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Mother Knows Best: The Overbearing in *Coriolanus* and *Psycho*

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Psychoanalytic critics have focused on the mother-son relationship throughout its criticism, stemming from Freud's reinterpretation of the Oedipal myth. These relationships have dominated popular culture, showing up in modern contexts as recently as this year. With the current fascination with these relationships at the forefront, this paper chooses to examine two texts formative in establishing these relationships – Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and Hitchcock's *Psycho*. In Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, tragic figure Caius Martius Coriolanus lashes out more aggressively because of his mother's training, much like Norman Bates, the quintessential mother's boy of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*. Critical history has shied away from examining the fictional "childhoods" of these characters, as they do not exist. However, the glimpses of psychoanalytic provided through these texts mean that the lens of psychoanalytic methods aids in understanding how these two figures react to their domineering mothers. Further, this paper seeks to examine how the lack of introspection provided to the domineering women of the narratives has affected reading of them. Both Volumnia of *Coriolanus* and Norma Bates of *Psycho* cultivate their sons' lack of contact with social realities in order to repress their sons' psyches, leading them to confusion surrounding sexuality.

In *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare uses the gossiping First Citizen and Second Citizen to introduce the audience to the characters of the play. The citizens emphasize Martius' pride, a flaw which leads to his tragic fall by the conclusion of the play, as his cause for the cruel actions they ascribe to him: "he pays himself with being proud" (1.1.32-33). Pride and a sense of contempt towards his social inferiors motivate Martius towards the actions he takes, but these attitudes are learned, not innate. His mother, Volumnia, ex-

ercises enough influence over Martius to drive him toward self-destructive pride. The First Citizen establishes that Martius' pride originates from his sense of obligation towards Volumnia: "Though soft-conscienced men can be content to say it was for his country, [Martius] did it to please his mother and to be partly proud, which he is, even to the altitude of his virtue" (1.1.36-40). Shakespeare establishes that Martius' pride possesses an indelible link to Volumnia; rather than feeling pride for himself, or seeking out pride for himself, he does so for his mother, framing their relationship as one of fear and domination rather than love. Volumnia's acquirement of pleasure out of domination of her son fuels his own domination of others. Therefore, Martius continues to destroy in a way of increasing his self-esteem. Volumnia bullies her son into his actions, which leads to his bullying behavior toward the people and self-destruction.

Martius exists as undeveloped, despite Volumnia's constant references to his perceived manhood. While he has proved his prowess on the battle field as typically required for a man, he remains half developed, despite the self assured image he projects to the world. Martius remains self-assured when he holds his mother's will, but when that pride disappears Martius can no longer handle himself. Ralph Berry notes in his essay "Sexual Imagery in Coriolanus," that Volumnia views Martius as only half developed in his self-conception:

For her son, the maternal order constitutes a breach with what he had conceived to be his nature. Had he been the man of certainty and solidity he appears to the world, we would well have accepted Volumnia's perfectly reasonable advice...

The wounds of adolescence have never, for [Martius], healed. (306)

Essentially, Martius has never learned to define himself outside of his Mother's orders. When demanded to complete an action opposite to his earlier learning, he cannot trust himself or his body to yield to those demands. Volumnia inhibits Martius' enjoyment of his own actions, forcing him to wait for her expression of pride before he expresses pride in himself. Martius channels his loss of

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pride and self-assurance onto the people, expecting them to respect him even more because of the assurance he receives from his other.

Volumnia places unachievable or contradictory demands upon her son, insulting Martius' status in society when he finds fault with how the plebeians regard him. While Martius rages against his public image, Volumnia rather insults his self to bring him back into line:

CORIOLANUS. I talk of you.

Why did you wish me milder? Would you have me
False to my nature? Rather say I play

The man I am. ...

VOLUMNIA. You might have been enough the
man you are

With striving less to be so. (3.2.15-18, 23-24)

Power usurps all other virtues for Volumnia, and Martius must gain the power of the people, even when gaining this power goes against her own virtue. She expects Martius to utilize domination outside of the sphere of war, but Martius cannot equate domination with tenderness, because of his underdeveloped conception of self. Without the reassurance of his mother, Martius becomes lost.

Volumnia vicariously lives through her son's deeds because she has fully inhabited his life. Therefore, Martius becomes unable to experience pride without first filtering that pride through his mother. As suggested by Berry, Volumnia taught Martius from an early age to have an "impossible pride...contempt for social inferiors...[and] lack of contact with the realities of social interaction" (307). Eventually, the consequences of these social teachings manifest by causing him to regard all pride through the mirror of his mother. Martius seems unable to produce pride in his own actions as he compares everything to his Mother's probable reaction:

My mother,

Who has a charter to extol her blood,

When she does praise me grieves me. (1.9.16-18)

While Martius commits great deeds, he finds himself unable to fully take ownership of his actions. Despite his military prowess, which the audience has been made to admire greatly, he stops Cominius from continuing to praise him as he does not feel worthy of

the praise of his mother does not agree. Martius' development has been severely stunted as he looks towards his mother for all validation of his self worth and place in society.

Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* explores the damage created by a man's lack of validation and self worth found through childhood rearing. Norman Bates seeks out his mother's approval on all aspects of his life, including when he invites Marion to dinner at the house, thus triggering the mother aspect of his personality:

MOTHER. I won't have you bringing strange young girls home for supper. By candlelight, I suppose, in the cheap erotic fashion of young men with cheap, erotic minds! And then what, after supper? Music? Whispers? ... "Mother, she's just a stranger!" As if men don't desire strangers. As if – oh! I refuse to speak of disgusting things, because they disgust me...Go tell her she won't be appeasing her ugly appetite with my food or my son! Or do I have to tell her because you don't have the guts? (Hitchcock, *Psycho*)

Norman's invitation verges upon the romantic gesture of a date, of which the mother side of Norman's brain does not approve. The slightest mention of an action verging on romantic aggravates "Norma" to release a violent reaction towards the cause. While Norman intentionally seeks out his mother's approval of his actions, "Norma" immediately rejects them. Norma's assumption that her own son must be one of the young men "with cheap, erotic minds." Her judgement traps Norman into himself in a way in which Norma feels saves him from himself. She assumes the worst about her son, and therefore feels obligated to save him from making the wrong decisions.

Therefore, while Norman seeks to break away from his mother, locked away in his own psyche, but he remains unable. Norman notably refers to his situation as a trap, but one that he can never escape:

No one really runs away from anything. It's like a private trap that holds us in like a prison. You know what I think? I think that we're all in our private traps, clamped in them, and none of us can ever get out. We scratch and we claw, but only at the air, only at each other, and for all of it, we never

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budge an inch. (Hitchcock, *Psycho*).

Norman's childhood as influenced by Norma Bates has caused him to lock away himself in his own trap, including locking away his own mother. Norman's mother was his trap, and now his trap has become part of himself. Therefore, Norman never has to leave his mother alone, but also carries her insecurity and jealousy with him as part of himself. Martius, as well, scratches and claws at the air surrounding him as evidenced by his desperation for war and aggression. However, he cannot escape as he cannot conceptualize a world without his mother. By the play's end, Martius receives the opportunity to ultimately free himself by destroying Rome, but he does not take the chance. Instead, his mother convinces him to come back which ultimately leads to his own destruction.

In Berry's essay about *Coriolanus*, he states that Martius "resorts to war as a means of compensating for sexual intercourse" as from Volumnia's training, Martius associates sex and aggression; in the same way, Norman equates sex and violence. *Psycho* shifts the original, underlying tones of the interrelation of sex and violence present throughout *Coriolanus* to the forefront of the story. Instead, both Martius and Norman experience intimacy as undesired, and something of which their mothers would not approve. Martius and Norman never fully develop as men; both languish in the half state of adolescent because of their lack of surety surrounding their own sexual advancements, establishing that the concept of the overbearing mother still has a place in society.

Volumnia views herself as more than Martius' mother, going so far as to treat Martius like her new husband rather than as her son, a treatment used now in modern film to hint at a dependency of mother on son rather than son on mother. When in conversation with Martius' wife, Virgilia, Volumnia informs her reaction to Martius' exploits in war:

If my son were my
husband, I should freelier rejoice in that absence
wherein he won honor than in the embracements
of his bed where he would show most love. (1.3.2-5)

Volumnia gains pleasure from her son's victories, and demands

Virgilia to experience the same emotional response; however, she also expects Virgilia to not act as competition to herself for Martius' affections. Essentially, Volumnia experiences almost a jealousy at Virgilia's place in Martius' life which leads her to keep Martius from becoming too influenced or close with his own wife. In *Psycho*, the mother's insistence on the inferiority of other women, much like Volumnia, leads Norman to lash out in violence at other women.

From the prototype of the Volumnia-Coriolanus relationship, it becomes clear that Volumnia's overbearing personality on her son pushed him towards simultaneously having both pride and low self-esteem. Volumnia's bullying personality stripped Coriolanus of his own selfhood outside of the context of his relationship with his mother. These traits carry over to Norman Bates in *Psycho*, though they appear to be more fully formed in him. Norman lacks the safeguard of his mother, as Norma has been canonically dead for quite a while at the time of the film. While Volumnia still lives to effectively still control Coriolanus, Norman must rely on the side of his brain that has become "Mother" – one that he feeds through his fascination with the skeleton of Norma.

As Norma no longer lives to equalize Norman, he must learn to rely on his own thoughts without the calming effect of "Mother." Norman equates expressions of feminine sexuality, as well as his interest in feminine sexuality with violence that he believes his mother would have wanted him to commit. Norman Bates' ideation of his mother's thoughts on feminine sexuality result in his eventual murder of Marion Crane. In her initial introduction, Marion does not present a threat to the Mother side of Norman's brain, much like Virgilia does not present a threat towards Volumnia. However, as Norman's attitudes toward Marion change, she begins to trigger the conditioning brought about by Norman's upbringing:

[Norman was] pathologically jealous of [Norma] [and] he assumed that she was pathologically jealous of him. Therefore, if he felt a strong attraction to any other woman, the 'mother' side of him would go wild. (Hitchcock, *Psycho*)

In a much more psychotic fashion than Martius, Norman repressed his own self so much that he eventually allows the Mother to take

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over. Much as Martius thinks that Volumnia experiences jealousy at his actions, Norman feels that his mother, even after death, would be jealous of his intimacy.

The relationships between mother and son have grown to encompass a great deal of film and literature, and therefore has inspired creators to return to previous source material and create adaptations to the modern day. The hit television show *Bates Motel*, starring Vera Farmiga and Freddie Highmore as Norma Bates and Norman Bates, retains aspects of the relationship between Norma and Norman but modernize the characters by portraying them as a prequel to the film by Hitchcock as well as placing the setting in the modern era. While *Psycho* shows the consequences of psychotic jealousy on mothers and sons with unhealthy attachments, the film does not show how these relationships initially began.

Within *Psycho*, for example, the audience lacks a clear portrait of Norma because her description comes from Norman's projection of her onto himself. Norman's perceived jealousy from his mother only manifests because of the version of her that he has internalized. Bernard Dick explains in "Hitchcock's Terrible Mothers" that we lack a description of Norma from a reliable narrator:

Everything we know about her is presented from Norman's point of view, but Norman is an unreliable narrator. When he acts as his mother, he is projecting himself onto her, so that we're watching Norman's version of what his mother would have been if she had been he. (240)

Therefore, the audience perceives Norma in only her projected medium. Norma becomes the shadowy cause of Norman's instability to the film audience – she had the most hand in raising Norman, and her title haunts Norman's troubled mind. By viewing her through Norman's eyes, we solely see her repressive and cruel qualities.

Bates Motel as a modern narrative changes this flaw, and recognizes Norma's self while still highlighting her terrible upbringing of Norman. In the pilot episode, "First You Dream, Then You Die," after Norma's husband dies, Norma and Norman move into the motel and house in Oregon. However, when first moving into the house, Norma treats Norman more as a newlywed husband,

and less like a son. When she first pulls into the driveway, she poses on the hood of her car in front of the motel. While the audience understands her excitement, her way of expressing her emotions leads the audience towards their unhealthy relationship. The continuation of the *Psycho* narrative and addition of Norma's formative actions show the continuation of the character of Volumnia into modern day. However, Norma from *Bates Motel* lacks the assurance that Volumnia has in *Coriolanus*.

Volumnia within *Coriolanus* does not lack for confidence. Her own explosive personality causes the other citizens of Rome to treat her with a respect quite unlike that of the norm. She demands confident action from Martius, for she gains recognition through his display. She strips him of his gallantry, or courage, as something he himself cultivated and attributes it to herself. Her methods of raising Martius are deliberate, meant to create the insecurity and attachment present in Martius throughout the play. Conversely, in the modern interpretation of the *Psycho* narrative, *Bates Motel*, portrays Norma as sympathetic because of her unsure and unsteady parenting. Norma seems unsteady in her parenting of Norman and more apt to seek for his approval even in situations where she should not as if afraid of losing him. Therefore, *Bates Motel* begins to diverge the narrative of *Psycho* from that of *Coriolanus* by suggesting different reasons for the mother's repression of their sons – Volumnia out of pride, and Norma out of fear.

Martius and Norman can be classified as “mama's boys” as they futilely attempt to escape the psyche that their mother has formed for them. Further, the relationship between mother and son has not gone away as it continues to fascinate contemporary audiences. The relationships discussed in this paper show the more tragic end of these relationships, but mirror ones that have even become comic in contemporary culture, like Mallory Archer in *Archer* and Lucille Bluth in *Arrested Development*. While Norman's relationship takes a more sinister turn than Martius', both suffer from the repression of selves to become the man that their mother wanted. However, their repression only succeeds in turning them into a parody of the son their mothers wanted. Mother, as it seems, does not always know best.

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