Manhood Fresh Bleeding: Shakespeare's Men and the Construction of Masculine Identity

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Abstract:
This essay examines the various expectations placed on male bodies in the early modern period, the repeated challenge of "proving" one's masculinity, and the various critical reactions to violent action in Shakespeare's plays. Early modern ideas regarding "manhood" and the gendering of bodies have been misinterpreted by many recent critics, and the myths of gender renversement and masculine anxiety have been greatly overstated. In contrast, the complex relationship between the body and the construction of manhood has been downplayed, while the important sociocultural expectation of masculine bodily sacrifice has not been fully appreciated. The connection between honor and violence extends well beyond the aristocracy and provides an important foundation for early modern English society, but most critics diminish the significance of masculine service and death.

1 At the end of *Coriolanus*, when Tullus Aufidius and Caius Martius Coriolanus return to Corioles after abandoning their invasion at the gates of Rome, Aufidius accuses Martius of treason and tells the men of Corioles, "He has betrayed your business, and given up, / For certain drops of salt, your city, Rome— / [. . .] He whined and roared away your victory, / That pages blushed at him, and men of heart / Looked wond'ringly each at others" (5.6.93-102).[1] Incredulous, Martius cries, "Hear'st thou, Mars?" to which Aufidius responds, "Name not the god, thou boy of tears" (5.6.102-3). This is stunning. Martius Coriolanus acquired his *agnomen* by almost superhuman martial feats in the very city where he is being accused of unmanliness. Singlehandedly, he has fought within the city gates and, as he reminds Aufidius, defeated many Volscians, including the general himself. How, then, can Aufidius so brazenly impugn his manhood? What is perhaps more stunning, however, is the critical reaction to this moment. Almost universally, critics read Martius' reaction to the appellation "boy" as a signal of his castration or emasculation. For example, Bruce Smith claims that the contrast between open and closed bodies prompts "Coriolanus to imagine his stabbing death at the hands of the Volsces as an act of emasculation" (16). Janet Adelman argues that the language here "represents a kind of castration" (121n), and Coppélia Kahn appears to agree with Aufidius' assessment of Martius as something less than manly: "this god is but a boy, finally, a 'boy of tears'" (*Estate* 158). But Martius' actual words are "Cut me to pieces, Volsces. Men and lads, / Stain all your edges on me" (5.6.112-13). Martius is not imagining emasculation; he is inviting annihilation. Nor does he fear a violent encounter. He says that

[1] All quotations of Shakespeare's plays are from The Norton Shakespeare, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, et al.

he wishes he “had with him six Aufidiuses, / Or more, his tribe, to use [his] lawful sword” (5.6.128-9).

2 The interpellation of this warrior as a “boy” demonstrates the (perhaps unjust) nature of a socioculturally inscribed gender identity. Martius has “proved himself a man” (1.3.15) in combat countless times, but that manhood is not incontrovertible. Despite demonstrating his manliness again and again, despite submitting himself to over twenty-five wounds, despite vanquishing all his enemies, Martius’ masculinity is not assured. This episode demonstrates the interminability of corporeal interpretation. Bodies are texts. They can be read and re-read. And since manhood is inscribed on the body, manhood can be read and re-read. Thus, Martius must constantly demonstrate his manliness in order to remain *a man*. This essay considers the effect of continual masculine action on characters such as Martius Coriolanus. It examines the various expectations placed on male bodies in the early modern period, the repeated challenge of “proving” one’s masculinity, and the various critical reactions to violent action in Shakespeare’s plays. Early modern ideas regarding “manhood” and the gendering of bodies have been misinterpreted by many recent critics, and the myths of gender *renversement* and masculine anxiety have been greatly overstated. In contrast, the complex relationship between the body and the construction of manhood has been downplayed, and the important sociocultural expectation of masculine bodily sacrifice has not been fully appreciated. The connection between honor and violence extends well beyond the aristocracy and provides an important foundation for early modern English society, but most critics diminish the significance of masculine service and death.

3 In *Coriolanus*, Caius Martius is considered Rome’s greatest warrior, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that he is “wont to come home wounded” (2.1.106). Another wound on Martius’ body is an occasion for joy, as is demonstrated when Menenius asks Volumnia if her son has been wounded. She responds proudly, “O, he is wounded, I thank the gods for’t!” To which Menenius replies, “So do I, too, if it be not too much. [. . .] The wounds become him” (2.1.108-10). The two then enter into a mutual blazón of Martius’ myriad wounds, recounting every injury and adding the most recent wounds to the tally. Menenius concludes the cut-accounting with an almost unbelievable sum: “Now it’s twenty-seven. Every gash was an enemy’s grave” (2.1.141-2). One would think that a warrior who has been wounded almost thirty times would be considered incompetent. In contrast, we might look at Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine the Great, Part Two*, where we learn that Tamburlaine is either charmed or an exceptional fighter; he has “conquered kings / And with his host marched round about the earth,” yet he is “Quite void of scars and clear from any

wound" and has "by the wars lost not a dram of blood" (3.2.110-13).[2] But the wounds of Martius do not mark him as a poor fighter; rather, they distinguish him as a valiant warrior. His wounds sign him as male and provide demonstrable proof of his manhood: as a record of his willingness to face grave physical peril in battle, they literally inscribe his masculinity on his body and present an indelible record of his martial acts.

4 Page DuBois envisions wounds as emblematic of both a masculine martial superiority and of loss and castration. In the case of *Coriolanus*, she sides with the critics mentioned above, suggesting that his wounds make Martius "like a woman in his vulnerability" (197). Yet Martius' scars exemplify the difference between female vulnerability and male vulnerability, the former passive, the latter active. As Kahn observes, feminine vulnerability marks the female body as a passive object of violent penetration, but masculine vulnerability figures the male body as an active agent of self-fashioning; in this paradigm, male wounds represent

> the most problematic, self-cancelling figuration of masculinity in the Roman works. The Latin word for wound is *vulnus*, the root of "vulnerability." In an obvious sense, wounds mark a kind of vulnerability easily associated with women: they show the flesh to be penetrable, they show that it can bleed, they make apertures in the body. But through the discursive operations of *virtus*, wounds become central to the signification of masculine virtue, and thus to the construction of the Roman hero. (*Roman* 17)

If Martius' body is vulnerable to wounding, it is because he consistently exposes it to physical danger. He chooses to be vulnerable and this agency is wholly male. As Gail Kern Paster notes, Martius may bleed, but he is in control of his body: "Such blood is voluntary in two senses: it is shed as a result of action freely undertaken, and it is shed virtually at will, 'the blood I will drop'" (97). In fact, his identity is so grounded in military sacrifice and achievement that the images and metonymical associations he makes often turn him into an instrument of war, as when he cries, "O' me alone, make you a sword of me?" (1.7.76). According to Ralph Berry,

> To regard the sword-symbol as phallic here is rather a necessity than an arabesque of criticism. I do not know what the line means as a literal statement. But Coriolanus seems to have an awareness of the emblematic potency of "sword." I suggest that the

[2] Despite his unwounded status, Tamburlaine also seems to view wounds, or at least an attitude of indifference toward them, as a sign of manhood. This quote comes from a speech in which Tamburlaine is trying to convince his sons that "A wound is nothing, be it ne'er so deep. / Blood is the god of war's rich livery" (3.2.115-16). As long as it is not crippling ('be it ne'er so deep"), a wound is not to be feared; it is the appropriate dress of the warrior. To prove his point, he cuts himself. Earlier, he has declared that "he shall wear the crown of Persia / Whose head hath deepest scars, whose breast most wounds" and whose character the willingness to "wade up to the chin in blood" (1.3.74, 84). Wounds are figured as interconnected to manliness and honor. Similarly, in act 3, scene 5 of Beaumont and Fletcher's *Bonduca*, Decius cries, "More wounds, more honour" (122).

> line can only have a symbolic meaning, that war which Coriolanus came to as an adolescent made him a man, and supplied him with a sense of sexual maturity [. . .]. (302)

Berry is correct about the emblematic potency of sword here; otherwise, I believe he is entirely wrong. Not only is there no "necessity" in regarding the sword as a phallic, there is little cause, other than the post-Freudian tendency to read all swords as phallic. Sometimes a sword is just a sword. Obviously, this image of Martius as a sword is not literal, but figurative, as he is lifted above the soldier's heads, like a sword. But it is martially, not sexually, figurative. Although the wars may have "made him a man," I do not think that this passage suggests anything about Martius' sexual maturity. If we are to attach a Freudian interpretation to this line, then Martius' self-association with a sword reveals an impulse more closely aligned to *destrudo* and *Thanatos* than to *libido* and *Eros*. In the context of his address to the soldiers, a sexual reading makes almost no sense. Martius is choosing men to join him in his assault on Aufidius. In this situation, Martius becomes a weapon in the service of Rome. Depending on the textual decisions one prefers,[3] Martius seems either to be imagining himself as a sword to be wielded by the men, or urging his select soldiers to become swords themselves. Because the entire speech is directed outward—"If any such be here [. . .]" (1.7.67)—I prefer the second reading. Martius is raised by the men, like a sword. He asks the men, "[Do you make a sword of] me alone, make you a sword of me?" The "me alone" seems to be an invitation: Do you make a sword of me alone? Make swords of yourselves too. His praise of each of them, "If these shows be not outward" (1.7.77), as equal to four Volsces suggests a moment of pride in them as soldiers, not a moment of narcissism or self-adulation.

5 In addition to Berry, there are other critics who offer Freudian readings of Coriolanus, See, for example, Robert Stoller's "Shakespearean Tragedy: Coriolanus" (especially 267) and Charles Hofling's "An Interpretation of Shakespeare's Coriolanus" (especially 421-24). and there may be some justification for associating Martius with a phallus. He is described as a man "Who sensibly outdares his senseless sword / And, when it bows, stand'st up!" (1.5.24-5). I read such passages through a militaristic lens, but I have no problem with critics who suspect a double entendre at work here. My difficulty with most psychoanalytic readings of Coriolanus is that they almost always lead to an assertion of Martius' castration. For example,

[3] In the Folio, the line reads, "Oh me alone, make you a sword of me:" The Oxford *Textual Companion* attributes the "Oh" to scribal change and alters the text to read "O' [Of] me alone" (Taylor, et al. 595). This is the most common emendation I found, but Phillip Brockbank, following Tucker Brooke (unwisely in my opinion), assigns the line to the soldiers and renders it, "O me alone! Make you a sword of me!"

in Adelman's oft-quoted examination of the "make you a sword of me" quote, she argues that Martius' "whole life becomes a kind of phallic exhibitionism, devoted to disproving the possibility that he is vulnerable" (111). Adelman adopts Brockbank's punctuation for "O me alone! Make you a sword of me!" but she attributes the line to Coriolanus rather than the soldiers. Adelman does not cite her source for this reading in her "Anger's My Meat" article (or in any of the article's various afterlives), and I could not find an edition that combined this punctuation with this speaker (it is not used or listed in the Arden, Cambridge, Oxford, or Norton editions, nor in older versions by John Dover Wilson, A.L. Rowse, or Tucker Brooke). Of course, the two interpolated exclamation points make Martius' statement more self-descriptive and phallic and thus make Adelman's interpretation much more plausible. I disagree. After all, Martius' wounds, and his display of them, expose and perhaps even exalt his vulnerability. The very vulnerability of his body is what proves his manhood: he is vulnerable to attack, his body is susceptible to wounding, but he is a man—he can take it. Adelman's claim that an association with the phallus makes Martius' death "a kind of castration" (121n) seems to misconstrue the warrior's final act. Rather than representing a loss of manhood, Martius' vulnerability here confirms his manhood.

6 I believe the consistent misreading of the conclusion of *Coriolanus* stems from a prevalent misunderstanding of early modern attitudes toward the body and masculine gender. Many critics describe the male body in Shakespeare's England as site of extreme instability and masculine anxiety. Stephen Orgel, for example, argues that "For us the entire question of gender is controlled by issues of sexuality, and we are quite clear about which sex is which"; for the early moderns, however, Orgel claims that "the line between the sexes was blurred, often frighteningly so" (13). Basing their interpretation of gender on the work of Thomas Laqueur, critics like Orgel perceive an ontological proximity between the biological sexes and suggest that masculine anxiety results from the fear of being turned *back* into woman. Laqueur claims that "The boundaries between male and female" were those of "degree and not of kind" (115); in this model, women were merely inferior versions of men.

7 Critics who support this reading of early modern gender often cite the story of Marie Germain, who, according to Montaigne, was raised as a woman, but "Straining himself in some way in jumping," turned into a man when "his masculine organs came forth" (69). Patricia Parker, for example, recontextualizes the story within Montaigne's larger work, noting that the account of Marie Germain was inserted into an essay from Book 1 entitled "De la force de l'imagination." Parker comments on the importance (in the essay and thematically) of the final example of sexual transformation here, the story of Iphis (from

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 8). According to Parker, we should not forget that Montaigne is talking about the suggestive power of the imagination. Shakespeare is not Montaigne, but I have no problem with Parker's arguments up to this point. When she suggests that these stories should be understood within the discussion of male impotence and anxiety, however, I am afraid I cannot agree. The tale of impotence does not immediately follow, as she implies; instead, there is a commentary of the stigmata of religious individuals such as St. Francis. Yet even if the story of impotence did directly follow, impotence has nothing to do with Marie Germain. Germain has no problem with his member, nor should his story or the story of Iphis be read as an indication of a masculine fear of transformation. After all, both these tales tell of *women* changing into men, not the other way around. These events, like the stories they accompany, are simply unusual occurrences that Montaigne found interesting. Like the common people Montaigne mentions later, critics who insist on reading Marie Germain as an allegory of male anxiety have "been so strongly seized that they think they see what they do not see" (70). Moreover, Marie Germain becomes a male not through gender performance, but through physiological change. She becomes male because her *body* becomes male. This emphasizes the primacy of the body in gender-formation. Additionally, Laqueur's degree-not-kind view of early modern sexual biology has been largely discredited. As Elizabeth Foyster observes, one-sex model theorists like Laqueur fail to distinguish between "elite male medical thinking or theory, and popular belief or practice" (28). Helkiah Crooke and other early modern writers clearly divide human bodies into two distinct sexes, as Smith, Paster, Adelman, and others have all shown.

8 Nonetheless, very good scholars continue to repeat this fiction in order to promulgate the myth of universal male anxiety. Orgel, for example, noting that "Medical and anatomical treatises from the time of Galen cited homologies in the genital structure of the sexes to show that male and female were versions of the same unitary species" (13), argues that stories such as that of Marie Germain expose the early modern male's fear of physical gender reversal. According to Orgel, the discourse of early modern "scientific" gender teleology operates within a larger political agenda that attempts to vindicate male domination of women; he suggests that "The frightening part of the teleology for the Renaissance mind, however, is precisely the fantasy of its reversal, the conviction that men can turn into—or be turned into—women; or perhaps more exactly, can be turned *back* into women, losing the strength that enabled the male potential to be realized in the first place" (14). But this supposed early modern fear of reversal is mostly a postmodern creation. Men of the early modern period, in general, did not imagine effeminization in terms of physical reversal, and certainly did not

express their worries about such a bodily reversal. In fact, in their separate discussions of the case of Marie Germain, Orgel, Parker, and Stephen Greenblatt all ignore the fact that it is the girls of the village, and not the men, who fear changing sexes. As Montaigne reports, "In this town there is still a song commonly in the girls' mouths, in which they warn one another not to stretch their legs too wide for fear of becoming males, like Marie Germain" (870). Men may have been threatened by "unruly women" or "tribades" (homosexual seductresses),[4] and may have been alarmed by the possibility of these women penetrating the categorical boundaries of maleness, but they do not appear to have been worried about *becoming* women themselves. As Orgel himself admits, "those transformations that are attested to as scientific fact work in only one direction, from female to male" (13). Of course, Parker claims that the "rhetoric of insistence" (361) in these texts of transformation demonstrate considerable unease through their unequivocal declarations, and thus instead of displaying confident affirmations of the stability of the male body, these works reveal numerous men who protest too much. This is possible, of course, but why must all assertions of masculine assurance be taken as bluff and bluster while expressions of anxiety are accepted at face value? Parker points out that Montaigne's examination of the power of imagination proceeds from the story of Marie Germain to an extended discussion of impotence:

> [. . .] the essay that incorporates this striking anecdote [of Marie Germain] moves from the resonant teleology of women's desire to be provided with the *virile partie* to precisely the imperfections of that "part," to preoccupation not with transformation from the imperfect female to the perfect male but with a form of its *renversement*, the imperfection and defect (*deffaut*) of male impotence. (343)

She notes the abundance of failed "instrument" tales in the *Essais*, and situates Montaigne's impotence fixation within what she describes as a wide-spread preoccupation with male impotence in France that spans "an extraordinary range of texts" (345). But impotence is not the same as physical *renversement*. An impotent man still has his instrument, whether or not it works correctly. In fact, Montaigne's anecdotes all conclude with the restoration of sexual virility, reiterating the very material presence of the "honorable member" (73). These men have not been physically reversed. They do not become women, nor are they castrated eunuchs. In truth, their bodies undergo no significant physical change.

9 This suggests that concern over gender boundaries and what Mark Breitenberg calls "anxious masculinity" have both been overstated. Men were not afraid of spontaneously turning into women, despite the prevalent cultural force of gender construction. In fact, I

[4] For a discussion of "unruly women," see Penny Gay's As She Likes It, especially 1-16; for a short discussion of the tribade, see Greenblatt's *Shakespearean Negotiations* (74).

suspect that most men in the early modern period hardly ever thought about their gender on a conscious level, much like today. Men may have their masculinity questioned in Shakespeare's plays, but drama is, after all, a medium of conflict. The problem with much recent criticism is the tendency to take a challenge of manhood as an indication of anxious, ambiguous, or troubled masculinity when this may not necessarily be the case. For example, in *1 Henry 6*, Talbot is challenged by the Countess of Auvergne, who declares him her prisoner and asks,

> Is this the scourge of France?
> Is this the Talbot, so much feared abroad
> That with his name the mothers still their babes?
> I see report is fabulous and false.
> I thought I should have seen some Hercules,
> A second Hector, for his grim aspect
> And large proportion of his strong-knit limbs.
> Alas, this is a child, a seely dwarf.
> It cannot be this weak and writhled shrimp

One could read this passage as an indictment of Talbot's manhood, but I think that would be an incorrect reading. Certainly, Talbot seems to belittle his own power, telling her that he is only "Talbot's shadow [. . .] but the smallest part / And least proportion of humanity" (2.3.45-53). He admits that his "weak and writhled" shrimp-like body might indeed be contained by the Countess, but the men in his army, who are "his substance, sinews, arms, and strength" (2.3.63), are too great for her to entrap. Later in the scene, after she has been cowed by his military force, the Countess calls him "Victorious Talbot" (2.3.67) and a "great warrior" (2.3.82). She may have challenged his masculine identity earlier in their encounter, but words alone cannot defeat an army, and words alone cannot rob a warrior of his manhood. Thus, the supposed masculine anxiety of Talbot is *projected* here, not present in the man himself.

10 Talbot's manhood is not located solely in his body, which may be captured or grow old, but manhood also cannot be entirely separated from the male body. In life and on the stage, a man must not only possess a male body, but he must also use it like a man, which means exposing that body to extreme danger and potential destruction. Men who, like Talbot, offer their bodies up to violent action are celebrated as men. For example, in a passage of *Pierce Penilesse* (1592) that probably refers a performance of *1 Henry 6*, Thomas Nashe exclaims,

> How would it haue ioyed braue *Talbot* (the terror of the French) to thinke that after he had lyne two hundred yeares in his Tombe, hee should triumphe againe on the Stage, to haue his bones newe embalmed with the teares of ten thousand spectators at least,

> (at seuerall times) who in the Tragedian that represents his person, imagine they behold him fresh bleeding. (F3R)

Nashe's laudatory lines behold Talbot not in any of the many engagements where he defeats the French, but when he is "fresh bleeding." Like Coriolanus, Talbot authenticates his manhood through willingness to fight and bleed. Butler claims that "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (*Trouble* 33). To a certain extent, this is true, yet gender identity is not *solely* constituted through performative expressions; rather, gender identity is constituted primarily through corporeal realities. Each gendered act is prescribed and proscribed by physical bodies.[5] Early modern male bodies represent appropriate sites for violent engagement and as such bear the cultural expectation that they will act honorably and submit to a world of violence. It is in this milieu of possible masculine destruction that men "prove" their manliness and connect the body they were born with to the gender that body represents. Thus, the only way the "unrough youths" of the rebel army in *Macbeth* can "Protest their first of manhood" (5.2.10-11) is with sword and shield. Similarly, in *Coriolanus*, Volumnia proudly explains how

> To cruel war I sent [Martius], 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. (1.3.14-18)

Manhood must be "proved" by bodily risk. Butler advocates rethinking of the materiality of the body "as the effect of power, as power's most productive effect" (*Bodies* 2). Shakespearean bodies can read them as an effect of a patriarchal structure that commits male bodies to violent self-sacrifice in the service of the state and society.

11 Certainly, there are other expressions and counter-expressions of manhood in Shakespeare—*militis gloriosi*, Machiavellian opportunists, Bruce Smith's "saucy jacks," and others—but these challenges to masculine heroism, actually work to reinforce the mythic and cultural power of the "real man" in the plays, who submits his body to the realm of masculine violence. Smith argues that "The effect of all these parodies is to empty the masculine ideals in question of their content, to expose them as only so much posing" (56), but this ignores the *actions* of Shakespeare's men. Can Talbot's manhood be considered a "pose" if he dies in his posturing? Are his masculine ideals really emptied out in content? Are audiences supposed to

[5] Butler addresses this issue in her 1999 Preface to the anniversary edition of *Gender Trouble*; see especially vii-xxvi.

view the masculine paradigms of Hotspur or Prince Harry as hollow simply because Falstaff cannot live up to them? I think not. Simply because jigs follow the tragedies, or saucy jacks and fools play at being warriors, or the Nine Worthies are satirized in *Love's Labour's Lost*, or Falstaff's catechism declares honor a mere scutcheon, a word, air (*1H4* 5.1.133-8)—these things do not mean that audiences should dismiss Hotspur's elevation of honor or ignore the myriad other characters who, like King Harry, "covet honour" (*H5* 4.3.28). Honor and manhood are intimately connected. To be a man means to brave injury and death for the sake of honor.[6] More importantly, this masculine code requires a bodily sacrifice for the good of the community. Like Talbot, the honorable man must be prepared to die for the sake of others. As Brutus says in *Julius Caesar*,

> If it be aught toward the general good,
> Set honour in one eye and death i'th' other,
> And I will look on both indifferently;
> For let the gods so speed me as I love
> The name of honour more than I fear death. (1.2.86-91)

C.L. Barber has noted that "honour" is most often connected to social rank, and especially to the gentry (330), and class consciousness certainly contributes to notions of honor and virtue, but it would be a mistake to relegate expectations of bodily sacrifice to the codes of a warrior-class, aristocratic elite. All male bodies participate to a greater or lesser extent in the period's violent self-formulation and all men experience the great leveling of death and bodily destruction. I do not mean only that the higher orders are brought low, as is suggested by Cleopatra when she says in *Antony and Cleopatra*, "Young boys and girls / Are level now with men" (4.16.67-8). This kind of leveling plays with the metaphorical images of death's detruding power, lowering individuals to an equal level both physically (in their graves) and metaphysically (in the underworld). Cleopatra, who has just lost her lover, claims, "The odds is gone / And there is nothing left remarkable / Beneath the visiting moon" (4.16.68-70). In contrast, violent masculine death elevates even common men to a kind of nobility, moving them from the common file into the category of "proven" men. Those who fight with King Harry in *Henry 5*, for example, will be remembered precisely because of the destruction they invite upon their bodies. Before Agincourt, the king declares, "if it be a sin to covet honour / I am the most offending soul alive" (4.3.28-9); yet he does not reserve that "sin" for the

[6] Mark Thornton Burnett suggests that the early moderns saw virtue a subcategory of honor, although both were powerful and transformative influences on men (201); Smith links virtue to learning (50). For this essay, I am interested in the way virtue is conflated with honor in terms of masculine ideal. Specifically, I want to emphasize the way that the very words are intricately tangled with notions of manhood. As Kahn notes,"the very etymology of *virtus* is gender-specific. [. . .] Shakespeare plays on the derivation of virtue from virtus, in turn derived from vir—Latin for man" (*Roman* 14).

aristocracy alone, but rather extends the opportunity for honor to nobleman and commoner alike when he says,

> We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.
> For he that today sheds his blood with me
> Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
> This day shall gentle his condition.
> And gentlemen in England now abed
> Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
> And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
> That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's Day. (4.3.60-7)

A man may "gentle his condition," but he must be prepared to bleed, and even die for it. In this, masculine bodily expectations cross all class boundaries. Some may dismiss Harry's "The fewer men, the greater share of honour" (4.3.22) as mere rhetoric, part of the ruling class' maintenance of power, delivered to improve the morale of the exploited troops and to prevent desertion. But if the king does not really mean what he says, if these words are mere oratory, if, in fact, "The better part of valour is discretion" (*1H4* 5.4.117-18), then why does Harry not simply withdraw? Why personally fight at all? In *Macbeth*, Duncan directs the battle from afar, and in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Octavius refuses to meet Antony in single combat. Like these two rulers, Harry could choose not to proffer his body. Logically, intellectually, there is no reason for the king personally to fight at Agincourt. In truth, the rational thing would be to withdraw. Yet if he did withdraw, safely removing his body from the fight, then he would then risk the intolerable stain of effeminacy.

12 This demonstrates the deep-structural power of this sociocultural expectation. Even the nobility are not exempt. In fact, Shulamith Shahar notes that, historically, this ideological impetus particularly impacted those in the upper orders, so that "In the nobility, elderly women indeed outnumbered men because of the frequency of violent death among males" (79). This suggests that politicized claims regarding the hegemony of the power elite cannot be consistently applied in terms of masculine destruction. On the other hand, notions of honor and bodily sacrifice are not solely the concern of the aristocracy. We see this in Act 2, Scene 3 of *2 Henry 6*, when Horner the armorer and his apprentice Peter fight to the death with sandbag-weighted staves in order to establish their "honesty." Foakes calls this fight a "comic duel" (44), but Horner might disagree. These men are commoners, and their encounter is certainly set in contrast to the duels of courtiers. It is even possible that their combat has been staged for the entertainment of the gentry: Margaret confesses that she has left the court "purposely" to see the quarrel tried (2.3.52-3). But the men face real physical danger and Horner dies nonetheless. Peter may succeed in this fight as a result of his former-master's

drunkenness, but the bout itself emphasizes the need for all men to possess physical strength and soldierly prowess.[7] Shakespeare's plays consistently demonstrate the need for such masculine power, sometimes by showing the benefits of male puissance, sometimes by showing the disastrous consequences of manly lack. As Jonas Barish contends,

> Shakespeare clearly believes in valor, in manly readiness, in military prowess. These qualities matter because the world we inhabit contains lawless, self-serving, aggressive human beings, ready to use others as means, ready to push them around whenever others seem to stand in the way of their own private purposes or private pleasures. (121)

Shakespeare's plays present honorable manhood as the opposition of both private persons pursuing "private purposes or private pleasures" and state institutions pursuing nationalistic agendas. Thus, even in the plays that feature no overt depictions of war, the leviathan movements of states and other political entities can be seen along the fringes, giving intimations of intrigues and machinations beyond the scope of the drama: Norwegian armies march past, Ephesian Dukes condemn Syracusian merchants to death, sea captains rob Illyrian galleys of their cargo, providential tempests turn Turkish fleets.

13 It is within this martial world that Shakespeare's males establish their manhood. Like the living men of early modern England, the reality of masculine gender identification involves the ever-present potential of bodily harm. Critically, masculine engagement with violence in the plays has been downplayed or denigrated and manhood itself has become synonymous with hegemonic oppression or anxious overcompensation. When a character like Martius Coriolanus dies, he becomes critically castrated, diminished and removed from conscious significance. For example, Linda Bamber believes that

> The deaths of Macbeth and Coriolanus, like the deaths of the history heroes, are lacking in general significance. They do not, like the deaths of Hamlet and Lear, reaffirm us in our humanism, our sense of the value of our lives to us. Macbeth and Coriolanus simply exhaust the possibilities of their mode; they repeat themselves until, like Marlowe's Tamburlaine, they are dramatically played out. Then they die. Whereas Hamlet's story culminates at the time of his death, Macbeth and Coriolanus's stories simply end. In retrospect, we might say that Coriolanus has repeatedly fought battles and abused the commoners and Macbeth has killed and killed and killed. (96)

[7] Jennifer Low suggests that duels and mock duels reveal the interconnectivity of manhood and social rank and that an awareness of this distinction is indispensable for an understanding of gender (see her *Manhood and the Duel* for more on this). Rather than *defining* masculinity, however, I would argue that rank complicates that definition. As the above conflict demonstrates, even low-born men participated in deadly, manhood-affirming contests. Like the defendant in a high-born duel of honor, as described in Vincentio Saviolo's *Vincentio Saviolo His Practise* (1595), Peter is "both accused and constrained to fight" (BB2V).

This may be true for some audience members, but even if they did not move Bamber, the deaths of Macbeth and Martius Coriolanus are certainly not "lacking in general significance" to Macbeth and Martius themselves. These deaths are not insignificant as much as they are invisible.[8] Leonard Digges, in his *Stratioticos* (1579), urges the soldier to "keepe and preserue his Armour and weapon as one of his members" (L1V). This transforms the weapon into an appendage, but it also makes the man an extension of the weapon. As Elaine Scarry suggests, "Although a weapon is an extension of the human body (as is acknowledged in their collective designation as 'arms'), it is instead the human body that becomes in this vocabulary an extension of the weapon" (67). This metonymical process effects the moral erasure of the male body by making men into non-living entities: it is much easier to attack the "muskets" or the "pikes" than it is to murder human beings. This repetitive cycle is cultural and, unfortunately, still has not been dramatically played out. In retrospect, we might say that the Shakespeare's men are compelled to perform their acts of manhood, where they die and die and die.

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[8] Elisabeth Bronfen argues that "Because they are so familiar, so evident, we are culturally blind to the ubiquity of representations of feminine death. Though in a plethora of representations feminine death is perfectly visible we only see it with some difficulty" (3); but representations of male death are just as difficult to see because audiences *expect* males to die, especially in plays where war features prominently. Male bodies die in war all the time. They are acceptable sites of violence and as such can easily disappear from view.

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