

Boys Will Be Boys:

Constructions of Toxic Masculinity in Dramatic, Metaphorized, and Real-Life War Spaces

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War is violent; war is destructive; war is masculine. Although notable historical—as well as more recent—exceptions exist, men have traditionally acted as the instigators, organizers, and executors of war. Both real-life war as well as its dramatic and metaphorized representation in art and entertainment have worked to construct and idealize a heroic masculine paradigm. From the ancient Greek and Roman culture and their corresponding literary epics, through early modern conceptions of the masculine ethos and Renaissance drama, and up to and including the modern US military complex and its paid association with the National Football League, history has consistently provided a privileged space in which an enduring blueprint for the hypermasculine war hero is preserved. More specifically, in William Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and *1 Henry IV*, as in real-life war, and the metaphorized war of the NFL, the physical landscape of the battlefield functions as a performance arena in which toxic masculinity is constructed, privileged, and perpetuated.

For many cultures, in order to *become a man*, a young boy must participate in a culturally-prescribed rite of passage. Oftentimes, these rituals require displays of courage and stoicism—Vanuatu land diving; or require violence and aggression—the Spartan Krypteia; or require silently enduring pain and humiliation—college fraternity hazing. Acquiring one's masculinity, then, is cross-culturally recognized as a socially constructed process through which

one must successfully pass, and not a biological trait with which one is naturally born. Regardless of culture or historical period, successful transference into traditional notions of manhood, if not through direct military training, at least require qualities similar to the fundamental characteristics of the “military man.” According to Kimberly Hutchings, “aggression, rationality, and physical courage are identified both as an essential component of war and also of masculinity” (389). The gender socialization of boys—and what is and has been considered gender-appropriate masculine behavior—parallels the qualities deemed critical for successful military performance, and as a result directly positions war as masculine.

In his history dramas *Coriolanus* and *1 Henry IV*, Shakespeare explores the connections between martial prowess and the construction of masculinity. When Cominius publically recollects Coriolanus’ first military engagement, he shares the story of a young 16-year-old Coriolanus, who, despite his “Amazonian chin,” had displayed violent courage on the battlefield (2.2.90). During a moment in which “he might act the woman in the scene,” Coriolanus, despite his youth, “proved best man i’ th’ field,” and defeated the more experienced Tarquin (2.2.95-96). In what is described as a rite of passage, Cominius claims that it is Coriolanus’ courageous performance on the battlefield that transforms him from a boy into a man. Cominius’ story suggests that Coriolanus exchanges his violent military deeds for his manhood, and that his newfound masculinity is something he has earned. Cominius’ description of a pre-battletested Coriolanus, too, equates untested boyhood with femininity, and therefore not only offering a direct connection between masculinity and war violence, but also positioning the feminine outside this military arena.

Volumnia, too, connects acts of violence, aggression, and martial prowess to one’s acquisition of masculinity. When discussing Coriolanus’ success in battle, Volumnia declares:

“To a cruel war I sent him, from whence he returned, his brows bound with oak. I tell thee, daughter, I sprang not more in joy at first hearing he was a man-child than now in first seeing he had proved himself a man” (1.3.13-17). Like Cominius, Volumnia suggests that participating—and finding success—in battle is the ground upon which one’s masculinity is formed, proven, and obtained. Conversely, then, to avoid or fail in this endeavor would position the boy as effeminate, or unmasculine. Earlier in her conversation with Virgilia, Volumnia implies that a boy who fails to go to war is “no better than picturelike to hang by th’ wall,” a passive decorative piece, and a feminized object of one’s gaze (1.3.11). Volumnia would “rather had eleven die nobly for their country than one voluptuously surfeit out of action” (1.3.23-25). To die a noble death in war, then, is preferable to avoiding war altogether. Volumnia’s outlook constructs binary positions: the aggressive masculine as the active-dominant and the feminine as the passive-subjugate. According to Don Conway-Long, “masculinity itself [is] a *performance* of dominance” (71), and therefore, if one does not actively and courageously participate in violent war, he “act[s] the woman.”

King Henry IV similarly expresses shame when discussing his son Hal and his uncourtly—and what may be construed as unmasculine—behavior. Henry laments Hal’s conduct, wishing instead his son were like the militaristic Hotspur—the idealized war hero and “the theme of honor’s tongue” (1.1.81). It is not until Hal later assumes a military role, promising to “redeem all this on Percy’s head,” that his father respects and trusts his son (1.1.132). Hal suggests that through violent bloodshed he will “scour [his] shame” and be able to proudly claim himself the King’s son, a man prepared to assume the role of masculine war hero (1.1.137). Like Volumnia’s and Henry’s hope for Coriolanus and Hal—as has been the case in many cultures throughout history—one way in which boys are expected to become men is through military

training and violent combat. According to David Morgan, “in all types of society, state or stateless, simple or complex, men are expected to fight or to be prepared to fight, to enlist in military service, and to undergo some form of military training” (166). He further states that “of all the sites where masculinities are constructed, reproduced, and deployed, those associated with war and the military are some of the most direct” (165). Historically—as well as in Shakespeare’s texts—the violent, aggressive masculine is constructed and privileged in a martial setting, and in particular, on the battlefield itself.

Attempts to maintain opportunities for the construction and reproduction of masculinity, the female and the feminine are necessarily ‘othered,’ subjugated, and expelled from these war arenas. According to Michael Kimmel, “Historically and developmentally, masculinity has been defined as the flight from women, the repudiation of femininity” (126). Such is the case with Hal, who must dismiss both the female—Falstaff—and the feminine—Poins—in order to fulfill his father’s expectations and role as a heteronormative, masculine king. Although Falstaff is a male character, Valerie Traub makes a compelling case that his “somatic iconography metonymically positions him as the fantasized pre-oedipal maternal, against whom Hal must differentiate” (459). Although he and Hal are seemingly friends for the majority of *1 Henry IV*, Hal cruelly banishes Falstaff at the conclusion of *2 Henry IV*: “I banish thee, on pain of death” (5.5.63). Traub suggests that the female ‘other’ “must be repudiated or subjugated in order for Prince Hal to assume phallogentric control as King Henry V” (474). In Hal’s slow rejection and eventual expulsion of Falstaff, he accomplishes just that.

Although Hal acquires a series of significant life-lessons from Falstaff—and at times seems to genuinely enjoy his company—he must ultimately reject the maternal Falstaff in order to avoid becoming, or returning to, the effeminate (Traub 458). Likewise, Hal must disconnect

himself from Poins, whom the play presents as a “queer hero whose erotically charged friendship with Hal must be swept aside to facilitate Hal’s rise” (Kolkovich 635). Though Poins does not appear frequently, his connection to the effeminate is obvious. Elizabeth Kolkovich describes Poins as “not conventionally masculine,” “effeminate by early modern standards,” and “intimately connected to the play’s representations of masculinity” (636; 640; 638). Although Hal does not actively expel Poins like he does Falstaff, Poins—who is “just as great an obstacle to princely, masculine behavior [as Falstaff]”—disappears when the play turns to the exclusively masculine space of the battlefield (641). In each instance, Hal must detach himself from the female-feminine, a construction both Volumnia and Henry believe is weak, shameful, and detrimental to acquiring manhood.

It is Hotspur who initially foregrounds effeminacy as problematic in *1 Henry IV* (Kolkovich 640). According to Kimberly Hutchings, “privileged versions of masculinity feed off contrasts both with alternative masculinities and with an oppositional, feminized ‘other’” (389). In the masculine hierarchal stratification, Shakespeare places the masculine war hero as the assumed ideal and presents Hotspur as the embodiment of the perfect knight (Barker 295). Throughout the play, Hotspur privileges his own martial masculinity over the effeminate. Hotspur expresses exasperation, anger, and a sense of superiority when he encounters “a certain lord, neat and trimly dressed, / Fresh as a bridegroom, and his chin new reaped / Showed like a stubble land at harvest home. / He was perfumed like a milliner” (33-36). Like Poins who himself is preoccupied with clothing and perfuming—and distinctly unsoldier-like—the “popinjay” lord that Hotspur encounters, who uses “holiday and lady terms,” and “would himself have been a soldier” had it not been for the guns—or violence—is positioned as effeminate, or an inferior form of masculinity (1.3.50; 46; 64). Similarly, focus on the lord’s cleanly-shaved

face parallels Cominius' "Amazonian chin" description of the pubescent, pre-masculine Coriolanus. When King Henry questions Hotspur's decision to withhold prisoners, Hotspur and Blunt imply both the lord—because of his lack of masculinity and war manners—and his report should be considered worthless.

Like Hotspur, Coriolanus, too, is presented as the idealized war hero who "vehemently shuns any behavior that could be marked as 'effeminate'"; for Coriolanus, this includes "acting or performing" (Starks-Estes 154). Although Coriolanus attempts to participate in the customary social rituals required of him to become elected consul—wearing a gown of humility and begging the plebeians for their vote—he does so reluctantly, and also ineffectively. Coriolanus ultimately refuses to, or is incapable of, performing. According to Kent Lehnhof, what causes Coriolanus "to reject play-acting in his own person is the sexualized fear that it will unman him" (354). To publically subject himself to the plebeians, to show his wounds to Rome's citizens, or to listen to Cominius tell tales of his heroic exploits, all serve to put Coriolanus on vulnerable display, as an object upon which to gaze, a distinctly feminine trait according to Volumnia. Coriolanus' refusal to appear vulnerable presents itself in the technical component of *Coriolanus*, too, in the lack of soliloquy: "As one who disavows femininity to this degree, Coriolanus's lack of soliloquy is significant; it reinforces his aversion to any sign of vulnerability" (154). Coriolanus rejects Rome's rituals, as well as the traditional technologies of play performance, as they leave him exposed. The only scripts Coriolanus follows are those of war.

Despite his abhorrence for weakness and exposure, Coriolanus ultimately ceases his retributive sack of Rome at the behest of his mother, who pleads for mercy. Coriolanus' concession, by his own account, is "of a woman's tenderness" and his tears of compassion an

“unnatural scene” at which the gods laugh (5.3.129; 184). For Coriolanus, to show emotion and accept peace is womanly and unnatural. Furthermore, Coriolanus acknowledges the situation will be “most mortal to him” (206). Aufidius confirms Coriolanus’ assumptions when he and the conspirators confront Coriolanus, designating him “traitor” (5.6.85). Aufidius slights Coriolanus’ masculinity by calling him “thou boy of tears” (100). The term ‘boy’ “in an early modern context, may suggest not only a youth but also a womanly man,” thus crushing Coriolanus’ manhood (Starks-Estes 157). Aufidius’ “re-boying” of Coriolanus suggests that masculinity can be impermanent, hierarchical, and surrendered altogether. This reflects Adi Adams, Eric Anderson, and Mark McCormack’s claim that “boys and men police gender and sexuality... threatening to unveil others... through the use of other emasculating and homosexualizing epithets” (280). Like Hotspur, who repeatedly criticizes the effeminate “popinjay” messenger, Aufidius regulates and reorganizes Coriolanus’ manhood.

Although Aufidius viciously condemns Coriolanus’ emotional display, he had previously accepted Coriolanus’ subjugation and vulnerability—“I... present / My throat to thee”—when offered to him, a fellow soldier (4.5.99-100). According to David Morgan, military life suggests an “operation of a double standard, the toleration of homosexual relationships so long as they did not threaten the wider patterns of good order and discipline” (168). The military battlefield, then, allows space for acceptable displays of emotion, specifically homosocial bonding among masculine heroes. Previously, Coriolanus refused to be vulnerable with anyone, yet offers his life and service to Aufidius, his military equal. Aufidius reacts to Coriolanus’ offer of military revenge in homoerotic terms, focusing on masculine power, marriage, and sex: “I loved the maid I married, never man / Sighed truer breath. But that I see thee here, / Thou noble thing, more dances my rapt heart / Than when I first my wedded mistress saw / Bestride my threshold”

(4.5.118-122). Aufidius uses Coriolanus as a direct substitute for his wife, asking Coriolanus to “Let me twine / Mine arms about thy body” (110-111). Furthermore, Aufidius describes a dream in which he and Coriolanus had been “down together... / Unbuckling helms, fisting each other’s throat” (128-129). Aufidius connects hypermasculinity, homoeroticism, and war, and because both he and Coriolanus represent the privileged war version of masculinity, their interaction is deemed acceptable.

A similar homoerotic interaction occurs earlier in the play between Coriolanus and Cominius. After the battle at Corioles, Coriolanus hugs Cominius “In arms as sound as when I wooed, in heart / As merry as when our nuptial day was done, / And tapers burned to bedward!” (1.6.30-32). Like Aufidius, Coriolanus makes a connection between his relationship with a fellow military soldier and his wife. Kolkovich argues that “Male homoerotic desire could be consistent with honorable masculinity if tied to military fellowship” (641). Therefore, because Coriolanus, Cominius, and Aufidius all share that soldierly social bond, displays of homoerotic affection are accepted between them. This contrasts with Hal’s relationship with Poins, who is not a soldier: “the problem with Poins is that he loves Hal in the tavern, not on the battlefield” and therefore their homoerotic relationship requires removal before Hal becomes king (641). In each example, the militaristic, hypermasculine war hero is privileged and positioned to govern acceptable modes of masculine behavior.

Expulsion of the female and the effeminate male—and examples of hegemonic masculinity—as displayed in *1 Henry IV* and *Coriolanus*, appear, too, throughout American military history. Although the United States has recently opened all military positions to women, including front-line combat positions, there still remains quite a bit of resistance, with some special forces units still without a woman. Historically, however, combat positions were reserved

for men. According to Bonnie Mann, war has always been linked with nation and masculinity, and she suggests the United States' "feminizing loss" in the Vietnam War "had long taken its place on our social imaginary as a story of the unmaning of America" (5). Mann further suggests that, following wars like Vietnam and the terrorist attacks on 9/11, the United States attempts to reassert its masculinity through propaganda and displays of strength (6). Because "masculinity is associated with qualities that make good warriors," the American military 'others' anyone associated with the feminine (Prugl 335). Prugl claims that "men's domination of women primarily plays a symbolic role in warfare: it serves as a metaphor for domination of the enemy" (336). To be inclusive of women in the military, then, complicates the idea of heroic masculine domination and the feminization of the enemy. Recent American military policy reflects anxieties over feminization, defeat, and appearing weak. The Clinton Administration's Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy, as well as the Trump Administration's decision to ban all transgender people from military service, have worked to "other" people not conventionally masculine, perpetuating the idea that the battlefield—whether in dramatic renderings or in real-life practice—is a space only for a privileged heteronormative masculinity.

The correlation between masculinity and war displayed in Shakespeare's plays corresponds not only with modern military practice but is also echoed in the NFL's metaphorized war. In addition to the obvious connection of two opposing teams, like opposing armies, lining up to attack one another, the game is besieged with military terminology—sack, blitz, trenches, and neutral zone, among others. The playing field—situated like a battlefield—offers a space in which privileged toxic masculinity and physical violence are accepted and performed under the guise of play-war. The military connection to football extends beyond the game itself, as the NFL and United States armed forces have developed and cultivated a mutually beneficial

relationship. Former NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle once admitted, “It was a conscious effort on our part to bring the element of patriotism into the Super Bowl” (*NYT*). During the 1970 Super Bowl in New Orleans, the NFL delivered a reenactment of the Battle of New Orleans in the War of 1812; for the 1981 Super Bowl, the NFL wrapped a yellow ribbon around the Superdome in support of the release of American hostages in Iran.

Today, the two’s relationship has evolved into a multi-million dollar paid partnership, and any attempt to disturb that bond has resulted in social, economic, and professional repercussions, as was the case with Colin Kaepernick. Following his decision to protest the country’s treatment of people of color during the national anthem, he and the players who joined him in kneeling faced media and political backlash, with Donald Trump remarking, “You have to stand proudly for the national anthem or you shouldn't be playing, you shouldn't be there, maybe you shouldn't be in the country.” Later, at a political rally, Trump suggested NFL owners tell any player who protests to “Get that son of a bitch off the field right now. Out!” NFL owners obliged, creating a rule requiring players to stand for the national anthem. One might conclude, then, that failure to participate in the rituals of military and national patriotism results in an “othering,” with protest players no longer welcome on an NFL field; they are no longer eligible to participate in the war. To be sure, Kaepernick has not played football since.

Beyond its military connections, American football—similar to other violent combat-style sports like boxing and rugby—was first established in response to men’s perceived threat to their power. The sport eventually developed into “a homosocial institution which served to counter men’s fears of feminization” (Messner 14-15). David Rowe believes sports like football have acted as “an integral element of self-sustaining forms of exclusivist male culture” (246). Unlike other violent sports, American football remains the only major sport in the world without

a female counterpart. Eric Anderson suggests that sports, especially football, have “become a leading definer of masculinity in a mass culture that has lost male initiation rituals” (862). In other words, football, like traditional masculine rites of passage, turns boys “away from the qualities associated with femininity” and instills within them qualities traditionally associated with masculinity (862). Unsurprisingly, too, team names often reflect the violence of the sport, some named after animals of prey—bears, lions, falcons—or historically warring peoples—Vikings, raiders, buccaneers. With violent imagery so pervasive throughout the various components of the league, it is fitting, if not predictable, that similar ‘othering’ and privileging of certain masculinities has occurred throughout the history of the NFL, a sport initially created by men with war in mind.

Similar to military history, and the actions of the male characters in *I Henry IV* and *Coriolanus*, the female-feminine needs to be expelled, if not altogether excluded, from this militaristic arena. Like the military’s stance on LGBTQ+ members and Hostpur’s and Aufidius’ feelings towards the effeminate, the NFL has constructed a culture in which gay men do not feel comfortable expressing their sexuality. In fact, there has never been an openly gay player in the NFL. Chris Culliver, during his time as a player with the San Francisco 49ers, was asked during an interview if a gay teammate would be welcomed on the team. Culliver responded, “I don’t do the gay guys,” stating that if there are homosexual players on the team, “They gotta get up outta here... can’t be in the locker room” (Rosenthal). Although criticized for his remarks, Culliver’s comments are not unique. Messner suggests that “homophobia and misogyny [are] the key bonding agents among male athletes, serving to construct a masculine personality that disparage[s] anything considered ‘feminine’ in women, in other men, or in oneself” (151). Both

the female and the feminized ‘other’ are excluded from these militaristic hypermasculine spaces, like an NFL locker room.

Beyond the expulsion of the female-feminine, hegemonic masculinity exists in the ranks of heterosexual NFL players and coaches as well, with punters and place kickers frequently referred to as “not real” football players—“boys among men” often mocked by commentators, fans, and former players. According to Anderson, “contact sports have been described as a place in which hegemonic masculinity is reproduced and defined” (860). Super Bowl winning head coach Brian Billick, while working in an official capacity for the NFL Network, stated, “You guys know how it is. [Kickers are] a part of your team [but] kickers aren’t football players. They’re different. Yes, kickers are people too, but they’re not football players” (Orr). Billick’s comments clearly position football kickers as ‘other,’ as separate, distinct, and *different*. Through their research on organized sports, Adams, Anderson, and McCormack found that “men accomplished the reproduction of their privilege through displays of strength and violence,” thus privileging “a particular subset of heterosexual men” (279-280). In the NFL, it is the “field generals,” and heavy-hitting, violent players who are part of the privileged toxic masculinity.

On the football field and in locker rooms, a metaphorized war takes place—from tactical strategy, to terminology, to valorizing players who make the biggest, most violent hits, to ‘othering’ and dismissing the female and the effeminate. When recent medical research confirmed links between brain injuries and CTE, a condition similar to Alzheimer’s, the NFL’s initial response to engage “in explicit marketing and corporate social responsibility campaigns in attempts to keep children invested in playing” was described as a “reflection of the ‘sports-masculinity complex’” (Rugg 48). Prior to this brain research, when a player had his ‘bell rung,’ there was the expectation that he would ‘man up’ and play through any discomfort, visual

impairment, or pain that resulted from violent impact. Despite research findings, when new rules were recently imposed to protect players' safety—specifically with regard to concussions—one NFL player, Andrew Sendejo, wore a hat that said “Make Football Violent Again.” Despite recent progress in diagnosing and understanding the lasting effects of concussions, players like Sendejo still seek to distribute as much violence and physical damage as possible. Angelo Cataldi, legendary Philadelphia sports talk radio host, responding to the league's concern with player safety, once said NFL teams were “ignorant of the one thing that makes their sport special: toughness.” He cites former Pennsylvania Governor's book entitled *The Wussification of America*, claiming the NFL, “the most violent game in America,” had “gone soft,” a phrase suggestive of diminished masculinity. Cataldi might agree with *Coriolanus*' Second Servinman: “peace is a great maker of cuckholds” (*Coriolanus* 4.5.238).

Despite the obvious ‘othering’ of the feminine-effeminate and a strong aversion to players who identify as gay, the football field and locker room often become areas for acceptable displays of emotion and homosocial behavior. The NFL's inherent connection to war, as well as the NFL's willingness to align itself with the American military, creates a mimicry of battlefield space within the game of football. According to James Sutton, a professor of the sociology of sport at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, “You think of emotion—aside from anger, men aren't allowed to express emotion. But in the sporting context, men are allowed to cry. All these social norms seem to be suspended once you get into the locker room, or take the field.” When Aufidius criticizes Coriolanus' display of emotion toward his family, the two soldiers are not within the context of the battlefield; however, when discussing—or engaged in war—their displays of emotion and homosocial behavior are acceptable. Similarly, Poin's effeminacy and love toward Hal are inappropriate because they do not take place on the battlefield. Similar

homosocial behavioral standards are seen, and widely accepted, in most primarily masculine sports: playing football is about “clenched fists... violent butt-slaps, [and getting] high on your own pulsing adrenalin” (Lyon 30). More recently, athletes have celebrated significant on-field plays with genital thrusting and crotch grabbing.

Because violent military combat operates outside political and social norms, soldiers often experience difficulty with reintegrating into everyday rituals and expectations. Coriolanus, after returning from war, is unwilling—or unable—to participate in the social rituals expected of him. Similarly, when Hotspur, clamors of war, honor, and battlefield violence in the court, a setting that completely contrasts a battlefield, Worcester responds that he will “talk to [Hotspur] / When you are better tempered to attend” (1.3.233-234). Worcester’s reaction to Hotspur indicates that his aggression is inappropriate in this setting. There is a disconnect between these soldiers’ effectiveness on the battlefield and their ability to assimilate back into regular everyday life. Their boldness, lauded on the battlefield, fails in a non-violent space. Coriolanus’ and Hotspur’s experiences parallel those of real-life military soldiers, too, who are trained to kill, as well as, to a lesser extent, that of NFL players, who are tasked with physically and emotionally assaulting the opponent. When these soldiers return from war, however, oftentimes the toxic masculinity and violence that is encouraged and valorized on the battlefield is instead condemned in normal society. Roberta Barker suggests that Shakespeare invited “the audience members to cast a cold eye on warlike masculine heroism” (305). Shakespeare may have critiqued toxic masculinity, but the model to construct and perpetuate it still persists.

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