

Obtaining Effective Political Agency through Informal Access: Using Volumnia from Shakespeare's Coriolanus as a Model

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Abstract: Past studies have examined Shakespeare's historical plays through the lenses of political theory in multiple ways, focusing primarily on formal access to policymaking — official, structured channels of influence. This paper hereby uses Volumnia from Shakespeare's Coriolanus as a model to examine the attainment of effective political agency through the perspective of a politician with only informal access to policymaking. Volumnia's success in preserving the city of Rome contrasts with the failed attempts by other male characters' sole reliance on formal political channels. Through her interactions with her son Coriolanus, a politician with formal access to policymaking, she exemplifies how effective political agency can be achieved by her use of rhetoric, body language, and indirect influence to manipulate politicians with authority to achieve her private political pursuits. Volumnia's certified success under a patriarchal narrative exemplifies possibilities for politically marginalized minorities in modern society, especially the female body.

Keywords: Shakespeare; Volumnia; Political agency; Political theory; Female empowerment

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1. Introduction

As people consider the power of formal institutions' logistics, such as when politicians and court justices exercise their political agency through their formal access to policymaking to shape the world according to their will, many modern people assume it is the only effective way to shape a regime's policy, yet the mightiness of informal access is often overlooked. The concept of formal access in political philosophy refers to the structured, official mechanisms and processes through which individuals or groups can influence or participate in formulating, implementing, and evaluating public policies. On the other hand, informal access refers to how individuals can influence or participate in the exercise of public policies outside official, structured, or institutionalized channels. Examples of exercising informal access include attempts to persuade (including acts of reasoning, threatening,

or bribing) a politician with formal access through methods of personal influence, social connections, or public persuasion, underlining this process's lack of transparency and regulation of formal processes. Formal access is conventionally considered more powerful since important policy decisions are often made before the public comment phase ^[1]. Yet it is not always the case, as informal access can play a significant role in political processes ^[2]. This paper argues that effective political agency can be acquired through informal access. A politician can introduce their notion into political institutes by influencing or persuading politicians with formal access, as demonstrated by Volumnia in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. By inflicting psychological influence on Coriolanus and auxiliary targets, Volumnia showcases the power of informal political engagement in manifesting her ultimate political pursuit of preserving the city of Rome. Contrasting with other female characters' ineffective attempts to gain political agency and with male characters who possess formal political power and primarily employ it through formal connections to achieve their goals, Volumnia proves that effective political agency can be attained through informal means by a politician other than through policy-making authorities.

2. Literature review

2.1. Overview of political agency and its attainment

This paper will primarily focus on the effectiveness of manifesting one's political pursuits. Many contemporary scholars, including Giddens and MacIntyre, stress the degree of the agent's liberty when defining political agency ^[3-4]. Furthermore, this paper emphasizes the politicians' attempt to gain political agency, the "capacity to make things happen." when they do not own formal access to policymaking, but rather use informal access. The matter of political agency addressed in this paper is redefined as stated, stressing its effectiveness rather than its degree of freedom as contemporary political theorists define it.

Discussing Volumnia's unique attempt to exercise her informal access, this paper will later divide her tools into rhetorical skills and body language. Her rhetoric is compelling due to her capability to appeal to reason and emotion in her arguments. The essay defines the appeal to reason as similar to the appeal to logos — strong logic ^[6]. Her strategy includes laying psychological influence on her son Coriolanus, a politician with formal access using the mentioned two tools, and saturating her political pursuits to auxiliary targets like Virgilia around her main target Coriolanus to ensure her control over him.

2.2. Political agency under modern political structure

Politicians with formal access to policy-making are simultaneously granted effective political agency through their formal access. In Chapter 3, *Empowered Democratic Agency in the Anthropocene of Democratic Norms of Earth System Governance*, Walter F. Baber and Robert V. Bartlett wrote, "It is important to note agents of governance are not merely political actors. They are rather, authoritative actors" ^[7]. Referring to Dallas, Pattberg, and Betsill's book *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics*, the two professors clarified that "They have both the legitimacy and capacity to act" ^[8]. In relation, once one possesses both the legitimacy and capacity to act, they are considered politically authoritative actors — and, therefore, can exercise effective political agency. As political actors with formal access have both the legitimacy and the capacity to act, their political agency is guaranteed. However, this paper aims to attest that without the legitimacy to act, one can still gain political agency through finessing psychological influence (as her way of informal access) over politicians possessing formal access.

2.3. Shakespeare's Coriolanus

Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* is unique as a historical play through its portrayal of a female character — Volumnia — and her exquisite way of employing informal access to gain political agency. The play centers around Coriolanus, a Roman general, and his interactions with his mother, Volumnia, and other political figures such as Menenius and family figures such as his wife Virgilia. In addition to its exploration of themes including political expertise, regimes, and the interplay between honor and ambition — common to other Shakespearean historical tragedies — *Coriolanus* presents a politically ambitious and astute female figure — Volumnia ^[9]. She wields informal access through rhetorical skills in political discourse to manifest her wish for Coriolanus's success and to preserve the city of Rome ^[10]. Yet beyond her eloquent speech, her use of body language and her strategy of interacting with auxiliary targets will also be examined in the next section. Her female identity and lack of access to formal policymaking underscore her political achievements (gaining political agency and eventually preserving the city of Rome to her wish) as undoubtedly remarkable, and a suitable model in discussing how one could exercise informal access to gain effective political agency.

3. How Volumnia gains political agency

3.1. Historical context on her female identity

Volumnia exemplifies an atypical case where the classic Shakespearean female characteristics are challenged by her political ambitions and her intellectual tools, including rhetorical skills and body language, exercised to manifest those ambitions. In the context of the Elizabethan Era, the majority of written plays often portrayed women in a misogynistic light, reflecting the patriarchal society of the time ^[11]. The absence of women from the stage during this period contributed to the creation of such patriarchal female characters ^[12]. Specifically, Shakespearean female characters, while influential, were often portrayed in poor light and depicted submissively as objects of pleasure ^[11]. In addition to their often biddable traits, many of these depicted female characters lacked political ambition. This underlying tendency correlated with most of the persuasion strategies of these female characters — they tended to appeal to their own emotion in attempting to persuade others while significantly failing to appeal to reason. For instance, in Act 2, Scene 2 of the play *Julius Caesar*, to persuade Caesar, her husband, not to attend the Senate, Calpurnia first describes the troubling dream she attempted to discard. After hearing Caesar's confident dismissal (“Cowards die many times before their deaths; The valiant never taste of death but once.”) she pleads with her fright, saying: “Alas, my lord, Your wisdom is consumed in confidence. Do not go forth today: call it my fear That keeps you in the house, and not your own.”

Her plea, driven by concerns, eventually failed and Caesar was murdered as her dream predicted at the Senate that day. Most female characters portrayed by Shakespeare failed to appeal to reason when arguing, for the majority of them lacked political knowledge and, thereby, persuasive authority. Accompanied by their often-portrayed trait of lacking political ambition, most female characters fail to appeal to reason during arguments. Even when pleading with emotion, most of them stress their private sentiments as Calpurnia did rather than appealing to the opposite party's emotions. These female characters often fail to achieve their private purposes. Contrasting these female characters, Shakespeare presents Volumnia as a politically active woman, challenging traditional gender roles in Elizabethan drama ^[10]. Not only did Volumnia have the intellect to appeal to reason in her rhetoric, but the power of Volumnia's appeal to emotion is mightier than that of other female characters due to her devised mixture of appeal to her own and the other party's emotions, actualizing her political ambitions. Combining the emotional appeals from both herself and the other party with logistics supported by her intellect, her touch to the

art of persuasion is proven vigorous.

3.2. Her approach to psychological influence

Informal access leads to effective political agency when it is used by one to influence another with formal access to policymaking. Volumnia gains effective political agency through her ability to exert powerful psychological influence on others by directly employing rhetorical devices and body language on her target of influence while indirectly insinuating her beliefs to auxiliary targets. As mentioned in the last paragraph, Volumnia's identity is exceptional in the Shakespearean context. Her character embodies the complex relationship between motherhood and political power^[13]. Volumnia's direct target of influence is her son, Coriolanus, since her identity as his mother provides her with a deep understanding of Coriolanus's emotions and principles and substantial influence in modeling his character. As his mother, she has been guiding Coriolanus to seek danger, honor, and prominence in service to the city of Rome. Raising her son as a warrior, she is the driving force behind his military ambitions. Volumnia's political pursuits include winning family honor, promoting Roman values, and maintaining control and influence over her son so that she can extend her control to the political landscape of Rome, but, above all, the preservation of the state. She manifests these pursuits despite her lack of formal access to policymaking by using informal access to exert psychological influence on Coriolanus and other auxiliary targets through her powers mentioned later in this section.

3.3. Influence on Coriolanus

3.3.1. Strong rhetorical skills

Volumnia utilizes ingenious argument skills as she appeals to both reason and emotion supported by her platitudinous political knowledge. In interacting with her main target of influence — Coriolanus, she showcases her strong rhetorical skills in instilling and evoking the belief in honor toward the city of Rome. For instance, in Act 5, Scene 3, when both Cominius and Menenius had failed to convince Coriolanus not to destroy the city of Rome, Volumnia succeeded. Parts of her speech that demonstrate her exertion of psychological influence through appealing to and justifying her own emotions in her rhetoric are as follows: “Thy valiantness was mine, thou suck’st it from me; But owe thy pride thyself”^[14].

She speaks directly to Coriolanus, attributing his valor to her nurturing, creating a moment of powerful psychological manipulation. She strategically uses the verb “suck”, turning the private emotional and ethical appeal of the maternal position into a logical transition of valor (from mother to son through the lactational process) by painting the picture of a child being nursed by his mother. Evoking Coriolanus's gratitude for her rearing while stressing her contributions to his prosperity, she then establishes her influence and superior position over him, underscoring her control over him and her credit to his success. She further distances herself from his pride, seemingly as an act of compromise, yet insinuates that his pride is what drove him to the destructive actions of the city of Rome. In two sentences, she establishes her virtue of valor, criticizes him for allowing his pride to devour the virtuous qualities she instilled in him, and obviously presents her implicit appeals to her own emotion of investment and expectation in Coriolanus.

She then proceeded to appeal to reason with: “Thou art my warrior; I help to frame thee. Do you know this lady? The noble sister of Publicola, The moon of Rome, chaste as the icicleni That's curdied by the frost from purest snow And hangs on Dian's temple: dear Valeria!”

Extending her argument on the influence she had on him as a matriarch raising a warrior (who she possesses

as she uses “my warrior”), Volumnia introduces a woman — “the noble sister of Publicola.” As Volumnia highlights the said woman’s noble lineage, Volumnia shifts her speech’s focus to invoking the sense of familial and societal duty on a broader scale compared to the private “suck of valor.” Enriching her speech with imagery like “the moon of Rome”, she introduces another female model capable of guiding while stressing her integrity as “purest snow.” These symbols are phrased in such a sincere way, implying the moral and cultural Roman obligations that Volumnia wants to remind Coriolanus of. Notably, Volumnia paints this patriotic model with her full notion without clarifying whom she is referring to, so undoubtedly Coriolanus was actively taking her descriptions of this model as he cannot refute a model that is ambiguous and righteous. Therefore, when she eventually reveals Valeria, all the void descriptions of Roman integrity that Volumnia was painting become vivid and the confrontation is unavoidable. The friend of Coriolanus’s family, the noble Roman woman, had come all the way down to him for the sake of the city of Rome. In this section, Volumnia expands Coriolanus’s domain of responsibilities, shifting from a son’s duty to that of a Roman nobleman, and shifts her argument’s base from kinship to nationality. Coriolanus is thus guided to recover from her earlier condescending claim and is led to confront his Roman identity and obligation, showcasing Volumnia’s success in using rhetoric to appeal to reason.

3.3.2. Use of body language

She then extends her psychological influence by toning down her aggressiveness through her body language. Note that no clear stage directions indicate Volumnia’s body language throughout the play, so her portrayal would highly depend on the actress/actor. Yet there is one line of hers that suggests a movement. At the end of the speech in which Volumnia persuades and implicitly criticizes Coriolanus as her way of informal access to preserve the city of Rome, she showcases the depths of her desperation and sincerity of her plea by kneeling before Coriolanus, making the silent appeal to his emotion: “Down, ladies; let us shame him with our knees. To his surname Coriolanus longs more pride Than pity to our prayers. Down! An end; This is the last. So, we will home to Rome, And die among our neighbors. Nay, behold’s! This boy, that cannot tell what he would have But kneels and holds up hands for fellowship, Does reason our petition with more strength Than thou hast to deny’t.”

[They kneel.]

The motion of kneeling that Volumnia directs herself, Virgilia, and Valeria to perform demonstrates great supplication and humility, forming a sharp contrast with the reproaching speech. By physically lowering herself, the paternal roles between Volumnia and Coriolanus are switched. As her body position alternates between standing, sitting, and eventually kneeling, she gradually diminishes her dominant maternal authority and ends her speech with a sole emotional plea to Coriolanus himself, leaving their fate of death at the hands of Coriolanus. Witnessing his respected mother, beloved wife, and long-acquainted family friend — all women — kneeling in front of him, his emotions as a traditional male character are shaken, as it signifies his failure to protect the women in his life. Volumnia’s speech’s tone shifts from condescending, reasoning to eventually emotionally pleading, each supported by her rhetoric, the company she chose, and her body language. Though seemingly the choice is left to him, these consecutive actions lead him to break and follow his mother’s will.

3.4. Interaction with auxiliary targets

Aside from directly contacting Coriolanus, Volumnia also interacts with auxiliary targets as her informal access strategy to help her navigate her political pursuit of bringing honor to her family and preserving the city of Rome. By influencing figures around Coriolanus, Volumnia makes her control over her main target truly pervasive. For

example, in Act 1, Scene 3, she speaks to Virgilia, Coriolanus's wife, as she expresses concerns about him being at 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."

Volumnia's purpose in this speech is to calm Virgilia by encouraging her to take pride in Coriolanus's achievements while instilling her personal ideals into Virgilia. She uses the hyperbolic comparison between her son's actions as a husband and as a warrior to emphasize her commitment to the Roman ideals of honor and duty. Exercising her matron authority over Virgilia, Volumnia plants the recognition of martial valor over domestic affections in Virgilia. As she replays her ability to place psychological influence on people around Coriolanus through her rhetorical wit, she ensures her informal access's effectiveness to him.

3.5. Outcomes achieved

As a result of the ideals Volumnia has long planted in him and her eloquent speech, at the end of Act 5, Scene 3, Coriolanus breaks down saying: "O mother, mother! What have you done? Behold, the heavens do ope, The gods look down, and this unnatural scene They laugh at. O my mother, mother! O! You have won a happy victory to Rome; But, for your son, — believe it, O, believe it, Most dangerously you have with him prevail'd, If not most mortal to him. But let it come."

The sparing of Rome and the prevention of greater conflict directly result from Volumnia's speech and planted influence on her son. Her informal access to psychological influence manifested her ultimate goal — preserving the city of Rome, and, therefore, proved her political agency effective.

4. Why Volumnia succeeds while others fail

To evaluate the effectiveness of Volumnia's political agency through informal access, researchers can examine the failed attempts of two characters with formal access to stop Coriolanus from destroying the city of Rome. In Act 5, Scene 1, Cominius reports back to Menenius, noting Coriolanus's nonchalance to the plea as "he would not seem to know me." Even when Cominius had attempted to appeal to Coriolanus using every bond of fellowship and honor that they once shared.

Then when, in Act 5, Scene 2, the fatherly character Menenius similarly appealed to their relationship through: "O, my son, my son! Thou art preparing fire for us; look thee, here's water to quench it. I was the man who loved thee more than all men loved, and here lie I for thy vow's sake."

Coriolanus repeatedly responded with an outright dismissal "Away!", demonstrating his resolve to align with the Volscians. Both Cominius and Menenius's failure is rooted in Coriolanus's complete emotional detachment and his rigid commitment to his new identity as an enemy of Rome. Since they were priorly emotionally connected through formal political access, their feeble bonds were severed as Coriolanus cut down the bonds of Romans while his stronger kinship with Volumnia persisted. Their failure again affirms the effective political agency Volumnia had gained through informal access — her psychological influence over Coriolanus.

5. Implications for understanding political agency

5.1. Revaluating political power

Volumnia's example challenges the notion that formal access to policymaking is necessary for effective political agency. Informal access is expedient in attaining political agency through great individual virtue that allows one to

exert substantial psychological influence on politicians with formal access to policymaking. Volumnia's method of exercising informal access differs from that of many other Shakespearean female characters, who are often limited in their appeal to their private sentiments. Volumnia, however, is capable of appealing to the reason and emotion of both sides of the party under her role as a matriarch while interacting with basilic personnel around Coriolanus such as shaping Coriolanus's wife's values to plant her influences on her son.

5.2. Relating female identity to contemporary civilians

Relating to Volumnia's female identity in the Roman Republic or as depicted as a character in an Elizabethan-era play, the restraints she faced as a woman in participating and even influencing government affairs are as significant as the ones people face as civilians nowadays. Though people might not have the rooted psychological manipulation of politicians with formal access as Volumnia has with Coriolanus, the tools she used to employ direct psychological influence are open to people and are not deprived of the right to influence the other civilians around. While her kinship is central to Volumnia's power of influence on Coriolanus, her matriarchal approaches to influence her son can be seen as guidelines for any minority that is marginalized in the modern setting. These guidelines especially apply to women seeking to break patriarchal constraints and gain equality. By exercising rhetorical skills, body language, or indirect interaction, people can exert psychological influence as their informal access takes them closer to their political manifestations.

6. Conclusion

Volumnia's effective political agency in Coriolanus exemplifies how substantial influence can be wielded in the political game through informal access. She gained political agency by using psychological influence to manipulate politicians with formal access to policymaking, specifically, her son Coriolanus. Her methods of manipulation include rhetorical skills and body language that help her appeal to both the reason and emotion of the two parties, as well as indirect interactions with auxiliary targets around her main target to surround him with her principles and imprint her political beliefs on him. By analyzing her victory in helping preserve the city of Rome compared to the failed attempts of Cominius and Menenius, it can be seen that the political agency provided by informal access is functional in attaining political agency.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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