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On Matriarchal Thirst for Power in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and Racine's *Britannicus*

Abstract

This paper aims to analyze a significant aspect in Shakespeare's Coriolanus and Racine's Britannicus, that is, the thirst for power. This phenomenon involves two crucial secondary characters; Volumnia and Agrippine, mothers respectively of Caius Marcius Coriolanus and Britannicus. Both Coriolanus and Britannicus are political tragedies re-enacting the politics in the Roman Empire. Shakespeare and Racine use history to convey realism. Plutarch's The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans (1579) is Shakespeare's most obvious source in writing Coriolanus, while Racine relies upon (as he explains in his preface) the Annals of Publius Cornelius Tacitus as the main historical source for writing Britannicus. The struggle or thirst for power is nothing new but one unique aspect in Coriolanus and Britannicus is that certain female characters are no less sly, avaricious, or immoral than their male counterparts. Volumnia in Coriolanus and Agrippine in Britannicus are such characters. This thesis aims to analyze their character in terms of their wickedness in designing for power. The protagonists in both they are protective and loving mothers on one side and cunning and domineering on the other. This double personality they show makes them intriguing non-Manichean characters.

Keywords: *Coriolanus*, *Britannicus*, matriarch, power, psychoanalysis

Introduction

This paper focuses on the two matriarchs in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and Racine's *Britannicus*: Volumnia and Agrippine, mothers respectively of Caius Marcius Coriolanus and Britannicus, who are the eponymous heroes of Shakespeare and Racine's two plays. The main points discussed in the thesis are the thirst for power Volumnia and Agrippine share, why they are so greedy, and how this phenomenon affects the plot and the major characters: Coriolanus, Britannicus, Nero, and Junie. Even though *Coriolanus* and *Britannicus* are named after Volumnia and Agrippine's sons, the two mothers are as important as their heroic offspring in the plot or their influence on other important characters; Nero and Junie for example. Charles Boyce in his *Critical Companion to William Shakespeare* (2005) states: "The influence of Volumnia is the driving force behind Coriolanus and the play" (80). Wistan

Hugh Auden, in his *Lectures on Shakespeare*, compiled and edited by Arthur Kirsch, states that: "The real individual here [in *Coriolanus*] is not Coriolanus but Volumnia" (253).

View on whether *Britannicus*' Agrippine is the most important character or not is not for debate for Racine himself says in the second preface to *Britannicus*: "C'est elle que je me suis surtout efforcée de bien exprimer, et ma tragédie n'est pas moins la disgrâce d'Agrippine que la mort de Britannicus." which means that Agrippine is, in fact, the character whom Racine worked the most on depicting, especially in the way she affects the other main character, Nero. His tragedy is no less Agrippine's disgrace than it is Britannicus' death. In *Etudes sur Racine*, René Pommier goes further in his analysis of Racine's preface, stating that the playwright might as well say that the tragedy is as much--if not more--about Agrippine's Disgrace as it is about Britannicus' death. Other critics as Mitchell Greenberg and Volker Schroder argue that Nero and Agrippine are the main protagonists in *Britannicus*, each being as important as the other.

Literary critics tend to agree on Volumnia and Agrippine's importance in both tragedies. These two characters have an essential influence not only on the plot but also on the set of characters evolving with them. For example, in *Coriolanus*, Volumnia is the one to exhort Coriolanus to join the Senate and to forfeit his will of crushing Rome. Agrippina's pressure on Nero plays an important role in making him find in Narcisse an advisor and plotting behind her back in killing Britannicus. Frederick James Furnivall, in his introduction to *The Leopold Shakespeare: Works in Chronological Order, F.J Furnivall Edition* (1883), comments on Volumnia when describing her in the preface of his book: "No grander, nobler woman was ever created by Shakespeare's art" and he later adds: "From mothers like Volumnia came the men who conquered the known world, and have left their mark forever on the nations of Europe". Another critic who asserts the same about Volumnia is Wystan Hugh Auden in his *Lectures on Shakespeare*, edited by Arthur Kirsch (2002): "The character of Volumnia raises the point that any man who has achieved much in the world has had a dominating and demanding mother." (253). Charles Boyce again, when analyzing Caius Marcius' character, also known as Coriolanus, proclaims in his *Critical Companion to William Shakespeare* that: "He [Coriolanus] is incapable of being anything except what his mother has made him, the influence of Volumnia is thus central to the play." (86-94), before concluding that: "He [Coriolanus] is entirely Volumnia's creation, and thus, Coriolanus is psychologically dependant on her good opinion." (93-94).

These quotations show that Volumnia's character is very influential in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. Rene Pommier claims that Nero, son of Agrippine, and half brother to Britannicus, is an Emperor who got on the throne thanks to neither his birth, nor to his military feats or his genius for politics, but his mother's intrigue. For Pommier, ever since the opening scene of *Britannicus*, the conflict between Agrippine and her son Nero is the principal matter or conflict of the play. The fight for power between Volumnia and Nero cause the two major crises in *Britannicus*: Junie's Abduction and the death of Britannicus. Shakespeare's most important sources in writing *Coriolanus* are Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* (1579), as well as William Camden's *Remaines of a Greater Worke Concerning Britaine*, also known as Camden's *Remaines*. Racine's essential source in writing *Britannicus* is Tacitus' *Annals*. Racine himself says in his second preface to *Britannicus*: "I was so infused with this [Tacitus] excellent historian's work that almost every shiny idea I had in writing this play came to me from him. I wanted to add to this collection some of the most beautiful passages I tried to imitate, but that would take as many pages as the tragedy itself."

Last but not least, the third point which makes both Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and Racine's *Britannicus* worthy of comparison is the limited amount of discussions and comparisons made on Volumnia and Agrippine. Both mothers figure in the list of the most studied characters in each of the plays they appear in but they are often merely considered as protective mothers seeking only the best for their sons. Furthermore, there is little discussion of the psychological aspect of Volumnia and Agrippine and the greed they have for power. F.J Furnivall, Harold Bloom, David Berrington, and Jay Halio all claim that Volumnia's wickedness and thirst for power do not appear as vividly in Plutarch's *Lives*. They all agree, however, on the fact that the lines Volumnia has in *Coriolanus* are Shakespeare's creation, that the matriarch appears to be less aggressive and power-thirsty in the playwright's main source, Plutarch's *Lives*, and thus that the playwright aims to stress her greed for power. Some other critics, such as Janet Adelman, Christina Luckyj, Arthur Kirsch, and Wystan Hugh Auden argue that Volumnia is not the perfect image of the Roman powerful Mother, caring for her family and even more for her motherland. These latter claim that Agrippine is far from being a nurturing mother and they see in her a power-driven manipulator. The first group of critics offers us the chance, through their analyses, to see through the eyes of the first personality of Volumnia, her loving mother's eyes. The second group of critics allows us to identify her power-thirsty matriarch's self and to see through her mask, the real motivation in her endeavours.

As previously mentioned, literary critics so often depict Volumnia and Agrippine as two love-driven mothers. This thesis aims to take another approach in analyzing these two protagonists to portray them as power-thirsty mothers, or Matriarchs who greed for power above all. The fragments from both *Coriolanus* and *Britannicus* which will be analyzed in the three following chapters will, however, show both sides of each one of Volumnia and Agrippine; the caring mother, on one hand, the greedy for power Matriarch on the other. This method will not only shed some light on the duality and complexity of their roles, but it will also show how they use their first personality to benefit the other one.

The Matriarchs' Greed for Power

Literary criticism often relates Shakespeare's Volumnia and Racine's Agrippine's greed for power to either political, historical reasons or psychoanalytical ones. Some critics state that both Matriarchs are written to perfectly fit their roles as great caring and protective Roman mothers when others argue that Volumnia's control over her son, Caius Marcius Coriolanus, and Agrippine's grasp over her son Nero are in reality but a representation of the Freudian Oedipus complex. While the first argument has encountered no major opposition since it only relates Volumnia's and Agrippine's motivations to the background they evolve in, the second argument brings some literary critics to disagree on the nature of the mother-son relationships in both *Coriolanus* and *Britannicus*.

The first scene in which Volumnia appears (I.iii) is indeed one of the most controversial fragments. In the mentioned scene, Volumnia sees in Coriolanus more than a son she cares for and aims to protect. The matriarch describes her son as a husband she beds:

SCENE III. Rome. A room in Marcius' house.

Enter VOLUMNIA and VIRGILIA they set them down on two low stools, and sew

VOLUMNIA

I pray you, daughter, sing; or express yourself in a more comfortable sort: if my son were my husband, I should freelier rejoice in that absence wherein he won honour than in the embracements of his bed where he would show most love. [I.iii. 1-5]

Arthur Kirsch sees in this fragment Volumnia comparing her son to a potential lover. According to the critic, the mother's love for her son is not only maternal but also sexual and Oedipal. Other critics disagree with this analysis and attribute Volumnia's motherly love to the society she evolves in. Harold Bloom's interpretation of this fragment in *Shakespeare: The Invention*

of the *Human* leads him to a simple conclusion: Volumnia's lines are grotesque and show nothing but tyrannous and violent traits. Bloom declares that Volumnia's thrill for war and heroic deeds have been exaggerated by William Shakespeare, reminding us that Volumnia, as originally described in Plutarch's *Lives* is less of a blood-thirsty figure. Bloom adds that: "... his [Coriolanus] ferocious mother, Volumnia, who must be the most unpleasant woman in all of Shakespeare, not excluding Goneril and Regan". Theodora Jankowski states in her *Women in Power in the Early Modern Drama* that: "On one level, Volumnia-as daughter, woman, wife, and mother-[sic]is a product of a society that places a high value upon a sterile idea of manliness that demands both the death of enemies and the spiritual death of the men who possess it. Being successfully raised in her society and accepting its values, Volumnia, in turn, raises her son in them and produces a warrior, a hero praised by the society that produced him. On the level of educating her child to the ideologies of society, then Volumnia is a successful mother." Jankowski, by bringing the Roman society into the equation, minimizes Volumnia's aggressive pursuit of power and her penchant for violence.

This interpretation closes the door to see Volumnia as a free-acting protagonist, driven by her psyche. For Janet Adelman though, Volumnia's ferociousness can simply not be attributed to her society, for *Coriolanus* is not Shakespeare's first play taking the Roman Empire as its background, and Volumnia is not Shakespeare's first depiction of the Roman mother. Volumnia is, however, particular in her fierceness. Adelman, in her *Suffocating Mothers* (1992) describes Volumnia as a cold suffocating mother who did not nurture Coriolanus when he was but a child and this goes in contradiction with the role or the image which Shakespeare and his contemporaries had of the caring Roman mother.

Later in the same scene from the same act (I.iii), Volumnia congratulates herself for the first time about how she made Coriolanus a man, a hero, a protagonist who holds the fate of Rome in his hands. This scene shows Volumnia's pride in her making the character of Coriolanus what he is, and proves that Volumnia's efforts in planting power in her son are part of a long process which will conclude in benefiting from this power herself. Volumnia grows power in Coriolanus only intending to reclaim it when the moment comes:

VOLUMNIA

...When yet he was but
tender-bodied and the only son of my womb, when
youth with comeliness plucked all gaze his way, when
for a day of kings' entreaties a mother should not

sell him an hour from her beholding, I, considering
how honour would become such a person. that it was
no better than picture-like to hang by the wall, if
renown made it not stir, was pleased to let him seek
danger where he was like to find fame. To a cruel
war I sent him; from whence he returned, his brows
bound with oak. I tell thee, daughter, I sprang not
more in joy at first hearing he was a man-child
than now in first seeing he had proved himself a
man. [I.iii. 5-18]

Charles Boyce, in *Critical Companion to William Shakespeare*, explains that this first declaration of Volumnia about how she created Coriolanus: the Hero, out from a child, shows not only her pride in doing so but also serves as an omen for the reader as what to expect from Volumnia. Volumnia, by shaping the main protagonist of the play with her hands, intrinsically acquired the power to shape the play and its outcome with her own hands. He states: "[Coriolanus] is entirely Volumnia's creation and thus, Coriolanus is psychologically dependant on her good opinion" and continues: "...the influence of Volumnia is thus central to the play."

Wystan Hugh Auden, in his *Lectures on Shakespeare*, compiled and edited by Arthur Kirsch, proclaims that: "Volumnia wants power by proxy". Auden's opinion is that Volumnia is singular in her quest for power and it could only be psychological and not cultural, for Roman women as depicted in Plutarch's *Lives* act as nurturing mothers, not as controlling and domineering ones.

Volumnia's thirst for power can be seen indeed as a particular psychological response to cultural frustration. Volumnia rejects the characteristics of dependence and passiveness easily found in the figure of the Roman mother. Virgilia, the wife of Coriolanus, serves as a useful foil for Volumnia. She is present in most Volumnia's appearances and contrasts her domineering and controlling traits and appearing at all moments as what Volumnia is not; the Roman mother.

Harold Bloom reminds us that: "Volumnia, who must be the most unpleasant woman in all of Shakespeare" (584), is not to be assimilated either to the other mothers in her society. He claims: "In Shakespeare's strangest play, Volumnia remains the most surprising character, not at all readily assimilable to your averagedevouring mother", He sees in her greed for power a peculiar trait that other Shakespearean female characters do not share. Bloom continues: "She boasts of having sent Caius Marcius

[Coriolanus] off to battle when he was still very young" (584) and later on reminds us that this is unusual behavior for a Shakespearean mother-figure.

VOLUMNIA

...Than gilt his trophy: the breasts of Hecuba,

When she did suckle Hector, look'd not lovelier

Than Hector's forehead when it spit forth blood [I.iii. 39-44]

Harold Bloom again, notes that: "...she [Volumnia] delights in blood, though it is her son's". His reading of this passage only implies that Volumnia is a sanguinary power-thirsty mother or Matriarch. Christina Luckyj's interpretation is less critical towards the character of Volumnia and implies that the Matriarch behaves in such a way and speaks similar words only to fit in her role of proud and courageous mother, that she is doing so for her son and the society and that her inner thoughts and feelings might be very different. This latter interpretation becomes even more accurate when Harold Bloom concedes that his critic on Volumnia does not include her psyche but only the outcome of her behavior, for, as he says: "Since Volumnia, like everyone else in the play, has only an outward self, we have few clues as to how an early Roman matron became Strindbergian (a nice comparison by Russell Fraser)". Janet Adelman sees in Volumnia's domination over her son a self-preservation reaction. According to Adelman and Kirsch, Volumnia feels the need to control Coriolanus so that he does not destroy his mother: she becomes the phallic mother as not to be subject to her son. The latter critics advance that Volumnia's thirst for power aims not as much at acquiring power as at confiscating it from her son. The greed for power that Volumnia shows comes from her fears that Coriolanus becomes powerful enough he would not need her anymore, powerful enough he would not need Rome anymore, powerful enough he would turn against Rome, and thus against her. Adelman, when analyzing the last act (V.iii) she claims that Volumnia recognizes her in the Rome her son, Coriolanus, is besieging: "The ruin on which Coriolanus will tread will be his mother's womb". Thus, Adelman and Kirsch see in Coriolanus' attack on Rome the attack on his mother and imply that would be the reason behind her thirst for power.

Literary criticism around Racine's *Britannicus* also agrees on the importance of the first scene where Agrippine appears (I.i). In *Etudes sur Britannicus*, Rene Pommier claims that Agrippine's first appearance is the perfect introduction to a play; using only one character, the playwright introduces the main protagonists and the conflict the tragedy revolves around. In the scene cited below, Agrippine announces to her confidante, Albine, that she will not accept Nero's emancipation and autonomy. Agrippine declares that she will take measures in recovering the power she

once enjoyed even if this means that she has to plot and force her son into submission:

AGRIPPINE

Albine, il ne faut pas s'éloigner un moment.
Je veux l'attendre ici. Les chagrins qu'il me cause
M'occuperont assez tout le temps qu'il repose.
Tout ce que j'ai prédit n'est que trop assuré :
Contre Britannicus Néron s'est déclaré.
L'impatient Néron cesse de se contraindre ;
Las de se faire aimer, il veut se faire craindre.
Britannicus le gêne, Albine, et chaque jour
Je sens que je deviens importune à mon tour. [I.i.1-17]

In the last three lines of this segment, Agrippine tells her confidante, Albine, that Nero grows tired of being loved, and that he now wishes others to fear him [15]. Britannicus is a hindrance to Nero and day after day, so becomes Agrippine [16-17]. Pommier states that Agrippine's first intervention allows us to know who the primary characters are, what is at stake in the play, and also that the conflict opposes mainly emperor Nero to his mother, Agrippine. These lines most importantly show Agrippine's fear of being rejected by her Nero, not for he is her son but because he is the emperor. Volker Schroder, in his *La Tragédie du Sang D'Auguste*, implies that all of Volumnia's deeds may be explained and understood by referring to this fear. It is also this same fear that Roland Barthes explores, though using more of a psychoanalytical approach, to shed light on Agrippine's persona and the motivation behind her thirst for power. Barthes claims that Agrippine plays the role of the phallic mother throughout the whole play and the domination she seeks to apply on Nero is not only a product of her fear of losing the power she enjoys via Nero but also the love he has for her. In *Sur Racine*, Barthes the mother-son relationship between Agrippine and Nero as Oedipal. He claims, along with Charles Mauron that Racine uses the words "embraces" and "caresses" in a sexual way, not in a motherly one. For Mauron and Goldmann, Agrippine only gives her approval for Britannicus to marry Junie to keep Nero for herself. Mitchell Greenberg in *Racine, Oedipus, and Absolute Fantasies* also points the Oedipal bond uniting Agrippine to Nero.

The sharpest analysis, though, comes from Rene Pommier who excludes the previously mentioned theories to focus on telling us one important thing: Agrippine is driven by her love and thirst for power, not the love for her son. Nero grows more and more distant towards Agrippine and thus she needs to regain the power she has been losing since Nero began rejecting her. According to Pommier in *Etudes sur Britannicus*, Nero, is: "[An] Emperor who got on the throne neither thanks to his birth, nor for his

military feats or his genius for politics, but his mother's [Agrippine] intrigues, moreover, a mother who offered him power only intending to enjoy it herself through him". Pommier discredits Barthes and Mauron for affirming that Agrippine Oedipal love for Nero by reminding that Agrippine has not one but two sons; Nero and Britannicus (Though she did not give birth to Britannicus). Yet, the Matriarch's actions toward one and the other are categorically different from the other. Agrippine questions Nero's love for Junie, labeling it as too sudden and out of nowhere, however, she does encourage Britannicus' passionate love for Junie and tries to push this latter in Britannicus' arms. Agrippine disagrees with Nero's decision to abduct Junie. Finally, Agrippine works during the whole play for controlling or regaining control over Nero, and the only actions relating her to Britannicus aim only to stop Nero's deeds. Pommier concludes that: "Her [Agrippine] passion turns around power more than her son and if she works to keep her grasp over Nero, it is not because he is her son but because he is the emperor". Barthes' main argument which may explain why Agrippine bares an Oedipal love only to Nero and not to Britannicus is that this latter is but the son of her late, departed husband; The emperor Claudius. Indeed, Nero is the son of Agrippine and Domitius Ahenobarbus, not Claudius. The matriarch says: "Je m'assure un port dans la tempête/ Néron m'échappera, si ce frein ne l'arrête.[I.i.79-80]. Agrippine declares in these lines that stopping Nero is more important than protecting him for he is becoming a threat she compares to a tempest.

Rene Pommier's analysis concluding in Agrippine's being driven by her love and thirst for power over anything else also applies to the fragment above. Agrippine declares to Albine, her confidante, that by secretly pushing Britannicus and Junie into each other's arms, she will allow herself to take shelter from the tempest [79]. This proves once again that, Agrippine, in everything she does, never loses track of her objective; reaching for more power. It also verifies Volker Schroder's theory that Agrippine constantly (throughout the play, at least) fears either her son's rejection of his wrath; the tempest in her own words.

Agrippine feels Nero might break free from her grip where she not stop him by taking Britannicus and Junie as Allies [80]. The matriarch declares: "Je le craindrais bientôt, s'il ne me craignait plus." [82] meaning that if the son does not fear his mother, then she will be the one terrorized by him.

Agrippine then tells Albine that if she schemed to fail, she will have to pay the price. She says that she will fear Nero soon enough were he not to fear her anymore [82]. In *Racine's Politics: The Subject/Subversion of Power in*

Britannicus, Suzanne Gearhart reminds the reader that Agrippine's relationship with Nero is also based on fear. Agrippine confiscated the power from Nero as soon as she won him the throne: she rules instead of him, or in his name. Nero grows up and realizes that his mother does not intend to share the power that now rightfully belongs to him and decides to exclude her more and more as he finds in his counselors, Burrhus and Narcisse all the help he needs to rule.

AGRIPPINE

Non, non, le temps n'est plus que Néron, jeune encore,
Me renvoyait les vœux d'une cour qui l'adore,
Lorsqu'il se reposait sur moi de tout l'Etat,
Que mon ordre au palais assemblait le sénat,
Et que derrière un voile, invisible et présente,
J'étais de ce grand corps l'âme toute-puissante. [I.i.99-104]

Agrippine, through these lines, will justify her present and future deeds, she is proclaiming whatever she will do from this point on, and this is exactly why she will do it. She acknowledges the fact that Nero is not the little boy who used to trust her with everything he has [99-101], that the time where a simple word from Agrippine would assemble the senate is no more [102], and that she eventually ceased to be the spirit moving Nero's grown body [103-104].

Volumnia's and Agrippine's greed for power comes neither from their society nor from their deep love for Coriolanus and Britannicus. It is triggered by the fear of being passive and helpless to what is occurring around them. Theodora A. Jankowski's *Women in Power in the Early Modern Drama* would only confirm this need of Volumnia and Agrippine to evolve from the role of the passive, caring mother, to the role of active, power-thirsty Matriarch. How they feed their thirst, from where they get this coveted power, and how they apply their control and domination are the points discussed in the next chapter.

The Process of Using Power to Acquire More Power

Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and Racine's *Britannicus* are political tragedies turning around power and authority. Volumnia and Agrippina long for the power their respective sons, Coriolanus and Nero have. For Charles Boyce and Rene Pommier, this power belongs to the two matriarchs since they planted it and raised it in their sons, and it is only natural and legitimate that they reclaim it once it started to flee from them. This is why both Volumnia and Agrippine conspire against Coriolanus and Britannicus and apply pressure on them to take back what once belonged to them. Indeed, Auden affirms in his *Lectures on Shakespeare* that Volumnia strives for acquiring more power and she does this by controlling her Coriolanus; "Volumnia wants power by proxy, and it is her wish, not Coriolanus's [sic],

that he become consul, a political office to which he is unsuited." (254). Charles Boyce sees Coriolanus only as a product of Volumnia, that he is his mother's creation and what he has, he owes it to her; "He is entirely Volumnia's creation and thus, Coriolanus is psychologically dependent on her good opinion." (87), and according to him, Coriolanus: "abandons his life rather than suffer his mother's disapproval"(88). Boyce emphasizes Volumnia's wickedness and analyses how she schemes for power: "She [Volumnia] can manipulate him because when she created him she deprived him of all his motives but one, his pride, which depends on her continuing approval." (88) In this respect, Boyce is implying that Volumnia raised her son and made him the powerful warrior he is not for motherly duty, she did it to serve her interest, by ruling and controlling through him.

How Volumnia designs to quench her thirst for power is what Wystan Hugh Auden examines in his *Lectures on Shakespeare*. Auden's analysis supports the theory in which Volumnia's character shows two personalities or two faces; the first one is the loving mother while the second is the power-thirsty matriarch. Volumnia uses her loving mother's face to gain what she seeks; power. Auden says: "Volumnia makes Coriolanus do what she wants." (253).

VOLUMNIA

I prithee now, sweet son, as thou hast said
My praises made thee first a soldier, so,
To have my praise for this, perform a part
Thou hast not done before. [III.ii.107-110]

This fragment shows how Volumnia relates the choices Coriolanus makes to herself, she asks him to join the Senate and to gain the favor of the people, not for any other reason but because she wants it and that would make her proud of her son. When her son refuses to give way, she stops confronting him with arguments and threatens him to withdraw her love, as Auden explains: "...she first tries to argue with him. When the arguments do not affect, she adopts the tactics of scolding him and threatening to withdraw her love, which works." (253). and this is what the following fragment shows: "Do as thou list/Thy valiantness was mine, thou suck'dst it from me/ But owe thy pride thyself." [III.ii.128-130].

Volumnia dissociates herself from her son, perfectly knowing how psychologically dependent on her the latter is. She says it herself when addressing Coriolanus: "There's no man in the world/ more bound to's mother." (V.iii.158-159).

According to Auden's analysis, Volumnia applies the same tactics with her son later on in Act V, Scene III, when Coriolanus is about to march

on Rome. In this scene, Volumnia pleads with him to spare Rome and first tells him that by attacking Rome, his reputation will be forever stained, that the annals will remember him as: "The man was noble, / But with his last attempt he wip'd it out..." (V.iii.145-146). Seeing that her attempt does not suffice, Volumnia first kneels to Coriolanus, before she rises in anger, turns away from him in rejection, and shows her disappointment with him. The matriarch succeeds in making Coriolanus miserable by implying that he is an unworthy son who has no honor.

VOLUMNIA

This fellow had a Volscian to his mother;
His wife is in Corioli and his child
Like him by chance. Yet give us our dispatch:
I am hush'd until our city be a-fire,
And then I'll speak a little. [V.iii.178.182].

Once again, Volumnia applies her power and authority over Coriolanus to make him fulfill her wishes and desires. The matriarch uses the power she already has to acquire even more power and convincing Coriolanus not to attack Rome satisfies her greed and brings her from the status of a loving mother to one of the savior of Rome.

Volumnia plants the seeds of power in her son, Coriolanus, by raising him and making him the commander he is. The matriarch then drains him from this power throughout the play to satisfy her greed.

In *Britannicus*, Agrippine also uses her maternal face to acquire more power and drain the authority from her son, the emperor Nero. Rene Pommier analyses that Agrippine constantly reminds Nero of how she made him the powerful man that he is and that everything he has, he owes to his mother. In the opening scene of *Britannicus*, Agrippine informs her confidante, Albine that Nero refuses to see his mother and only listens to his advisors¹. At the end of the opening scene, Agrippine declares to Albine that she will not give up on her ambitions, refusing to let her son Nero break free from her grip.

AGRIPPINE

Mais je le poursuivrai d'autant plus qu'il m'évite :
De son désordre, Albine, il faut que je profite. [I.i.140-141].

Agrippine tells Albine in this fragment that Nero can simply not escape from her, that the more he tries to avoid her, the more she will pursue him [I.i.140]. The matriarch then says that she will take advantage of her

¹ Burrhus and Narcisse (the latter being the closest person to Britannicus. Narcisse spies on Britannicus in Nero's interest).

son's confusion² to regain control over the situation [I.i.141]. This fragment proves that Agrippine is ready to defy her son, the emperor, by doing whatever needs to be done to regain her power.

NERON [Nero]

Eloigné de ses yeux, j'ordonne, je menace,
J'écoute vos conseils, j'ose les approuver ;
Je m'excite contre elle, et tâche à la braver :
Mais (je t'expose ici mon âme toute nue)
Sitôt que mon malheur me ramène à sa vue,
Soit que je n'ose encor démentir le pouvoir
De ces yeux où j'ai lu si longtemps mon devoir ;
Soit qu'à tant de bienfaits ma mémoire fidèle
Lui soumettre en secret tout ce que je tiens d'elle,
Mais enfin mes efforts ne me servent de rien :

Mon génie étonné tremble devant le sien. [II.ii.132-142]

This fragment proves how much the emperor Nero is under the influence of his mother Agrippine. Addressing his advisor, Narcisse, Nero proclaims that Agrippine drains him of all his power and courage, he can defy her and use his power only when she is not around him [II.ii.132-134]. Nero then concedes that Agrippine made him what he is, his power is hers and to obey her is his duty [II.ii.136-142].

Agrippine's thirst for power leads her to make sure her son understands he is what she made him and no more. The emperor is a product of Agrippine's thirst for power, she raised him and made him emperor to quench this greed. Rene Pommier notes that Agrippine is constantly reminding her audience and especially her son, that this latter is ungrateful to her for she made him an emperor, and thus, the power he enjoys as such is all hers. The matriarch tells her Nero: " Je souhaitai son [Claudius] lit, dans la seule pensée/ De vous laisser au trône où je serais placée." [IV.ii.13-14], implying that she offered herself to the emperor Claudius only to make sure Nero will be his successor.

Agrippine psychologically tames her son into obedience, leading him to act according to her wishes, first by playing the loving mother's role who only seeks her beloved son's success. When the matriarch fails to control Nero through her maternal face, she decides to play another role by making him feel guilty for not ceding to her demands, reminding him that it is his

²Confusion here refers to Nero not knowing what to do with Britannicus, and Junie whom he recently abducted.

duty more than a mere choice that he does so. Agrippine herself confesses, in the company of Britannicus, Albine and Narcisse, that she shows these two different faces to dominate her son Nero; "Le coupable Néron fuit en vain ma colère :/Tôt ou tard il faudra qu'il entende sa mère./J'essaierai tour à tour la force et la douceur." [III.v.26-28].

Agrippine informs her audience³ that Nero tries to flee from her wrath in vain, for, sooner or later, he will have to answer to his mother [III.v.26-27]. The matriarch reveals then her strategy to control Nero; alternating between forcefulness and mildness and so forth [III.v.28]. Nero's defiance for Agrippine ends in her rejecting him and disapproving of him, which eventually brings him to withdraw his resistance and to submit to her. However, Agrippine shows even more wickedness by not only psychologically pressing her son to obey her but also by scheming behind his back to oppose his deeds and decisions. The matriarch takes Britannicus and Junie as allies, knowing that Britannicus, son of her departed husband, Claudius, is the legitimate heir to the throne and thus, the legitimate emperor of Rome.

Agrippine uses then the main characters⁴ to satisfy her greed and thirst for power and her actions are driven by this greed and by nothing else, as she says to Nero: "Moi, le faire empereur? Ingrat ! L'avez-vous cru ?/ Quel serait mon dessein ? Qu'aurais-je pu prétendre ?/ Quels honneurs dans sa cour, quel rang pourrais-je attendre ?" [IV.ii.144-146]. After this short extract, it becomes clear that Agrippine made her son emperor not for his good but hers, as she clearly states that she chose Nero over Britannicus not out of love, but because she can expect no honor, no rank, and no distinction coming from crowning Britannicus. In other words, making Britannicus emperor brings her no power whereas placing Nero on the throne does.

According to Roland Barthes and René Pommier, Nero's supposedly blind love towards Junie is but a way to contradict his mother and to stand against her by doing what she forbids him to do. This naturally means that Agrippina's attempts to help Britannicus and Junie being together is but a way of imposing her power and authority over her son, it has nothing to do either Nero, Britannicus, or Junie's interests. However, uniting Britannicus and Junie is a way for Agrippine to keep her power and to protect her authority as she says: "Bientôt, si je ne romps ce funeste lien/Ma place est occupée et je ne suis plus rien." [III.iv.10-11].

³Britannicus, Narcisse and Albine.

⁴Nero, Britannicus and Junie.

Agrippine proves here that her true aim is not to bring Britannicus and his beloved Junie together, but to separate Nero from the latter, fearing that Junie will replace her and thus, inherit her power.

For Roland Barthes and Charles Mauron, Agrippine's greed for power can be proven with certitude by one example; Her convincing her dying husband, Claudius, to choose Nero as his heir to the throne, over Britannicus, his true son, and legitimate successor. Undeniably, by doing so, Agrippine defied not only one man but the rules of succession governing the Roman Empire. There is, thus, no doubt in concluding that Agrippine's endeavors to talk the different parties⁵ into doing what she wishes does not and cannot come from her love for any of them, but for her love and thirst for power.

This latter argument is compelling for Agrippine, as the Roman mother she is, appears to be as proud as she is greedy. Making so many concessions and sacrifices, burying her pride for so many years for the sake of acquiring power truly proves that her desire and thirst for power overwhelms her and makes her the character she is.

Conclusion

In the chapters above, I have attempted to analyze the matriarchal thirst for power in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and Racine's *Britannicus*. This thirst for power focuses on two specific characters, one in each play; Volumnia in *Coriolanus* and Agrippine in *Britannicus*. The main purpose of this analysis is to prove that both Volumnia and Agrippine are protagonists that are driven by their greed for power and that these two matriarchs' actions serve the purpose of satisfying this greed. The consequences are important enough to shape the plot and the evolution of other characters in *Coriolanus* and *Britannicus*.

First, understanding why Volumnia and Agrippine act the way they do allows shedding light on what they are and what they are not. I have attempted to demystify the common belief that Volumnia and Agrippine fill in their role as loving and nurturing mothers while showing that the two matriarch's actions are not driven by love for their sons, neither do they come from their society.

Volumnia and Agrippine act for their interests; they feel the power they planted and grew in their sons belongs to them by right, and they design to keep this power or take back what has been lost of it.

⁵The main characters of the play besides Agrippine: Nero, Britannicus and Junie.

Designing for power implies a set of actions that would gain Volumnia and Agrippina's power back to them. How the two matriarch's scheme and apply their tactics to succeed; alternating between the role of the caring mother to the role of the rejecting and disappointed one, using the motherly tenderness and then shifting to forcefulness and fierceness, are essential points to examine to grasp the meaning of being driven by the thirst for power.

It is also important to analyze the matriarchs' deeds to comprehend the discussed phenomenon, thirst for power, and how it makes them interact with and evolve in their environment.

Evaluating the consequences of Volumnia and Agrippina's thirst for power is crucial to understand the importance of this phenomenon, and thus the importance of the two matriarchs in *Coriolanus* and *Britannicus*.

Finally, following the logic behind the previous chapters and putting the different arguments altogether, one concludes that Volumnia and Agrippina are the most decisive and influential characters in *Coriolanus* and *Britannicus*, a status they owe to their thirst for power. The matriarchal thirst for power is, therefore, the core of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and Racine's *Britannicus*.

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