

The Controlling Force of Rome in *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar*

Marta Cerezo Moreno

Universidad de Córdoba

In Shakespeare's Roman plays, Rome does not function as a mere location that the playwright uses in order to situate his characters and actions. The city is continuously addressed, attacked, defended, hurt, praised, feared and it even plays the role of a mother. Rome is the framework within which the playwright inserts every single element of the texts and without which the whole dramatic structure of the plays would collapse, since everything evolves around it. In *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar*, Rome functions as a power structure that holds the essential devices to shape and control the protagonists' actions, thoughts and final destinies. In the case of *Coriolanus*, it is a force that fights against the character's belief that he has his own individuality, his own sense of independence. In the case of *Julius Caesar*, the impelling force of Rome opposes the characters' attempt to create and manipulate a reality that works against the codes of behaviour of the city.

As we hear in the first lines uttered by the citizens of Rome in *Coriolanus*, the protagonist is the "chief enemy to the people" (I.i.6-7), and "a very dog to the commonalty" (I.i.27-28). The facts that this is the first depiction of Coriolanus and that this feature is continuously repeated throughout the whole play point to the relevance of the relationship between the common people and the patricians. That is, it calls attention to the significance of the connection between the different social classes within the play. This link is made explicit in Menenius' famous "Fable of the Belly" as a response to the corn riots (I.i.147-154).

Shakespeare presents the idea of Rome as a body politic, as an organic being whose members are interrelated and depend upon one another. The social and political organisation of Rome is displayed as a circumscribed environment whose limits are well defined. The dependence of the limbs on such a body is a two-way one. Not only do the common people need the collaboration of the higher social classes to subsist but, as we will mention later on, Coriolanus also needs the plebes' voices, that is, the people's votes, to be appointed consul. However, Coriolanus' challenge to such corporation leads to confusion and chaos, since Rome's stability is threatened. Following the metaphor of the body, Coriolanus is described as a "limb that has but a disease," that "must be cut away" (III.i.293-94).

The mainspring of the public and personal crisis in the play lies in the different definitions of Rome that Coriolanus and the common people give. The plebs see the city as Menenius' organic structure. Rome is presented as a place out of which man does not exist. As we hear Sicinius ask, "What is the city but the people?" (III.i.197), the plebs answer: "True/ The people are the city" (198-99). Human life depends on the relationships established among the citizens, who become the real components of the city. On the other hand, Coriolanus' Rome is a more physical and magnificent location that has to be defended in war, a place in

which valour is “the chiefest virtue” (II.ii.84). Coriolanus’ insults to the plebs are all based on their cowardice during military action, a feature that, in Coriolanus’ opinion, deprives them of any kind of authority or even presence in Rome:

Cor. Would the nobility lay aside their ruth,
And let me use my sword, I’d make a quarry
With thousands of these quarter’s slaves, as high
As I could pick my lance (I.i.196-99)

However, the Rome that ordains the development of the dramatic action is the Rome of the plebs, a city that demands a balanced coexistence among all the citizens. Coriolanus rejects such a city. His refusal to follow a custom that obliged him to show his wounds to the people and ask for their votes in order to obtain the Consulate singles him out and proclaims him “the rarest man in the world” (Iv.v.163-64).

Coriolanus’ singularity lies mainly in the fact that instead of using rhetoric to manipulate the plebs and achieve his aim—as Menenius and Volumnia advise him to do—he identifies words with thoughts and feelings. To Coriolanus, language is truth. As Menenius remarks: “His heart is his mouth” (III.i.255). Such equation will deprive him of the Consulate and will expel him from his own city. Coriolanus’ mother advises him to use words “of no allowance to your bosom’s truth” (III.ii.57). Coriolanus’ response ratifies his detachment from such manipulative and persuasive behaviour: “I had rather be servant in my way than sway with them in theirs” (II.i.201-02); “I would not buy their mercy at the price of one fair word, nor check my courage for what they can give”(III.iii.90-91). By using such discourse, he opposes law, custom and tradition, and asserts his independence and individuality.

The best way Coriolanus finds to affirm such uniqueness is to look for “a world elsewhere” (III.iii.135) and fight against the element that has tried to impose its control over him: “I will fight / against my cankered country with the spleen / of all the under fiends” (IV.v.91-93). Outside Rome, Coriolanus’ singularity and courage moves him away from the realm of men and draws him near the domain of the gods. As Cominius remarks, for the Volscians, Coriolanus’ new army, “[h]e is their god. He leads them like a thing / Made by some other deity than nature, / That shapes man better” (IV.vi.91-93).

Coriolanus’ target is to disentangle himself from the control mechanisms at work in Rome. In order to do it, he endows himself with the godlike quality of creation, in particular the genesis of his own nature:

Cor. ...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)

However, Coriolanus’ fate shows the audience how such authorship is not possible. The whole text functions as a controlling apparatus that defeats Coriolanus’ attempts to fashion his own identity. Such selfhood is ultimately portrayed as something that can be manipulated, as an artful process. But, how does this apparatus work in the play?

“He cannot but with measure fit the honours / Which we devise him” (II.ii.122-23), says one of the senators. Coriolanus’ nature is a creation. He has been

moulded by several forces, among which the state and the family stand out. Coriolanus' mother, Volumnia, is the principal agent of such construction. As her son says of her, she is "the honour'd mould wherein this trunk was framed" (V.iii.22). And as Volumnia herself proclaims, "Thou art my warrior: I help to frame you" (V.iii.62-63). But to say that Coriolanus has been his mother's own creation is also to say that he is Rome's offspring since there is a clear identification between mother and city. Rome's constituents are all linked to Volumnia by Menenius' remark that she "is worth of consuls, senators, patricians, / A city full; of tribunes such as you, / A sea and land full" (V.iv.54-56). Volumnia also commands her son's submission by using certain terms that relate Rome to the womb where man is given shape:

Vol. Thou shalt no sooner
March to assault thy country than to tread –
Trust to 't, thou shalt not – on thy mother's womb
That brought thee to this world (V.iii.122-25).

Coriolanus is finally defeated by the force of his own origins and goes back to them: "I melt, and am not / Of stronger earth than others" (V.iii.28-29); "Like a dull actor now I have forgot my part and I am out, / Even to a full disgrace" (V.iii.40-42), he finally admits.

The reference to theatricality is repeated several times in the play and it is essential to understand the real nature of Coriolanus' individuality. Everyone within the organic body of Rome must play a role. Such performance follows certain norms that the city impresses on each citizen. That impression is made explicit in the play by the use of a dramatic element such as the display of Coriolanus' wounds. The scars, wounds and blood are not only physical signs but public ones that, as Menenius remarks, "become him" (II.i.122) and, as Volumnia states, must be "[shown] to the people when he shall stand for his place" (II.i.146-48), since "he bears them for Rome" (IV.ii.28). His own body, represented by his blood, belongs to the city as it belongs to his mother. Coriolanus is then the product of a system that he unsuccessfully defies. We could conclude that the failure of such a challenge lies in the fact that by defying Rome he defies himself, he defies his own blood.

In *Julius Caesar*, we also witness how the characters are unable to mould the structure of the city. At the beginning of the play, Brutus and Cassius present Rome as corrupt under Caesar's command:

Cas. What trash is Rome,
What rubbish, and what offal when it serves
For the base matter to illuminate
So vile a thing as Caesar! (I.iii.108-11)

They both try to transform Rome in search of the public benefit and, consequently, to gain fame, honour and immortality. We hear Brutus state that: "if it be aught toward the general good, / Set honour in one eye, and death i'th'other... / I love the name of honour more than I fear death" (I.ii.84-88). In order to reach such a goal, they have to change the political organisation of the city by killing its head, by the assassination of Caesar. Their main weapon in such a task is the manipulation of reality. However, such an attempt is counteracted by a set of aggressive and prophetic portents, both natural and unnatural, that the playwright uses in order to stage Rome as a majestic city gifted with the power to override the characters' aims.

Cassius's belief that "men at some time are masters of their fates" (I.ii.137) is what impels them to carry out their conspiracy. Cassius challenges destiny and proclaims the force of human will and determination by defying a storm that seems to be symbolising the strength of a superior force that control men's fates:

Cas. For my part, I have walk'd about the streets,
 (...)

 Have bar'd my bosom to the thunder-stone;
 And when the cross blue lightning seem'd to open
 The breast of heaven, I did present myself
 Even in the aim and very flash of it (I.iii.46-52).

The conspirators try to nullify such control by constructing a different reality. In order to carry out their manipulation they must fashion each other first, because as Cassius remarks, "who is so firm that cannot be seduc'd?" (I.ii.309)23). We find Cassius convincing Brutus to kill Caesar, we see Decius persuading Caesar, we witness Brutus gaining the confidence of Caius Ligarius and, above all, we are witness to Antony's manipulation of the mob. They all attempt to create everybody else in their own image, they function as distorting mirrors whose images change depending on everyone's interest:

Brut. Into what dangers would you lead me, Cassius,
 That you would have me seek into myself
 For that which is not in me?

Cas. Therefore, good Brutus, be prepar'd to hear;
 And since you know you cannot see yourself
 So well as by reflection, I, your glass,
 Will modestly discover to yourself
 That of yourself which you yet know not of. (I.ii.62-69)

But how do they manipulate one another? Cassius says to Brutus, "be prepar'd to hear": language is their weapon. The discourse that Coriolanus refuses to use in order to obtain the people's votes and in order to avoid being banished from Rome is the language that is used in *Julius Caesar* by most characters. Rhetoric is essential to transform anybody's opinion and it eventually turns against the conspirators after Antony's most skilful use of it following Caesar's assassination. Despite the fact that the most repeated sentence in Antony's speech is "Brutus is an honourable man", he turns the mob against the conspirators by praising Caesar's virtues at the same time that he depreciates the conspirators', and specially Brutus', reputation. His mastery of language lends an ironic touch to the fact that he gains the people's support by undervaluing his own oratory skills:

Ant. I come not, friends, to steal away your hearts.
 I am no orator, as Brutus is,
 But (as you know me all) a plain blunt man,
 That love my friend;
 (...)

 For I have neither wit, nor words, nor worth,
 Action, nor utterance, nor the power of speech
 To stir men's blood; I only speak right on (III.ii.218-25).

Dissimulation, deception and hypocrisy are implicit in this kind of discourse and are essential to the manipulating scheme of the protagonists. Brutus's

command to his allies is: “let not our looks put on our purposes / But bear it as our Roman actors do, / With untir’d spirits and formal constancy” (II.i.225-27). The theatrical image, which we also encountered in *Coriolanus*, is here an essential device that Shakespeare inserts in his play. As we mentioned above, the conspirators are willing to gain eternal fame by murdering Caesar. They believe immortality will be reached by the remembrance of their act. Such a memory is related to the dramatic performance of the act in future times by Cassius: “How many ages hence / Shall this our lofty scene be acted over, / In states unborn, and accents yet unknown!”(III.i.111-13).

The characters’ role as actors might be considered from two different points of view. On the one hand, Cassius considers them as basic elements in the historical process, not only of the city but also of the whole world. On the other hand, the theatrical image might refer to the fact that they are actors that are being directed, guided, commanded and controlled by a stage manager. That is, instead of manipulating reality, instead of manipulating history, they are the ones that are being manipulated.

Some elements is the play such as Brutus’s doubts, the different interpretations of certain dreams, the various explanations given to natural and unnatural elements in the play, the characters’ different motives for killing Caesar and the characters’ disagreement on issues such as Antony’s death or the attack of Philippi show the audience that reality is not simple and that it is very difficult to control since it is reality which controls us. Cicero’s statement that “men may construe things after their fashion, / Clean from the purpose of the things themselves” (I.iii.34-35) opposes Caesar’s belief in the power of the inevitability of things and the inexorability of time: “what can be avoided / Whose end is purpos’d by the mighty gods?” (II.ii.27-28); “it seems to me most strange that men should fear, / Seeing that death, a necessary end, / will come when it come” (II.ii.35-37).

Caesar’s view is the one that prevails at the end of the play. Brutus’ desire was to kill Caesar’s spirit, not his body. However, he had to kill the latter to extinguish the former:

Brut. Let’s be sacrificers, but not butchers, Caius.
We all stand up against the spirit of Caesar,
And in the spirit of men there is no blood.
O, that we then could come by Caesar’s spirit,
And not dismember Caesar! But, alas,
Caesar must bleed for it. (II.i.166-71)

The appearance of Caesar’s ghost just before the final battle and the fact that both Cassius’s and Brutus’s last words are addressed to Julius Caesar show how though Caesar’s body actually dies, his spirit remains till the end in the conscience of both characters. None of their aims has been achieved, they do not create a new Rome. The city in this play appears as something that dominates since the very beginning. Its majesty is materialised by the multiple references to its magnificent buildings and locations that seem to be governed by a superior force that control the citizens’ destinies.

I would like to finish this paper by quoting a few lines by Cassius:

Cas. When could they say, till now, that talk’d of Rome,
That her wide walks encompass’d but one man?

Now is it Rome indeed, and room enough,
When there is in it but one only man. (I.ii.152-55)

I am using these lines just to point out the closeness of two words such as “Rome” and “room”. When I read it I thought of the theatre as a room and I instantly linked it to the role of Rome in both plays. We have been considering the city as the main element in *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar*. Without the city, the citizens cannot live. Rome creates, controls and guides them. Without the city, action could not have been sustained, since everything is structured around it. But what about the theatre? As we have seen, theatricality has taken a leading role in both plays. Rome and room have both the same connotations if we look at the room as the theatre in which the play is performed. Without a stage plays cannot be performed. Actors, props, audience, all of them need the existence of the theatre to exist as, in both plays, the citizens need the city to live.

References

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