

The disruption of order and hierarchy in 'coriolanus'



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Penned against the backdrop of the 1608 corn riots, William Shakespeare's highly political Jacobean tragedy, *Coriolanus*, explores and oscillates between three inter-woven domains of the civil, political and military – in order to exploit a complex socio-political matrix and to expose the ways in which power underpins the transactional framework of human society. *Coriolanus*' intransigent nature can be seen in his inability to form relationships as well as a fixation on 'stoic virtus' and traditional gender roles which all partly contribute to his own decline, as well as the decline of the Roman government. However, Shakespeare also wishes to vocalise the unfavourable evaluation of the unbalanced power dynamic that underpins macro-political rule. This social fragmentation in conjunction with *Coriolanus*' hamartia of an inability to connect with others disrupts the cosmic harmony of the play and forms the crux of Shakespeare's exploration of the human psyche and government.

Shakespeare exposes *Coriolanus*' inability to form and develop functional relationships which is used to highlight his child-like immaturity. Throughout the play, *Coriolanus* holistically does not form a consistent, healthy relationship with any of the characters within the play. A warped perception of reality and self-elevation are part contributors in his inability to form relationships. In a pivotal moment in Act 1, which is situated just after the fighting the Volscians in Antium, Martius shifts into the third person- "and follow Martius" when speaking to Cominius about fighting the enemy Volscians. For Martius, the totems of war, blood and wounds boosts his self-esteem to the point where he is metaphorically blinded and cannot form functioning relationships. The shifting into the third person is symbolic on a

couple of levels. Initially, it serves to create an identity greater than the individual and de-humanise any social interaction with Martius and additionally, it self-deifies. Positioned early on his shifting into the third person foreshadows the metaphorical blindness Martius will experience which will destabilise Rome and himself. This destabilization begins as Martius is unaware that he cannot fight an abstraction or fate. Such is the case in a further instance, when Shakespeare implements imagery of Volumnia as pathologically grotesque- she is at odds with her conventional role within the matriarch- as seen in her prose which is not in traditional iambic pentameter for a woman.

This unconventionality and almost Oedipal relationship is continued when, in the interideological instruction, the newly-named Coriolanus “ kneels” in front of his mother. This imagery has connotations to surrendering which consolidates the idea in the play that his mother “ silences” him and therefore employs a tonality towards Coriolanus which is infantilising- consolidated in her use of the epithet “ gentle” when describing Coriolanus. Being “ gentle” juxtaposes Coriolanus’ true nature as a stoic warrior and is more often associated with femininity rather than masculinity. Volumnia therefore is able to leverage on words to render Coriolanus as child-like; she simultaneously turned Coriolanus into a man and kept him as a boy, truly a “ man child”. As Volumnia ensures her son remains paralysed by her domineering genitrix nature, Coriolanus’ fate is pre-determined. A determinist interpretation of Coriolanus’ inability to form functional relationships suggests that his lack of control over his family and domineering mother explains his ultimate tragedy. This idea is referenced in

a third passage, in which Menenius uses the present verb “ paint” which reiterates Coriolanus as the “ picture on the wall”. Here, even in Act 5, Shakespeare continues the semantic field of painting in order to consolidate Coriolanus’ identity as being formed and moulded by his mother. Volumnia’s control of Coriolanus by making her affection conditional on his fulfillment of her expectations of him, the more inextricably he is “ bound to his mother”. Despite being penned in a totally different social climate, Shakespeare’s plot is convincing on the plane of realism touching the relational domain of the play.

Shakespeare provides a damning critique on how excessive use of the sword can become counter-productive and merely a booster for the ego due to the conventions of ‘ stoic virtus’. Shakespeare satirises and becomes hyperbolic when exploring the relationship between Coriolanus and Aufidius. Both characters possess strong stoic virtus and are admirable fighters, in fact, Coriolanus “ sins in envying his nobility”. Indeed, the homosocial relationship between Aufidius and Coriolanus is revealed as they have “ shed [blood] together” and made “ vows”. Here, the totemic blood of the military domain is being fused into the homosocial world of Coriolanus and Aufidius. This is to satirise and to an extent, hyperbolise, how characters who become infatuated with the sword become so engrossed with their counter-parts that they desire sexual relations with them. This acts as a warning of the dangers of self-obsessed egotists, like Coriolanus, as they fixate on sole pursuits and idealise excessively on fighting and inter-twine their being into the militaristic domain which has great capacity for failure; as optimised in Coriolanus’ downfall and death. Shakespeare continues the hyperbolic

reactions towards fighting where Volumnia not only savours and relishes in the newly named “ Coriolanus must I call thee?” but becomes dizzy with excitement where she repeats “ welcome home” in quick, stichomythic, incomplete sentences. The use of coherent, yet grammatically incorrect sentences portrays how Volumnia has become disconnected with reality in light of the renaming of Coriolanus and his wounds. For Volumnia, this solidifies her desire for Coriolanus to act within her own criteria of a man.

Ruptures and outbreaks in the social hierarchy have the ability to completely dismantle a government- and Shakespeare wishes to highlight the vulnerability of government when social fragmentation exists and oppression of the lower classes comes to fruition. There is an immaturity of youth ascribed to Coriolanus as he is at heart a boy who is ignorant due to his absolute integrity for the patricians and hatred for the plebeians. Early in the drama, Martius begins his prose with sarcasm towards the plebeians calling them “ our gentlemen” and then immediately shifts into an offensive, attacking tone when he labels them as the “ common file – a plague”. This deliberate use of the adjective “ common” is to denote the distinct social classes that exist in Rome and by employing the imagery of cat and mice “ the mouse ne’er shunned the cat as they did budge” in Passage 1 solidifies the idea of the power imbalance between the strong “ cat” which is emblematic of the Patricians and the weak, scared plebeians who run away as “[mice]”. Additionally, the incorporation of the aposiopesis with the common, singular noun “ a plague” continues the semantic field of disease which is first referenced in Martius’ opening lines in front of the plebeians in which he refers to them in invective vitrol with a derogatory vocative

epithet “ fragments”. In focusing on the disease-ridden society from the voice of an elite Patrician serves as a damning indictment of socioeconomic inequality. These “ fragments” will ultimately form alliances to overthrow the Patrician rule in Rome, and this consolidated through the tribunes who are made up of plebeians.

Shakespeare explores the power of the common-people through the Tribunes, where their insistent pursuit to overthrow the unfair political system is maintained even until the end of the play as seen in the declaration that “ the plebeians have got your fellow tribune ... death by inches”. The Tribunes’ opposition to Coriolanus stems in part from their genuine fear that he will institute a revolutionary monarchy capable of destroying the new republican balance. Brutus pointedly accuses Coriolanus of affecting “ tyrannical power” and fears that he will gain so great a pre-eminence as to overshadow his fellow generals and this distaste can be seen in when Menenius, acting as a friend of Coriolanus, employs negative imagery of the Tribunes as “ old crab trees”, which essentially characterises them as knotted and sour. This plebeian-patrician conflict resolves when Coriolanus’ death becomes a sign of the restoration of republican order, not of tragic instability.