# When Words Defile Things: Homoerotic Desire and Extreme Depictions of Masculinity in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and Mixed Martial Arts

Aaron Hubbard, *The University of Akron*

Recent interest in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* coincides with the rising popularity of the combat sport known as mixed martial arts, or MMA. According to the *World Shakespeare Bibliography Online* there have been fifty-three theatrical productions of the play since the year 2000; in 2011, the play was made into a feature film starring Ralph Fiennes as Coriolanus and Gerard Butler as Aufidius. During this same time period, *Ultimate Fighting Championship* president Dana White was attempting to turn MMA into a commercial success. According to Michael Borer and Tyler Schafer, television broadcasters initially considered MMA "too barbaric for mainstream audiences," so White sought to bring "official rules, weight classes, and time limits" into the sport. In 2005, his reality TV show, *The Ultimate Fighter,* debuted on the "overtly masculine" cable network Spike TV. It was what Borer and Schafer called an "instant success" (167). White's show, which recently completed its seventeenth season, brings together amateur fighters who compete to become the ultimate fighter. That is, they compete to make the step up from amateur to professional ranks. White's show presents us with a spectacle in which two men grapple and struggle in ways that we might imagine Coriolanus and Aufidius grappling and struggling in the play's action.[1]

It is clear, therefore, that—in their depictions of masculinity, sexuality, and violence—*Coriolanus* and the combat sport of MMA share a cultural logic. They both share a specific way of reflecting cultural fantasies about masculine intimacy; at the same time, they both depict attempts between male fighters to brutally suppress and destroy the other, and to suppress and destroy desire—particularly homoerotic desire. That is, both texts reflect the way in which heteronormative culture's attempt to contain desire is shaped by a paradox between fantasy and perceptions of heteronormative masculinity. This hegemonic masculinity is enacted through the extreme depictions of violence in the texts of *Coriolanus* and MMA.

## 1. Parallels of Violence: Boxing and MMA

In her book *On Boxing*, Joyce Carol Oates writes that during a fight "so much happens so swiftly and with such heart-stopping subtlety you cannot absorb it except to know that something profound is happening and it is happening in a place beyond words" (11). Although boxing is a different sport, it shares with MMA many of the same kinds of depictions and enactions of masculinity, sexuality, and violence. It is easy to get lost in Oates's romantic vision of boxing and to forget that MMA and boxing are both extremely violent activities. More specifically, MMA and *Coriolanus* both engage with particular kinds of masculinity and combat which, as Robert Haywood argues about boxing, center on the "anxiety of masculine adequacy" and a "demonstration of male potency." These in turn create a "commingling of desires" and confuse brutality with sexuality. In other words, the homoeroticism that MMA and *Coriolanus* try to escape is "inescapably built into [their] action." Haywood argues that boxing engages and represents acts of combat and violence "whose ultimate purpose is the display of desire and then desire's destruction," specifically the destruction of homoerotic desire (14). MMA raises this violence to an even less restrained and minimally regulated level. This violence is represented in MMA by the fighter who is celebrated only to be driven to the mat and beaten into submission: likewise, Coriolanus enjoys military victories and consideration for consul, but in the end is torn to pieces by the Volscians as Aufidius stands by and directs the angry mob. Coriolanus's violent death is desire's destruction, or at least its attempted destruction, which is required by a heteronormative culture whose political order is, in part, shaped by a hegemonic masculinity.

According to Akihiko Hirose and Kay Kei-ho Pih, "hegemonic masculinity is viewed as impenetrable by what it is not" (191), and the process of presenting desire only to attempt to destroy it works within this cultural logic that views masculinity as impenetrable. That is, this logic about masculinity dictates that while a man can admire another man, he cannot desire another man. Hegemonic masculinity denies the possibility of physical, sexual, and psychological penetration. Men can fantasize about other male bodies, as well as come into contact with other male bodies through violence, but these bodies must remain within a

logic that precludes penetration. Working within this logic, MMA fighters use brutality and violence to fantasize about intimacy with other men, and even fantasize their own self-destruction at the hands of a more brutal fighter.

The role of fantasy in MMA became clear the first time I observed an MMA training session and spoke with fighters.[2] The MMA training facility is the place where the cultural logic of a hegemonic form of masculinity is cultivated. In a surprising echo of Hirose and Pih, Kyle Green echoes writes that at MMA facilities "you are allowed to admire, and seek to emulate, the bodies of other men, but you are not allowed to desire them" (389). Fighters begin their training sessions by shadowboxing—that is, by throwing punches into the air at an imaginary opponent. This resonates with Aufidius's dreams of fighting Coriolanus: "I have nightly… / Dreamt of encounters 'twixt thyself and me" (4.5.121-22). His dreams are a kind of shadowboxing that enacts his fantasy about fighting as well as a particular kind of masculinity. One gets the impression that today's MMA fighters are dreaming of their favorite counterpart as they dance and shadowbox around the cage.

Both MMA and *Coriolanus* are texts in which men seek to violently control their own anatomies as well as the anatomies of other men, while at the same time fantasizing about an ultimate form of intimacy achieved through brutality. One fighter told me that the training at his facility is very pragmatic: MMA hierarchy is determined by physical achievement. That is, the order or hierarchy of MMA is determined by the fight in the cage. In *Coriolanus,* Aufidius tells us that he has fought Coriolanus five times and that Coriolanus has often beaten him (1.11.7-8). And if the hierarchy of masculinity is best determined in the fight or in the cage, as MMA fighters argue, then we might consider that Aufidius perceives himself as being low in the order of things in comparison to Coriolanus. Desire in both *Coriolanus* and MMA is suppressed, in part, by the ways in which the fighters submit to order or hierarchy, and this is an important feature of both texts.

Desire, however, is always present in the cage and in the play, as well as in the experiences and practices of individuals, both women and men, regardless of the heteronormative contexts in which organizations, institutions, and cultures orchestrate their power in order to regulate or deny its presence. As Tim Dean writes, "sexuality has less to do with

genitalia than with the unconscious" and that "[s]exuality conforms to the dictates of fantasy, not to those of anatomy" (148). MMA and *Coriolanus* are shaped by the paradox that exists between the dictates of fantasy and desire, and the perceptions of heteronormative masculinity. Aufidius attests to this paradox when he embraces Coriolanus and says, "Here I clip / The anvil of my sword, and do contest / As hotly and as nobly with thy love / As ever in ambitious strength I did / Contend against thy valour" (4.5.108-12). This hot and noble contest between Coriolanus and Aufidius mingles fantasy with anatomy in a way that produces a form of masculinity that in turn enacts hegemony over both the spirit and the flesh.

Hegemonic masculinity is generated by the dramatic acts of brutality and violence that we can read and see in *Coriolanus* and MMA. We see this masculinity at work when Coriolanus refuses to show his wounds to the people—wounds that have been inflicted upon his body by other soldiers, including Aufidius. Coriolanus states, "I cannot bring / My tongue to such a pace. 'Look, sir, my wounds. / I got them in my country's service, when / Some certain of your brethren roared and ran'" (2.3.46-49). Not only does this image of Coriolanus present us with his distaste for the common people and an ideal masculinity in which men do not roar and run away from a fight; it also might imply that the only men worthy of mingling with, penetrating, or even gazing upon the body of Coriolanus are men such as Aufidius. But Coriolanus, as the ideal masculine subject, cannot allow himself to be penetrated by even the best of others, even though he and Aufidius desire each other. That is, there is an ironic contrast between brutality and intimacy in both MMA and the play, because at the same time that these fighters want to be made impenetrable, they also dream of discovering themselves, as Aufidius and Coriolanus do, in the merging of identities and of damaged bodies which can only occur in the context of the fight.

## 2. The Brutality of Words: Language and Hegemonic Masculinity

While I was observing an MMA training session, a fighter told me that "words defile things." Not only does this statement bring us back to Joyce Carol Oates's claim that a fight happens "in a place beyond words," but it also connects us to Coriolanus's own views with regard to words

versus actions: "When blows have made me stay I fled from words" (2.2.68). This statement indicates Coriolanus's preference for physical action and his need to have control over his own anatomy, but it might also indicate unconscious and unspoken fantasies about Aufidius that rise to the surface when Coriolanus is engaged in brutal and violent combat. Both Coriolanus and these MMA fighters distrust language because they think it lacks the clarity of a fight. They fear words because language has the potential to reveal the fantasies and desires that these fighters labor to repress, because they are unable to control how people might interpret their speech, and because language carries the potential to expose their heightened masculinity as a façade produced within heteronormative cultural codes.

The MMA fighters that I spoke with revealed a distaste for language when asked to describe a maneuver called a rear-naked choke-hold. In their view, the word *naked* defiles the perceived athletic purity of the hold. Many of the fighters I spoke with expressed disgust at the name of this particular hold, in which one fighter grabs another from behind, wraps his legs around the other's waist, and attempts to choke him around the neck. The implications of the hold's name, which makes room for the presence of desire, interfere with the notion of the sport or the fight as being pure or in an ideally masculine place beyond words. Words sexualize the hold and therefore emphasize vulnerability and penetrability. The fighters' discomfort with the terminology, rooted in a fear of penetration, mirrors Coriolanus's disgust at the idea of making his wounds visible to the people. That is, Coriolanus fears that, in examining his flesh, the people will speak impure words that would violate the nobility of his wounds—the very wounds earned in the purifying violence of battle—and therefore undermine the power of his masculine body. Menenius says to Coriolanus, "you must desire them / To think upon you," and Coriolanus responds, "I would they would forget me like the virtues" (2.3.51-53). The thought of exposing his naked wounds to the common people is disgusting. He is enraged at the ritual he must go through to become consul. "[I]f he show us his wounds," one citizen says, "we are to put our tongues into those wounds and speak for them" (2.3.5-7). Coriolanus, however, does not want them to penetrate him with their tongues. That is, he does not want the common citizen to think upon him, let alone speak for his wounds. His wounds serve as vulnerable holes in

the history of his body. If the people can verbalize the history of Coriolanus's body, then they might be able to subvert the myth of masculine exceptionalism that has shaped Coriolanus's identity as a Roman nobleman.

While the cultural logic of MMA and *Coriolanus* attempts to suppress desire, this desire still manages to rise to the surface. Fighters are concerned that their masculinity will be betrayed by a sexuality that is embedded in the language of the sport and in the gestures of the fight as well. Just as Coriolanus does not want his wounds to be penetrated by the thoughts of the people, at certain moments fighters are disturbed by and disgusted at the thought of anyone outside of the sport thinking of them as being vulnerable to, or desiring, penetration. It is not that fighters are or are not homosexual, but that homoeroticism is built into the action of the fight, just as it is built into the dramatic structure of *Coriolanus*, only to then be actively suppressed and denied.

Still, there is a desire for intimacy on the part of fighters. They seek to emulate and admire the bodies of other men, and even submit to the more idealized bodies in the sport as a gesture of male friendship. Yet at the same time, as Green points out, fighters are not allowed to desire other male bodies. In other words, they are not allowed to penetrate them. Green attempts to sustain his denial of penetration by applying his reading of the work of Georges Bataille to an interpretation of the sport. Building on Bataille's theories of excess and transgression as ways to create community through "a shared escape from the self," Green writes that the "MMA school is a site that facilitates intimacy" (389). Fighters cultivate relationships through violence; or, as Green states it, a fighter "chokes" his "way to friendship" (388). Here he describes how he applied the rear-naked choke-hold to his opponent. He writes:

> I could feel him tiring as his breathing became more ragged and his grip weaker. Taking advantage of this I managed to transition to his back. As he continued to take deep breaths, trying to twist into me, I managed to sink in the rear-naked choke. I hesitated but then slowly began to squeeze until he tapped. Afterward we lay on the mat breathing deep into our lungs….An hour later I knew all about his failing business venture. (389)

Green uses this anecdote to demonstrate the presence in MMA of intimacy and friendship, which in his view are cultivated by violence. The

language in this passage is full of sexual energy and desire, and yet Green goes on to say that fighters are not allowed to desire the masculine body—that is, to penetrate this ideal body. Anyone who reads this passage, however, should easily recognize that both men have penetrated one another—although the penetration is psychological, it is mediated by physical violence and enacted through the homoerotic rear-naked choke-hold—and that real intimacy cannot occur without physical vulnerability and penetration. This paradox between fantasy and perceptions of heteronormative masculinity, or the desire for intimacy and at the same time the denial of the desire for penetration, is at the heart of what makes MMA such a difficult cultural text. The violence is meant to both repress desire and at the same time fulfill a desire that is not simply being marginalized, but denied. For fighters and theorists like Green, the paradox between fantasy and perceptions of heteronormative masculinity depends on a logic or style of reasoning that is shaped by the ways in which they confuse brutality and sexuality, or violence and intimacy.

It is interesting to compare Aufidius's dream to Green's description of his encounter above. Aufidius recites his dream after Coriolanus has crossed into his territory: "all-noble Martius. Let me twine / Mine arms about that body" (4.5.105-06). This echoes Green's description of a rear-naked choke-hold. Aufidius's language, however, becomes even more erotically charged when he describes his "rapt heart" at the sight of Coriolanus, which parallels Green's depiction of breathing in his fight, and how Coriolanus has "beat [him] out" several times, finally saying to Coriolanus, "We have been down together in my sleep, / Unbuckling helms, fisting each other's throat" (4.5.115-24). These lines intensify the eroticism that is present but denied in Green's depiction and interpretation of his MMA experience.

By using the work of Georges Bataille to rationalize the violence of MMA as a path to intimacy and community, Green turns violence into a means of encountering the other. Green writes that violence is a way to "transform and discover the self through pain and pleasure, blood and sweat, self and other" (390). But Green denies the presence of sexual desire, and without the acknowledgment of desire and the possibility of penetration, it is impossible for Green to argue that intimacy can be cultivated within and through the violence of the sport. Fighters would like to maintain the façade required by hegemonic masculinity, this

impenetrable masculinity, while at the same time claiming that the sport is somehow a path to friendship and intimacy. While the potential for penetration and desire are present, it is the denial of their presence that makes Green's rationalizations untenable. The sport is shaped around the ideological fiction of masculinity, which is dependent upon the violent suppression of desire—in particular, homoerotic desire.

## 3. Conclusion: The Demystification of Masculinity

The play, which ends the way that I think many spectators might like to see MMA fights end—with the death of one of the participants—helps to reveal the logic that enforces this structure of suppression in the sport, while reading MMA next to the play helps to flesh out a vision of what an ultimate fight between Coriolanus and Aufidius might have looked like. The play ends with the Volscians surrounding Coriolanus and shouting "Tear him to pieces!" (5.6.121) as Aufidius encourages them. The death of Coriolanus seems to be the attempted destruction of desire, as the play ends with Aufidius standing over Coriolanus's body and stating, "My rage is gone, / And I am struck with sorrow" (5.6.147-48). Desire, however, persists: Aufidius's desires, and his need for an exclusively masculine intimacy through brutality, will remain unfulfilled or incomplete.

In the logic of masculinity in MMA and *Coriolanus*, one fighter seeks to inflict pain and suffering on the other until the other submits, or is obliterated. MMA presents us with a culture of violence that seeks nothing less than the submission of the other to the authority of violence as the price for intimacy. It represents a rising trend in the celebration of the spectacle of violence that is emerging as a defining aspect of our culture. The text of *Coriolanus,* through the symbolic power of its language, is able to demystify "the exemplarity of masculinity," which is an "ideological fiction" in early modern society (Dittmann 655). Because *Coriolanus* participates in the construction of this ideological fiction, only to dismember it in the end, when considered alongside MMA it can help us to better understand our own cultural moment and to consider what this sort of masculine violence might mean for our own society. In both contexts, masculinity seeks to make itself impenetrable to everything other than itself. And the more aware this masculinity becomes of its

vulnerability to being penetrated, the more antagonistic and violent it becomes. Like Coriolanus and Aufidius, it is always looking for a fight.

## Notes

1. Dana White's project is to present the combat sport to a mainstream audience; in other words, he is trying to create a popular audience for his business. *The Ultimate Fighter* is the average sports fan's most accessible introduction to MMA. It is a sport in which two fighters, most often male, enter a cage and use different styles of fighting, such as Muay Thai or jujutsu, as well as various punches, kicks, and holds to beat each other into submission. To end the match, one of the fighters must either tap out or pass out.

2. My conversations with MMA fighters occurred in the process of a different project for which I interviewed and observed fighters at a training facility in Canton, Ohio on April 1, 2012, and observed an amateur fight night in Akron, Ohio on April 21, 2012.

## Works Cited

Borer, Michael Ian and Tyler S. Schafer. "Culture War Confessionals: Conflicting Accounts of Christianity, Violence, and Mixed Martial Arts." *Journal of Media and Religion* 10 (2011): 165-184. *ILLIAD*. Web. 17 Apr. 2012.

*Coriolanus*. Dir. Ralph Fiennes. Weinstein Company, 2011. Film.

Dean, Tim. *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2009. Print.

Dittmann, Joo Young. "'Tear Him to Pieces:' De-Suturing Masculinity in Coriolanus." *English Studies* 90.6 (2009): 653-672. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 14 Apr. 2012.

Estill, Laura, and James L. Harner, eds. *World Shakespeare Bibliography Online*. Web. 12 December 2013. <http://www.worldshakesbib.org/index.html>

Green, Kyle. "It Hurts so it is Real: Sensing the Seduction of Mixed Martial Arts." *Social & Cultural Geography* 12.4 (2011): 377-396. *ILLIAD*. Web. 20 Apr. 2012.

Haywood, Robert. "George Bellow's 'Stag at Sharkey's': Boxing, Violence, and Male Identity." *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 2.2 (1988): 3-15. *JSTOR*. Web. 18 Aug. 2013.

Hirose, Akihiko and Kay Kei-ho Pih. "Men Who Strike and Men Who Submit: Hegemonic and Marginalized Masculinities in Mixed Martial Arts." *Men & Masculinities* 13.2 (2010): 190-209. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 14 Apr. 2012.

Oates, Joyce Carol. *On Boxing*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006. Print.

Shakespeare, William. *Coriolanus. The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition: Second Edition*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. New York: Norton, 2008. 2793-2880. Print.