

“A Psychoanalytic Perspective on the Character of Coriolanus:
The ‘Hen’ is Mightier than the Sword”

Richard M. Waugaman, M.D.

Georgetown University

WAUGAMAR@georgetown.edu

[http:// explore.georgetown.edu/ people/ waugamar/](http://explore.georgetown.edu/people/waugamar/)

Coriolanus says “As if a man were author of himself” (V.iii.36-37). That made me think of a psychoanalytic theory that you may not be familiar with. The play offers good illustrations of the oedipus complex, of the dynamics of narcissism, of so-called “terror management theory,” and perhaps of PTSD. The theory of the oedipus complex still stirs controversy, but don’t forget that the first time Volumnia opens her mouth, she tells Coriolanus’s wife, “If my son were *my* husband...” Coriolanus also illustrates a syndrome that has been called “self-creation fantasies.”¹ This pattern was first identified in 1991.

One thing we can say for sure about the personality of Coriolanus is that it is complex. One of Shakespeare’s most profound psychological insights is that people, and their motivations, are more complex than we might think. Our minds crave simple narratives, but reality is always more complicated than we’re ready to acknowledge. So if we’re tempted to conclude that Coriolanus’s domineering mother made him who he is, Shakespeare will systematically undermine that simple narrative at every turn.

¹ S. Rittenberg and L.N. Shaw, “On Fantasies of Self-Creation.” *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 46:217-236, 1991

In contrast with the more common “family romance” fantasy of wishing one had more ideal parents, the self-creation fantasy does away with one’s parents, in the person’s imagination. It sometimes arises when a boy is all too successful in his so-called “oedipal victory” and therefore has a closer bond to his mother than his father has, because the father is dead, otherwise absent, or too weak to protect the boy from an engulfing mother. This imbalance leaves the boy so enmeshed with his mother that, as he grows up, he fails in his struggle to establish a confident sense of a separate, autonomous identity. He might instead be chameleon-like, or feel like an imposter.

These are the circumstances that lead, in some cases, to a core fantasy of self-creation. One man said “when I was four, I started inventing myself.” For example, he started speaking with a fake English accent. He started pronouncing the family’s last name in an idiosyncratic way. Such men try to free themselves from an overly controlling mother through the fantasy of self-creation. Ironically, through unconscious fantasies of being their own mother, as it were, they also do the opposite—they regress to being closer to their fantasy of an all-good, nurturing mother by identifying with her. Replacing both their parents may also lead these men to believe they are both male and female.

Intriguingly, the two psychoanalysts who first proposed the syndrome of self-creation fantasies were partly inspired by creative literature—especially the novels that were particularly important to their two patients. These were Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, and an obscure 1904 novel by Luigi Pirandello (*The Late Mattia Pascal*), respectively. Harold Bloom was only exaggerating slightly when he said Freud borrowed all his best insights into human psychology from Shakespeare. In *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare certainly anticipated the

psychoanalytic discovery of self-creation fantasies by 400 years.

But there's another connection between self-creation fantasies and creative literature. Authors themselves often seem to have some degree or another of these fantasies. Many writers—especially those who use pen names, where this dynamic is unusually transparent—create a sort of fictive self who then does their writing. As Helen Vendler said in her wonderful 1997 book, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Shakespeare created the poems' "fictive speaker," with whom Shakespeare has what she calls "a relation of irony" (p. 26).

Let me now return to Coriolanus's remarkable comment, "As if a man were author of himself." In Act V.iii, Coriolanus spurns the entreaties of Menenius that he spare Rome from destruction. He coldly turns him away, though he gives him a letter, and he then tells Aufidius, "This man... was my beloved in Rome." In the next scene, he adds, "This last old man,/ Whom with a crack'd heart I have sent to Rome,/ Loved me above the measure of a father;/ Nay, **godded** me, indeed" (V.iii.8-10). He ends by promising Aufidius, "fresh embassies and suits,/ **Nor** from the state **nor** private friends, hereafter/ Will I lend ear to" (V.iii.17-19). Ironically, just then he sees his wife, his mother, and his son arriving.

He calls Volumnia "the honour'd mould/ Wherein this trunk was framed" (V.iii.22-23). Coriolanus soon worries he is on the verge of losing his resolution, and softening to their petition. His idealization of his mother, and his corresponding derogation of himself, lead him to say, "My mother bows;/ As if Olympus to a molehill should in supplication nod" (V.iii.29-30). He then comments on his son, as though he is now identifying with him, and is further softened by the son as a living reminder of when Coriolanus was his son's age.

Shakespeare is extraordinarily skillful in depicting psychic conflict. Coriolanus says, “My young boy/ Hath an aspect of intercession, which/ Great Nature cries ‘Deny not’” (V.iii.31-33). But he instantly pivots in the opposite direction and says, “Let the Volsces plough Rome and harrow Italy: I’ll never/ Be such a *gosling* to obey instinct, but stand,/ **As if a man were author of himself**/ And knew no other kin” (V.iii.34-37).²

No one can pack as many different levels of meaning into a few words as Shakespeare does. In this scene, Coriolanus offers us one of our many glimpses into his psychology. The presence of his mother and of his son make him realize he *does* in fact feel like a molehill, or a gosling—or a “minnow” (“triton of minnows”—his earlier insult of the tribune Sicinius). His military heroism has been an ultimately futile effort to overcompensate for that core, defective self-image. In the end, we learn that Great Nature *will not* be denied, and his mother’s success in her petition saves Rome, but leads to her son’s death. Self-creation fantasies often end in failure, since they ultimately can alienate the person from reality, and from real relationships. Trying to escape one’s past, rather than face it and come to terms with it, has its limitations as a way of coping with problems.

Coriolanus knows what he *needs* to do: “stand, As if a man were author of himself.” As if. No, he was not author of himself. His trunk—and mind—were framed by Volumnia, and she is here to call in her debt. In the character of Coriolanus, as

² Why “kin”? Shakespeare uses this word only 18 times. I can’t help but wonder if he was thinking of its anagram, “ink,” in connection with the trope of “author.” In other words, “As if a man were author of himself, and knew no other [author’s] ink.” Stephen Booth drew attention to the general category of such implicit word play, in what he called “Shakespeare’s Unrealized Puns,” where Shakespeare gives us the pleasure of uncovering subtle word play between the lines, as it were.

in the protagonists of the two novels and in the two male patients whose psychoanalyses are described in that 1991 article I mentioned, self-creation fantasies arise in response to a set of core conflicts. The need for a father's protection becomes most acute when "the developing self is most threatened." For example, one patient sometimes felt he was sinking into and merging with the analytic couch. This reminded him of what he called the "eerie and terrifying" feelings he had as a boy when his depressed mother had him get into bed with her. It made him feel he was merging with her, and losing himself.

As adults, these men often feel like imposters, no matter how outwardly successful they are. Their sense of a separate identity has been stunted by being treated as extensions of their mothers. Shakespeare's remarkable complexity can often be glimpsed merely by an actor shifting the emphasis on a single word. Think of the respective implications of Volumnia telling Coriolanus "Thou art my **warrior**," or, alternatively, "Thou art **my** warrior."

The fantasy of self-creation expresses, among other things, intense aggression against both parents. If a man *were* author of himself, he has no parents, so his actual parents are implicitly destroyed. Brilliantly, Coriolanus's perceptive mother intuits his greatest emotional vulnerability, and uses it to get what she wants from him. Of *course* she knows how to push his buttons—she's the one who *installed* them.³

Anyway, you remember that Coriolanus said "I'll never/ Be such a *gosling* to obey instinct." Famous last words. Volumnia does not let this pass. Like the prototype of the guilt-inducing mother, she rebukes Coriolanus later in this scene, "Thou hast

³ From Leslie Jordan's 1992 comedy *Hysterical Blindness and Other Southern Tragedies that Have Plagued my Life Thus Far*.

never in thy life/ Show'd thy dear mother any courtesy,/ When she, poor hen, fond of no second brood,/ Has cluck'd thee to the wars, and safely home/ Loaden with honor" (V.iii.160-164). She manipulates Coriolanus through his guilt about his implicit wish to destroy his mother. She picks up on his "gosling" image and answers it with her "poor hen... [that] has cluck'd thee to the wars." She does have a propensity to exaggerate, as Coriolanus observed when he said she claimed she would have done half of the labors of Hercules, if she had been his husband. How exactly she thinks she "cluck'd" him safely home is not at all apparent.

We always need to look both at what is explicitly enacted in a play, and what is there only implicitly. For example, as we construct our own backstory for the characters. Volumnia's overbearing presence may make us ponder the father's absence. We hear nothing about him, as far as I could tell. Plutarch tells us only that Coriolanus, "being left an orphan, [was] brought up under the widowhood of his mother." What might we infer about him? Is his relationship with Coriolanus echoed in Coriolanus's relationship with his son? In his relationship with Menenius as his father surrogate? We hear allusions to this from both Coriolanus and Menenius, especially when Menenius is trying to manipulate him not to attack Rome.

A servant says of Coriolanus "he is so made... as if he were son and heir to Mars." In Act I, Caius Marcius is given his new name because of his heroism in defeating Corioli. He rejects booty as a reward, but he petitions his general to free a prisoner who showed kindness to him. He says "I sometime lay here in Corioles/ At a poor man's house" (I.x.182-183). Or, as Plutarch worded it, "There was a certain hospitable friend of mine among the Volscians." Cominius agrees to free this prisoner, but when he asked for his name, Coriolanus says "By Jupiter, forgot!/ I am weary, yea, my memory is tir'd" (I.x.90-

91).⁴ I suspect this “poor host” became another father figure for Coriolanus. He swears by Jupiter, a name derived from “Zeus Pater,” the father god.

Every significant theme in a Shakespeare play is repeated in multiple variations, like the subject of a Bach fugue. If one theme is “As if a man were author of himself,” a sort of counter subject is Coriolanus’s reference to his mother as “the honor’d mould/ Wherein this trunk was fram’d.” Volumnia reinforces this narrative with her words, “Thou art **my** warrior,/ I holp to **frame** thee.” Yet another variation is in Act IV, when Comminius says of Coriolanus and the Volscians, “He is their **god**; he leads them like a thing/ Made by some other deity than Nature,/ That shapes man better.”

This is not an idle trope—it’s not the only time that Shakespeare subtly suggests a comparison between one of his protagonists and Christ himself. Coriolanus says of Menenius, “This last old man... Lov’d me above the measure of a father,/ Nay **godded** me indeed.” Having to display his war wounds to the plebeians, and the odd reference to them “tonguing his wounds,” brings to mind the wounds of Christ, and doubting Thomas needing to touch them. Shakespeare sometimes blends in subtle allusions to Jesus and other biblical narratives in his works. From the Roman plebeians in the first scene, to the Volscian conspirators in the final scene, the people say “Let us kill him,” like the words of the Geneva Bible, “Then they cried the more, saying ‘Let him be crucified.’”

I’m struck by the theme of Coriolanus’s fear of seeming feminine. There are many hints about this, including his modesty in not wanting to show his wounds. Ovid, one of

⁴ In the 2013 production at the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, DC, Coriolanus then faints, highlighting his fatigue—but also his psychological conflict at that moment.

Shakespeare's main sources, tells the story that Jupiter was so taken with Ganymede that he said if he were anybody other than Jupiter, he would want to be Ganymede. And that's very much what Coriolanus says about Aufidius. Plutarch mentions the tradition of wearing a loose gown to show one's wounds when seeking election as Consul, but there is nothing in Plutarch about the onlookers putting their tongue in Coriolanus's wound, to make it speak. Why did Shakespeare draw attention to this detail? Madhavi Menon, who edited the 2011 book *Shakesqueer*, thinks it's a sexual innuendo.⁵

There is no doubt that Volumnia pushes Coriolanus to military glory, then to political office. This is a transition he seems poorly prepared for. In particular, it is the need to dissemble that undoes him. It is not only his pride that will not allow him to humble himself before the people. It is also his rigid insistence on being truthful. Too late, Volumnia tries to coach him in a more flexible use of honesty. In this, she reminds us of Lady Macbeth telling her husband,

“Your face, my thane, is as a book where men
May read strange matters. To beguile the time,
Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,
Your hand, your tongue: *look like* the innocent flower,
But be the serpent under't.”

⁵ Personal communication, April 26, 2013