

[Critical paper written for my 2009 Shakespeare course at Messiah College.]

Love is a Battlefield: Homoeroticism in *Coriolanus*

Homoerotic overtones are not uncommon in Shakespeare's plays. We find them in *Twelfth Night* in Antonio's relationship with Sebastian. In *The Merchant of Venice* we can interpret Antonio's actions towards Bassanio as indication of homosexual feelings. While the previous cases provide examples of homoeroticism between friends, Shakespeare's canon also contains examples of homoerotic overtones between hated enemies. In *Coriolanus* there is undeniable homoeroticism in the relationship between Aufidius and Coriolanus; the homoerotic tones illuminate the love/hate relationship between the two men, making that relationship as believable a match as any of Shakespeare's heterosexual couples.

It is quite clear from the beginning of the play that Aufidius and Coriolanus are hated enemies. The two are on opposite sides of the war: Aufidius serves the Volscians, Coriolanus the Romans. Aufidius states that "if we and Caius Martius [Coriolanus] chance to meet, 'tis sworn between us, we shall ever strike till one can do no more" (1.2.34-36). Before the characters meet in battle, Coriolanus describes Aufidius as "the man of my soul's hate" (1.5.10). When the two are engaged in battle, Coriolanus tells Aufidius, "I'll fight with none but thee, for I do hate thee worse than a promise breaker" (1.8.1-2). Aufidius returns these sentiments, telling Coriolanus, "We hate alike: Not Afric owns a serpent I abhor more than thy fame and envy" (1.8.3-4). Following the battle Aufidius relates his hatred for Coriolanus to his soldiers, expressing that nothing "shall lift up [its] rotten privilege or custom 'gainst [his] hate to Martius" (1.10.22-24). The two

men do not merely fight for opposing sides; they each hate the other specifically and with a passion.

Despite their hatred for each other, it is clear that the men admire and respect each other with a passion equal to their hatred. It is Coriolanus who first tells the audience about Aufidius, stating that the Volscians

have a leader,
Tullus Aufidius, that will put you to't.
I sin in envying his nobility;
And were I anything but what I am,
I would wish me only he
(1.1.127-131)

From a character famous for his unyielding pride, this is high praise indeed. Coriolanus does not seem to respect or admire any other character in the play (save, perhaps, his mother); he hates the plebes and is constantly at odds with the patricians. Yet Coriolanus heaps praise upon his most loathed enemy: confessing that he envies Aufidius nobility and stating that, if he could not be himself, then he would want to be Aufidius.

Coriolanus and Aufidius each respect and recognize the other as a worthy foe: the best opponent amongst their enemies. Coriolanus makes a point to seek Aufidius out in the battle at Corioles, inquiring of a Volscian senator whether “Tullus Aufidius [was]...within your walls” (1.4.13). During battle Coriolanus goes so far as to request a favor of Cominius, stating,

I do beseech you,

By all the battles wherein we have fought,
 By th' blood we have shed together, by th' vows
 We have made to endure friends, that you directly
 Set me against Aufidius. (1.6.55-59, 78-80)

Coriolanus wants to have the honor of fighting Aufidius himself; this request is so important to him that he calls on Cominius' memory of "all the battles wherein we have fought," of all their history together, in support of his request. Not only does he want the honor of fighting Aufidius by himself, Coriolanus also indicates that he would rather fight Aufidius and no one else.

Were half to half the world by th' ears, and he
 Upon my party, I'd revolt to make
 Only my wars with him. He is a lion
 That I am proud to hunt. (1.1.132-134)

Coriolanus enjoys the challenge of hunting this "lion"; he seems to enjoy the act of battling Aufidius just as much, if not more, than any victory. Such a claim is made all the more believable by the fact that Coriolanus and Aufidius have met many times in battle, and even though Coriolanus wins each time, he never kills Aufidius; if he kills Aufidius, he kills the only true challenge and worthy opponent he has. Coriolanus confirms this interpretation of events after he is banished from Rome; he tells Aufidius, "if I had fear'd death, of all the men i'th' world I would have 'voided thee" (4.5.83-85). Such a statement indicates that Coriolanus sees Aufidius as the only person able to kill him, the only person he would have reason to fear. Even though they are bitter enemies, their hatred for

each other does not prevent Aufidius and Coriolanus from recognizing the other as a worthy, admirable opponent.

It's a well known cliché that the line between the strong passions of hate and love can often become blurred; such is the case with Aufidius and Coriolanus. The hatred between the men is so strong, so enflamed by the passion of war, it is no surprise when the line becomes blurred in their relationship. Like the enmity between Benedick and Beatrice of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Coriolanus and Aufidius exist as enemies until the plots of other characters free them to admit to friendlier feelings. After Sicinius and Brutus' plot against Coriolanus results in his banishment from Rome, Coriolanus comes to Aufidius to suggest they join forces and fight the Romans together. Upon hearing Coriolanus' entreaty, Aufidius delivers a speech that contains the most overwhelmingly homoerotic language of the entire play.

Let me twine

Mine arms about that body, where against

My grained ash a hundred times hath broke...

I lov'd the maid I married; never man

Sigh'd 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...

...Thou hast beat me out

Twelve several times, and I have nightly since

Dreamt of encounters 'twixt thyself and me-
 We have been down together in my sleep,
 Unbuckling helms, fisting each other's throat
 And wak'd half dead with nothing." (4.5.109-111, 117-121, 124-129)

For Aufidius the line between love (erotic love, at least) and hate has clearly blurred. He desires to embrace the body of his hated enemy Coriolanus (these lines become especially homoerotic in the BBC film version due to the pacing and blocking of the scene). Aufidius tells Coriolanus that the sight of him is more exciting than the sight of a woman. More specifically, Aufidius finds the sight of Coriolanus—at this moment—more exciting than the sight of his wife on their wedding night: “more dances my rapt heart than when I first my wedded mistress saw bestride my threshold.” Furthermore, Aufidius describes how he often dreams of fighting with Coriolanus, “unbuckling helms, fisting each other's throat.” The language Aufidius uses to describe his dream is violent and inescapably erotic, demonstrating the scope of his passion for Coriolanus. While it was argued above that the two men not only hate but also respect each other, the proof for such a claim had come primarily from Coriolanus' speeches; however, this speech of Aufidius' proves those feelings are returned. The battles between the two men are as important to Aufidius as the are to Coriolanus; Aufidius not only remembers these battles (“where against my grained ash a hundred times hath broke”), but also dreams about them as well (“we have been down together in my sleep”). Coriolanus and Aufidius' hated each other so passionately that it is no surprise to find that same level of passion in their love for one another.

It is clear that Coriolanus and Aufidius share a passionate relationship; it is equally clear that their homoerotic relationship demonstrates a believable match. Shakespeare often stages love-at-first-sight romances that require quite a bit of suspended disbelief from the audience: Romeo and Juliet, Miranda and Ferdinand, Oliver and Celia. Yet Coriolanus and Aufidius' love does not spontaneously appear in this manner, instead the groundwork is established through their long relationship as opponents. All of the points mentioned above help to make a homoerotic relationship believable as a match: they have a history together as enemies, they respect and admire each other, they each view the other as a worthy opponent, and both their hatred and their respect are detailed in passionate terms. The match appears even more credible from Coriolanus' end than from Aufidius' end. The women in Coriolanus' life, his mother and his wife, are either so overpowering or so weak that it is no surprise when he seeks the affection and affirmation of Aufidius. Coriolanus' mother, Volumnia, is an overpowering force in the play. It is clear that she has been both father and mother to Coriolanus (perhaps more father than mother), pushing him to be a proud and celebrated warrior. Coriolanus refers to his mother as "the honour'd mould wherein this trunk was framed," calling her "Olympus" to his "molehill" and admitting that "there's no man in the world more bound to his mother" (5.3.22-23, 30, 160-161). While Coriolanus clearly views his mother as godlike and allows himself to be shaped and controlled by her, it is less clear how he views his wife, Virgilia. Compared to Volumnia, Virgilia rarely speaks and, as a result, is a rather forgettable character. Aufidius, on the other hand, is Coriolanus' equal. With an

overbearing mother and a forgettable wife, it is no surprise that Coriolanus is drawn to a man that he can hold his own against.

The relationship between Aufidius and Coriolanus is clearly an emotionally and physically charged one. Enflamed by the passions of war, it is no surprise when their hatred takes a homoerotic turn. Coriolanus and Aufidius' entire relationship is marked by passion: passionate hatred, passionate battles, passionate admiration, passionate jealousy, and passionate love. The homoerotic love/hate relationship between Coriolanus and Aufidius reveals a match between equals, a match just as, if not more, believable than any heterosexual match in Shakespeare's canon.