"To please his mother"

A Re-evaluation of Psychoanalytic Characterization in *Coriolanus*

ZACH ACKERSON

"The fundamental point of psychoanalysis is that desire is not something given in advance," writes Slavoj Žižek, "but something that has to be constructed." Zach Ackerson's sophisticated reading of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* employs Freudian and Lacanian vocabulary, testifying to the vitality of "critical psychoanalytic re-evaluations" (to borrow Ackerson's precise classification). It also invites a possible rewording of Žižek's formulation, one that substitutes "close reading" for "psychoanalysis" and "critical understanding" for "desire." Constructing his argument out of the relative lack of scholarly attention to the title character's paternal side, Ackerson animates the play's Oedipal theme. What emerges from his analysis is a Coriolanus whose tragedy can be traced to an "intricate and distorted Oedipus complex." This succinct and well-substantiated characterization satisfies the desire of any theory that aspires to be considered critical—it cannot be taken for granted in subsequent encounters with the text.

—Geordie Miller

Shakespearean tragedy has long enraptured audiences with its larger-than-life characters and epic scenes of death and destruction. Protagonists such as Hamlet and Macbeth have drawn in audiences and scholars alike – their capacities to be identified with making their respective tragedies all the more moving. *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*,

one of Shakespeare's last great tragedies, garners its significance not from audience identification, but something quite different. The play's tone has traditionally been read as cool, pushing back against a typical tragic reading spurred by audience identification (Hatlen 393). This decided coolness has caused scholars to see the tragedy not so much as a play working on our emotions, but more as a play working "upon our analytic faculties" (Hatlen 393). And indeed this focus on an analytical reading of the play has spurred a wide range of critical analysis upon *Coriolanus*. From strict political analyses to psychological examination, critics have combed the play for centuries to establish analytical interpretations. The advent and employment of contemporary psychoanalysis in critical literary theory added another dimension of readings for many of Shakespeare's works, including *Coriolanus*. Traditional psychoanalytic readings of *Coriolanus* tend to gloss over the intricacies of his character, summarily adding up Coriolanus' relationship with his mother as essentially Oedipal, almost for the sake of the invocation of a psychoanalytic reading. Scholars such as Jackson Towne, situated early in the psychoanalytic movement, have made calls for Oedipal readings of *Coriolanus*, yet have made these claims largely upon superficial notions of the play's mother-son dynamics. I argue that is time for a critical psychoanalytic re-evaluation of *Coriolanus*, so as to heed the cautionary advice of Norman Holland and incorporate "psychoanalysis into literary criticism [...] to relate [a] work of literature to somebody's mind" instead of simply

evoking it for purely literary ends (217). The key to opening up *Coriolanus* to psychoanalysis, upon a deeper reading, seems to lie in a crucial lack of a father figure, Viewed through a re-evaluated Freudian and/or Lacanian psychoanalytic lens, Coriolanus' Oedipus complex can be seen as an intricate and distinct personality trait that comes to define all aspects of his life. Coriolanus' mother, Volumnia, restructures his superego by reinforcing his Oedipal tendencies.

The task of locating Coriolanus' complex depends first and foremost upon discerning a basic Oedipal theme in the play. As mentioned previously, the notion that *Coriolanus* is a play of Oedipal origins came about early on in the history of psychoanalysis. In 1924 Jackson Towne argued that "the story of a bold warrior losing his triumph because [he was] so 'bound to's mother' is clearly but a variation of the most essentially tragic of all myths, that of Oedipus" (84). Towne, however, cites only a few instances where Volumnia's will trumps Coriolanus', sufficing to conclude that *Coriolanus*, contrary to critic Stuart P. Sherman's claims, should be considered a play dealing with "sex-interest" (91), thus demanding more concerted Freudian readings. As Freudian psychoanalysis moved from the fringes of literary criticism to the forefront, more Oedipal readings of *Coriolanus* were undertaken. Martin Bergmann's book, *The Unconscious in Shakespeare's Plays*, serves as a prime example of the inherited psychoanalytic narrative which has endured to present day critical readings of Shakespeare's works. Bergmann pointedly situates Coriolanus' latent Oedipal aspects in his mother's

words. Volumnia, in conversation with Coriolanus' wife, Virgilia, remarks, "If my son were my husband, I should freelier rejoice in that absence wherein he won honour than in the embracements of his bed" (I.iii.2-4). Bergmann, with a keen psychoanalytic eye, extracts the Oedipal dynamics of this statement, positing that this latently sexual passing remark from a mother is not at all commonly accepted speech to be had with one's daughter-in-law (146). Bergmann also points out that after his marriage to Virgila, Coriolanus still chooses to live with his mother (146). Shakespeare takes creative liberties with his source material, Plutarch, by leaving Coriolanus to his mother's home, reinforcing Bergmann's essentially Oedipal understanding of the play's main character (146). The final point of literary evidence comes about in Coriolanus' approach on Rome. Bergmann reads Coriolanus' intended destruction of his mother city as an indirect attempt at matricide that ultimately results in his own undoing (150). Throughout the play, the interplay between Coriolanus and his mother leaves Bergmann to conclude on an Oedipal reading of the play. Yet, Towne totally forgets, and Bergmann seemingly dismisses, the crucial lack of a father for Coriolanus. With this scholarly deficiency in mind, this paper will now turn to a more in-depth understanding of the psychoanalytic factors at work in *Coriolanus*.

The Oedipus complex having been justified on a *prima facie* reading of the play, a situating of Coriolanus' particularly nuanced version of the complex must now be established. First off, an exploration of the psychoanalytic

conceptions of the complex will provide a structural framework to critique Coriolanus, and the events of the play. The Oedipus complex, as understood in the contemporary critical theory, was first articulated in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) by the pioneer of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud. As a corollary to his invocation of the ancient King, Oedipus, Freud situates the role of the parents in childhood development. According to his previous research, Freud found that "parents play a leading part in the infantile psychology of all persons who subsequently become psychoneurotics" (Ch 5, section D, part b). "Falling in love with one parent and hating the other forms part of the permanent stock of the psychic impulses" for Freud, and he believes that this phenomena has manifested previously in antiquity, in the legend of Oedipus (Ch 5, section D, part b). Oedipus' unknowing murder of his father and marriage to his mother were seen by the Greeks as acts of fate. Yet Freud articulates the actions of fate not as an outside force, but a tacit inner force: "[a]s the poet brings the guilt of Oedipus to light by his investigation [of the killing and marriage], he forces us to become aware of our own inner selves, in which the same impulses are still extant, even though they are suppressed" (Ch 5, section D, part b). "The dream of having sexual intercourse with one's mother," corroborated through much of Freud's dream analysis, "was as common [in antiquity] as it is today with many people" (Ch 5, section D, part b). Jacques Lacan, taking up Freudian psychoanalytical concepts, furthers the Oedipus complex. Figuring crucially in Lacan's conception of

Oedipal urges is his theory of Otherness. For Lacan, a Freudian manifestation of the Oedipus complex is essentially a playing out of a child's particular struggle to situate him- or herself between the external dimensions of Otherness (Johnston 2.3). A child's mother, for Lacan, is to be seen as the "Real Other," which is basically an omnipotent sort of love-giver, from whom the child strives to garner love (Johnston 2.3). Owing to her essential obscurity to the confused child, the mother is also a source of anxiety. This anxiety stems from a lack of knowing exactly what the mother "wants" in order for the child to receive affection (2.3). The father, on the other hand, manifests as a "symbolic other," standing in for what the child thinks the mother lacks (Johnston 2.3). Striving to please the mother, the child hypothesizes a notion of lack, which the father has, as not just a physical phallus, but an unidentified "x" (2.3). Coupling Freud's conception of the Oedipus complex with Lacan's elaborated account leads to one definitive conclusion: a person suffering from Oedipal urges is looking to fulfill a lack. What sets apart the traditional Oedipus complex in *Coriolanus* from *Oedipus Rex,* is that Coriolanus' father is not present in the play, the lack being of a father and, in turn, a lack of symbolic phallus. Coupled with the presence of a manipulative mother, Coriolanus' *hamartia* is completed through the nuanced manifestation of his voraciously active Oedipus complex.

Coriolanus' key character traits are his ravenous manliness and unbridled urge for self-sufficiency, shown through inordinate passions for violence and action. Joo

Young Dittmann, in his exploration of *Coriolanus* and his primary traits, characterizes Coriolanus as "the epitome of heroic masculinity" (655). Throughout the Early Modern era, the conception of masculinity came to be associated with inner truth, coupled with an outward show of this truth (Dittman 657). Along with the outward show of truth came a striving for succinct and truthful remarks (Dittman 657). Coriolanus, mirroring Shakespeare's early modern conception of masculinity, emulates this masculine "*virtus*" throughout the play (656). When chided by his mother to deliver a lofty, deceptive speech to the plebeians, Coriolanus pushes back, wanting to "play / The man he is" instead of an outwardly deceptive, effeminate persona (III.ii.15–16). For Coriolanus, striving to be true to his inner persona also bolsters the fact that he is constantly striving for self-sufficiency. In Coriolanus' mind, he has already won the glory and recognition of Rome through his individual military triumphs, so why must he be soft and persuasive to assure himself consulship? Coriolanus persistently wishes to avoid dependence on others (Dittman 657). This drive for total self-determination culminates in Coriolanus' departure from Rome via his renegade exile to the Volscians. When Coriolanus stands to receive visitors from Rome before his planned siege of his home city, he is struck by the appearance of his wife, child, and mother. Wishing to remain resolute, Coriolanus spurns the passions of "instinct," choosing to "stand / As if a man were author of himself" (V.iii.35-36). This is the culmination of Coriolanus' self-determination, which eventually fails at the behest of his persuasive mother (end

of act V, scene iii). Coriolanus' failure to be the "author of himself" becomes his tragic flaw, leading to his undoing via the treacherous Aufidius. The interest, for the purposes of this paper, lies in questioning why exactly Coriolanus must constantly strive for a hyper-masculine persona, which must stand alone, individually, to attain self-sufficiency. The answer can be found in the underlying link between Coriolanus and his mother, Volumnia. A deeper analysis of the mother's role in structuring the psychic elements of personality will illustrate how inextricably linked Coriolanus' tragic flaws are with the psychic manipulations he undergoes as a result of his mother's psychological restructuring.

The lack of a father, for Coriolanus, gave his mother the opportunity to restructure elements of Coriolanus' personality, which ultimately leads to his tragic undoing. In order to locate the specific mechanics of Volumnia's overt and covert influence of the lack of a father, a reconsideration of *Coriolanus* through a Freudian lens shall be employed. A return to an earlier passage in the play will frame the developmental aspects of Volumnia's influence. Speaking of how she worked to structure Coriolanus' personality early in his life, Volumnia states, "I, considering how honour would / become [Coriolanus] [...] was / pleased to let him seek danger where he was like to find fame" (I.iii.8-11). Furthering Volumnia's violent wishes, she goes on, celebrating "His bloody brow / With his mailed hand [...] like to a harvest man that's tasked to mow" his enemies the Volscians (1.III.31-33). At a glance, this violent account of Volumnia's wishes for her son

seems like simple worship of glory. However, Volumnia's account here bears much more underlying meaning than basic worship of her glorious son. According to Freud, the fear of threatened punishment and the striving for loving approval makes children identify with the moral standards of their parents (Hall 46). Identifying with the parents' moral norms leads to the creation of the highest form of psychic development, manifesting as what Freud termed the "superego" (Hall 46). Primarily, the superego looks to curb self-destructive tendencies, chiefly sex and aggression (Hall 34). As is quite obvious, Volumnia speaks not of curbing, but of celebrating Coriolanus' adolescent aggression, while not mentioning sexual tendencies at all. Effectively, Volumnia structured Coriolanus' superego so as to seek maternal approval through his violence and eventual destruction. What exacerbates this distortion of the superego is the fact that Coriolanus' sexual development has happened devoid of a father figure. Coriolanus, in his male phallic stage of psycho-social development, would never have developed the healthy fear of castration via the imposing figure of a male father (Hall 109). In the male phallic stage, a boy loves his mother while identifying with his father (Hall 109). Not seeing what he lacked – for Lacan, the symbolic other, or father's phallus (Johnston 2.3), Coriolanus thus came to identify himself with what his mother was lacking, in turn creating a hyperactive Oedipus complex where he never stopped loving his mother, needing her constant approval through violence and manly pursuits. Indeed lacking a father to her son, Volumnia insists on identifying her son with her

husband, in such instances as when she hypothesizes, "If my son were my husband" (I.iii.2). Though more tacit in nature, Volumnia's verbal characterization of calling Coriolanus Virgilia's "husband" also suggests an underlying identification of her son as "husband" as such (I.iii.26), and not purely her son, or Coriolanus. The result of this intricate and distorted Oedipus complex is a Coriolanus who is constantly striving to extricate his character from his mother, yet never fulfilling this goal. Coriolanus is never fully able to disentangle himself from his mother's insistence, whether it be succumbing to exhorting the plebeians (III.iii.130), or the tragic choice to acquiesce to his mother's pleas to spare Rome (V.iii.183). In an almost orgasmic fit, Coriolanus bows his self-determination to his mother's wishes: "O, mother, mother! [...] O my mother, mother, O! / You have won a happy victory to Rome; / But for your son [...] most dangerously you have with him prevailed" (V.iii.183-189). In essence, this last triumph of the mother over the son elucidates the conquering of the violent superego over Coriolanus' egotistic yearning for forming his own self. After the victory by Volumnia, Coriolanus is subsequently torn to pieces at the hands of Aufidius and the Volscians (V.vi.130-132). Ultimately, Coriolanus' *hamartia* is intimately linked with his mother's manipulation of his superego, owing in large part to the absence of the moderating influence of a father.

The coolness of *The Tragedy of Coriolanus* owes not to the lack of tragedy in the play, but to the covert nature of the tragic influences working throughout. It is only with a

psychoanalytic lens that *Coriolanus*, and its title protagonist, gains significant tragic weight in light of his lack of personal control over his actions throughout the play. To conclude, Coriolanus' own decisions led to his demise would be correct, but not wholly fair. It was only by virtue of his crucial lack of a father, and persistent presence of a psychologically destructive mother, that Coriolanus became destined to be undone, not by the sword alone, but by the inner workings of his psychic character.

Works Cited

Bergmann, Martin. *Unconscious in Shakespeare's Plays.* Karnac Books, 2013. Web. 24 Nov 2014.

Dittmann, Joo Young. "'Tear him to pieces': De-Suturing Masculinity in Coriolanus". *English Studies* 90 (2009): 653–72. Print.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Vienna, 1911. *York University Psychology Classics*. Web. 18 Nov 2014.

Hall, Calvin S. *A Primer of Freudian Psychology*. New York: The New American Library, 1979. Print.

Hatlen, Burton. "The 'Noble Thing' and the 'Boy of Tears': Coriolanus and the Embarrassments of Identity". *English Literary Renaissance* 27 (1997): 393–420. Print.

Holland, Norman N. "Shakespearean Tragedy and the Three Ways of Psychoanalytic Criticism". *The Hudson Review* 15 (1962): 217–27. Print.

Johnston, Adrian. "Jacques Lacan." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* 2014. Edward N. Zalta (ed.). Web. 19 Nov 2014.

Shakespeare, William. "The Tragedy of Coriolanus." *The Norton Shakespeare*. 2nd ed. New York: Norton and Co., 2008. 2802–2880. Print.

Towne, Jackson Edmund. "A Psychoanalytic Study of Shakespere's Coriolanus." *The Psychoanalytic Review* 8 (1921): 84–91. Print.