and garb / As he controll’d the war” (4.7.27-30).

Coriolanus decides to seek for revenge on Rome when he is not voted as the consul of the city and exiled from Rome. He allies himself with Aufidius against Rome and swears on revenge: “Wife, mother, child, I know not” (5.2.82). However, before he attacks Rome,
Coriolanus finds himself in an unmanageable predicament when he sees his mother, wife, and his son approach to his camp. Volumnia has come to appeal to his son to spare Rome. He fears that he may be “tempted to infringe … [his] vow” (5.3.20) against Rome: “But out, affection! / All bond and privilege of nature, break! / Let it be virtuous to be obstinate” (5.3.25-7). He feels the dominating power of “the most noble mother of the world” (5.3.46) as his mother approaches and he tries to resist not surrendering to her appeal. Yet, Volumnia is too obstinate to give up at once and she reminds him of her ever dominating power over him: “Thou art my warrior / I help to frame thee” (5.3.62-3). Volumnia threatens Coriolanus to call him betrayer both to his own country and his own mother. She is decisive to convince Coriolanus to give up fighting against his home-country:

if I cannot persuade thee
Rather to show a noble grace to both parts
Than seek the end of one, thou shalt no sooner
March to assault thy country than tread –
Trust to’t, thou shalt not – on thy mother’s womb
That brought thee to this world. (5.3.119-24)

Volumnia has persuaded him “to stand for the consul, to stand trial by the people and now she persuades him to give up his revenge” (King 78).

Coriolanus tries hard to defy his mother to be able to pursue his goal, yet he cannot oppose to a dominant mother’s desire for long. As well as his mother, Coriolanus also knows that “There’s no man in the / world / More bound to’s mother” than Coriolanus as his mother suggests (5.3. 157-9). Although Coriolanus begs his mother not to try to divert him from his aim: “I beseech you / …tell me not / Wherein I seem unnatural: desire not / T’allay my rages and revenges with / Your colder reasons” (5.3.82, 87-90), he is soon relapsed into his mother’s domination and quits his task that he has assigned himself. Coriolanus’ final speech with his mother reveals his desperation before his mother with his terribly painful cry:

O mother, mother!
What have you done? Behold, the heavens do ope,
The gods look down, and this unnatural scene
They laugh at. O my mother, mother! O!
You have won a happy victory to Rome;
But, for your son, believe it, O, believe it,
Most dangerously you have wit him prevail’d
If not most mortal to him. But, let it come. – (5.3.183-90)

Coriolanus has tried hard not to compromise his own identity to the one that his mother forces on him. “When he gives in to his mother and his own fate is decided, he hardly says anything” (King 18). He resigns to his mother’s wish of not attacking Rome; the play ends with his death in the hands of Aufidius who punishes Coriolanus for his betrayal.
In conclusion, Coriolanus has been exposed to a dysfunctional relationship with his mother. Volumnia has always exhibited an overbearing attitude on her son, as she has yearnings for her son’s life. Volumnia has tried hard to frame her son as she wishes and Coriolanus has become a proficient warrior in the battlefields. However, she is so ambitious a mother that she cannot feel satisfied with her son only as a warrior. She also longs for her son to become an accomplished consul in the political arena, as well. Yet, she disregards the fact that Coriolanus is a man of the battlefield, not of the political arena. Volumnia makes her son act like a politician in the battlefield and causes the very destruction of Coriolanus.

References


King, Bruce (1989). Coriolanus, Houndmills: Macmillan Education Ltd

