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Military Masculinity and the Act of Killing in Hamlet and Afghanistan

Hannah Partis-Jennings

Abstract:

This article looks at a 2011 incident which led to a soldier (Marine A) being convicted of murdering an Afghan insurgent. It focuses on the words (quoting from Hamlet) spoken by the Marine as he carried out the killing: “shuffle off this mortal coil, you cunt” and examines the link that these words establish between the war in Afghanistan and Shakespeare’s play. The article explores the connections between Hamlet and Marine A, and how their actions can be understood to both parallel each other and diverge around ethical contemplation, access to military masculinity, the banishing of the feminine and a process of mediation, performance and interpretation.

Keywords: Military Masculinity, Hamlet, Marine A, Afghanistan, War

Introduction - Hamlet in Afghanistan:

Following the events of 9/11 in 2001 and the commencement of war in Afghanistan, British troops became engaged militarily in a conflict that would last more than a decade and which, while originally designed as regime change to oust a Taliban government and pursue Osama bin Laden, would become a prolonged and messy counter-insurgency and state-building commitment (Paris 2013). The British military’s role largely mirrored that of their American counterparts; military push-back against Taliban insurgents, coupled with the training of Afghan security forces, and civilian engagement and development projects such as building schools and bridges (Duncanson 2013, 95). Towards the end of their deployment the British were predominantly operating in Helmand Province, a region in the south of the county with large amounts of

‘insurgent’ activity, extensive ‘kinetic’ engagement by the British, and high casualty rates among British military personnel (Farrell and Gordon 2009).

In this article I focus on an incident involving a Royal Marine named Alexander Blackman (known, and referred to hereafter, as Marine A) stationed in Helmand, who shot and killed an injured Taliban insurgent while out on patrol in 2011. The incident was accidentally captured on the head-camera of a fellow soldier and when the footage was discovered, Marine A was tried and found guilty of murder (Morris 2014). This was the first time since the Second World War that a soldier on active duty had been convicted of such a crime in Britain (Morris and Norton-Taylor 2013). According to media reports, over 100,000 people signed a petition calling for the conviction to be overturned (Pendlebury 2015). The audio recording of the incident and photographic stills were released on YouTube¹ and are thus publically available. The shooting also became the subject of a BBC documentary which, through interviews with soldiers and expert commentators tackled some of the ethical questions and controversies around the incident (Terrill 2014). One aspect of the killing that received little attention was the fact that the words “shuffle off this mortal coil” - almost a direct quote from Hamlet’s fourth soliloquy (the “To be or not to be” speech) - were spoken by Marine A just after he shot the Afghan man (Morris 2014). Beyond the sheer incongruity of the phrase in this context, there is potentially a fascinating access point inherent in the use of the quotation, which this article seeks to explore. Thus I use the frame of literary aesthetics to generate parallels

¹ This audio and all comments referenced in this article are available at: “Court Releases Audio of Royal Marine Executing Taliban Captive” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKxCZxPmvN8>.

and disjuncture which can elucidate aspects of the performance of military masculinity and of killing.

Theorising the Performance of Military Masculinity

In this article, drawing on Judith Butler's (2010) conception of relationality, as well as intersecting ideas around performance, intertextuality and gender I explore the mechanisms by which we understand and process acts of violence in war, our consumption of performances of dying and killing.

Military masculinity is a term to describe the sets of norms and behaviours most valued and aspired to in a military context (Eichler 2014). It includes elements such as physical strength, bravery, a lack of emotions such as fear and sadness and a denigration of the feminized (p. 82). It is both an individual and an institutional paradigm (Kronsell 2016). Feminist scholarship has grown wary of simplistically engaging military masculinity as a category of analysis noting that it is a fluid and shifting category, complex and intersectional and that naming it contributes to the process of its construction (see Bulmer 2013; Higate 2003; Welland 2013). I use it here to elucidate how gendered performances of war frame acts of killing as they take place. Yet I also push the boundaries of thinking around military masculinity to argue that it implies a process of performance and interpretation – witnessing performance, telling of it, framing it – as well as of action.

Butler writes that our identities are bound tightly together with our vulnerability to others, our inherent need to be defined as an entity in fluid relation to that Other which stands definitional against the 'I' (Butler 2010, 33). Her conceptions of ethics and the nature of being, are connected to our inevitable

dependence upon the Other. Yet she sees the notion of relational ethics, of relating to another within an ethical spectrum, as strictly bound within certain logics of war and violence (2010). While soldiers/combatants/war-time populations may be encouraged to develop fierce loyalty to their intimate group/fellow soldiers or citizens, the possibility of relating to the enemy Other is cognitively curtailed. There are nuances and complexities within this, and it is a fluid and performative construction of enmity. Yet, arguably there is a particular conception of the “enemy” employed in traditional performances of military masculinity which shuts down any possibility of understanding them as fully human (Butler 2010; Hearn 2012, 46).

This war-based enmity is structured by those who manifest it through cognitive boundary making with gendered and racialised elements such as gendered shaming and the denigration of that which is understood as feminized (Cohn 1987; Mann 2014). Cohn suggests that the masculine ideal fostered by the military is one which validates action over thought, which cultivates the capacity to subdue the thinking mind and is therefore fundamentally “anti-ethical”, she argues that many emotions are suppressed in war and hatred is given a prime position in the hierarchy of allowable feelings (Cohn 1999, 462). Moreover, the capacity and desire to think ethically, to consider the relationality of human existence which might provoke empathy and render violence more difficult, can coded as feminine and radically denigrated and devalued (Cohn 1987).

Arguably, within the context of military training, a certain capacity to act without excessive thought is associated with masculine bravery (Mann 2014). As Hamlet suggests “conscience does make cowards of us all” where conscience and therefore cowardliness are the domain of the feminized (Shakespeare 2007,

1958). Thus the supremacy of action over thought, and the denigration of relational intellectualizing are gendered and become a justificatory mechanism, a fundamental structure of heroic masculinity which shuts down ethical cognition, policing the boundaries of allowable action. Institutionalized fear of any feminized trend towards non-violence in the structures of militarism has severe consequences. In the First World War for instance, the British Army executed 306 of its own soldiers for “cowardliness”, - the refusal to fight and kill (Taylor-Whiffen 2011). Cohn’s analysis of gendered military practices and the film *Saving Private Ryan*, makes the point that one character is symbolically vilified for his feminized capacity to show mercy, and his non-violent ethic is linked to the subsequent death of heroic masculine soldiers (Cohn 1999). What is most notable about this notion of cowardliness is the shamefulness it evokes (Mann 2014; Cohn 1987). That understood as feminine is purged partially through linking it with shame, and the necessity to prove one’s capacity to demonstrate masculine traits, shaming and humiliating those that cannot maintain the “courage, power and authority exclusively associated with masculinity” in the logic of warfare and militarism (Sasson-Levy 2003, 451).

In the case of Marine A the act of killing itself, recorded visually and audibly, is the moment which fixed a performance to be interpreted. Killing as performance is the most intimate act, the most imbued with gendered weight where “militarized masculinities function as spatiotemporal landmarks that give killing in war its ‘orientation’ and make it morally intelligible” (Daggett 2015, 361). This performance of enmity enacted within and through the confusion and fear of active war killing is a site of particular ethical significance. Yet arguably the echoing up of this performative infrastructure generated by the public

availability of the killing is an equally central site of mediated enmity in which the affective centrality of the logic of war becomes evident in a virtual domain (in this article particularly YouTube and a specifically designed website).

To discuss this incident in a way that elucidates a particular performance militarized masculinity I draw on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. I am thus engaging with the so-called "aesthetic turn" - a mode of understanding and interpretation which "reorients our very understanding of the political" (Bleiker 2001, 511) whereby "aesthetic sources are models for rethinking political global predicaments" (Frost 2010, 435). Using an aesthetic lens to understand aspects of the study of international relations has interesting lineage (see Bleiker 2001; Frost 2010; Holden 2006; Jabri 2006; Moore and Shepherd 2010). This approach highlights "[t]he fact that through the work of art a truth is experienced that we cannot attain in any other way" (Gadamer 1975, 18) and the implications this has for global politics. Thus in looking at the intertextual dynamics between *Hamlet* and Marine A shooting an injured Taliban insurgent, I engage with an approach that is both disruptive and reflective, that offers insight while equally making the familiar strange (Frost 2010) and implicating the interpreters and representations of a given moment in the overarching logic that gives that moment meaning (Jabri 2006; Bleiker 2001, 513). Military masculinity then, can be understood as an interpretative framework through which war is read, an aesthetic through which violence is consumed. Technology and virtual consumption are implicated in militarized masculinity as it now exists. Eisenstein argues that "[i]n this techno-masculinist world we inhabit we are shown war as the drama of manhood" (Eisenstein 2007, 24) a drama not always dependent on biological sex or particular acts, but upon "masculine discourses

that can be adopted by males or females” (p. 27) and represented in the wider public domain.

Methodology:

This article undertakes a discourse analytical investigation of meaning in an instance of performative intertextuality. Marine A’s *Hamlet* citation is a particularly interesting moment of intertextuality, through which the logic of war and its ramifications are brought into performative iteration. Intertextuality, as understood by poststructuralist thinkers, refers to the referential capacities of texts (where texts constitute multiple discursive materials), and the implications of such cross-context referencing (Hodges 2011). Intertextuality is the lifting or decontextualisation of a piece of discourse from a given setting and its inserting or recontextualisation into another (Hodges 2011, 8; Bauman and Briggs 1990). The *Hamlet* quote being used by Marine A in Afghanistan is an example of what Derrida (1977) called *citationality*, whereby samples of “prior text” are quoted, and “draw attention to the previous context in which those words were spoken while reinterpreting them in the current interactional setting” (Hodges 2011, 10). Kristeva has argued that such recontextualisations may invoke “a signification opposed to that of the other’s word”, creating contradictions in textual significance between the original and referential usages (1980, 73).

By using *Hamlet* to point to both the similarities and differences between the character of Hamlet and Marine A, and using these to discuss military masculinity, I draw upon this insight and the method of intertextual deconstruction (Hodges 2011). This is an investigation of discourse as

performance which was given an audience beyond its context by the accidental video recording.

The method of the article is primarily discourse analytical, in that it seeks to investigate how meaning is constituted through language, but it draws upon a “bricolage” (Aradau and Huymans 2014, 607) approach to selecting pieces of discursive iteration. As part of my interpretation I conducted a discourse analysis of a specifically designed advocacy website called *Justice for Marine A*, as well as the audio recording of the incident on YouTube and the comments beneath it, other quotes from Hamlet complimenting the analysis, and interviews and comments in the BBC documentary about the incident, all of which correspond to the overarching aim of the article. My approach is thus to provide a “tentative and and explorative assembling of...data and concept fragments in relation to a research question or set of issues” (Aradau and Huysmans 2014, 607).

Hamlet, Marine A and Military Masculinity

Hamlet, the story of a prince trying to take revenge upon his uncle for murdering his (Hamlet’s) father (the King) and marrying his mother (Shakespeare 2007, 1922), is a play that has generated a wealth of literary criticism, as well as attention from other disciplines. It has attracted analysis and commentary from Joyce, Hegel, Goethe, Freud, Lacan, Nietzsche, Schmitt and many others (Critchley and Webster 2013, 1.79). As such, it is a piece of our collective aesthetic fabric that has become foundationally entwined in human culture. Moreover it is indicative of the extent to which the play is understood as tapping into something significant about human internal, psychoanalytic, social and political

life that it has been so intensively studied and critiqued. The result of this extensive interest in the work has been multiple divergent interpretations of its purpose and meaning. In this article, I draw upon critical insights that most particularly highlight the logics of military masculinity and killing.

The most important of these is that Hamlet is a character who, although capable of violence, is unable to kill his uncle Claudius, despite his desperate desire to do so in service of filial (and civic) duty (to avenge his father's murder and obey his father's ghost). As argued by Critchley and Webster, this inability is due to the subversion of action to the thinking mind (2013, l. 106) – his relational capacity preventing unethical action. Hamlet intellectualizes the violence he must commit, and thus is unable to enact it. An intertextual linking of *Hamlet* and Marine A through the citationality of the phrase “shuffle off this mortal coil”, demonstrates opposing relationships between thought and action. Hamlet's ability to commit violence is curtailed by his relational intellect, his capacity to understand the enemy Other (Claudius) as human. While Marine A, in performing military masculinity, is able to commit violence without apparent thought,² bypassing the vulnerability that links Self and Other (Butler 2010). In that sense, the moment of citationality highlights difference between the two actors, an oppositional ethical signification (Kristeva 1980, 73).

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is well known for its rich psychoanalytical insight and its memorable merging of linguistic beauty and torturous existential dilemma. Hamlet is in some ways perceived as an everyman, an emblem of humanity's struggle for self-realization. One of the most famous parts of the text,

² This is not to suggest that soldiers are incapable of feeling trauma, remorse, pain etc. around killing, but that the act itself takes place within specific cognitive limitations as Marine A himself has stated (see Pendlebury 2015).

the most familiar, analyzed, and memorized, is the fourth soliloquy - the “To be or not to be” speech. This speech has long captivated the curiosity of readers and viewers, with its heart-wrenching plea to the internal self, its foundational questioning of the vulnerability and collective suffering of human existence, and its invocation of a common morality, judgment and death (see Petronella 1974). It “speaks in universal terms” and yet simultaneously “refers to the question of a release from mortality” for an individual person, who is burdened by the capacity to envision the collective “pain and struggle of the world” (p. 83).

From this speech come the words spoken by Marine A as he ended the life of an injured Afghan man (Morris 2014) – “shuffle off this mortal coil” where a “mortal coil” signals our earthy life, and shuffling evokes the indignity and irrelevance that marks our departure in death (Petronella 1974, 83). The startling juxtaposition of such decisive brutality with an invocation of one of our greatest literary monuments to indecisiveness is ironic and attention-grabbing. One is left wondering why the soldier would choose to make this reference, marveling at the performativity, almost theatricality of his decision to do so, and astounded that such a cultural icon would be referenced in this context. However this moment of intertextual citation offers a particular window into the logic of war, signaling the extent to which the original context of the play is both *echoed and subverted* in the shooting of a Taliban insurgent by a British soldier. Both Hamlet and Marine A arguably seek access to military masculine heroism through killing. Marine A’s lack of ethical contemplation in killing subverts the original context in which ethical contemplation is so central. Yet as I discuss below, in exploring the incident through the aesthetic lens of Shakespeare’s play both performances of heroism show up gendered similarities.

The killing has been treated as pathological or exceptional; Marine A ended up on trial for murder and was found guilty. In this case, the key element was the fact that his actions were accidentally caught on camera (Morris and Norton-Taylor 2013). However, if you look at the logic of the killing, especially when elucidated through a gender-sensitive ethical framework, it is hardly differentiated from the founding parameters of war-fighting *writ large*. As Sandra Whitworth points out, military training is “in short...about preparing people to destroy other human beings by force” (Whitworth 2004, 151). The results of this particular kind of dehumanizing militarization is starkly highlighted by the Marine A incident in Afghanistan. This kind of training seeks to validate action above all, to imbue its central actors, like Marine A, with a sense of urgency that subverts vulnerability, and renders impossible the kinds of relational contemplation through which Hamlet envisages the universality of human life and the grievability of the Other (Hearn 2012. 46; Butler 2010).

It is easy to hear in the audio recording of Marine A’s actions, released to the public and available on YouTube, that he and other soldiers frame the injured man as sub-human. He is the enemy Other and his life is not the same level of human as theirs (Butler 2010; Hearn 2012). Joanne Burke makes the point that in this incident you can see the cheapening of enemy lives that allows them to become “fair game”, fair targets for violence (Terrill 2014). The soldiers are hugely reluctant to call for a medical helicopter or administer first aid, they refer to the man using various expletives and insults and while it cannot be seen in the public stills, according to the BBC documentary, they drag him roughly through the field (Terrill 2014). At one point one soldier specifically says, “I don’t give a fuck about you son”. They see the man only in terms of the damage he had the

potential to do to them, echoing Butler's understanding of how grievability is curtailed (Butler 2010). One soldier in the BBC documentary argues that Taliban brutality left British soldiers dehumanized (Terrill 2014), and thus arguably it makes sense that they would in turn, dehumanize their enemy since their own humanity and therefore capacity to recognize their human relationality, is depleted (Hearn 2012, 46). The men in the audio recording discuss how they should just shoot the Taliban fighter in the head but then suggest that this would be too obvious. When Marine A does eventually shoot the man in the chest the shock value is greatly mitigated by the language and violent attitude that preceded it - in some ways the act seems logical or inevitable in this setting, and in this moment.

Marine A then, is what Hamlet desires to become, capable of action without recourse to human ethics, deeply embedded within a system of logic that deliberately makes such ethical understandings impossible (Butler 2010; Hearn 2012; Mann 2014). Essentially the logic of war shuts down the possibility for relationality with those outside your intimate group (Hearn 2012, 46). Butler outlines the manner in which our capacity to view the life of the Other as grievable can be curtailed (Butler 2010, 7-8) and in a reversal of intertextual signification (Kristeva 1980) the use of the Shakespearean reference by Marine A, exemplifies Butler's insights. For Hamlet, violent action is not the issue, he can act on impulse, and is reactionary at various points in the text, most notably when he kills Polonius (Bradley 1991, 109). However, by the time he reaches the "To be" speech, Hamlet is incapable of action because he is required to contemplate a consequentialist positioning of his act within the wider context of morality, ethics and judgment (Petronella 1974). In the fourth soliloquy it is not

he, the individual man, but humans collectively that are burdened with the “heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks” that come with “weary life”. So that suffering in life, but also fear of the unknown hereafter: “the dread of something after death”, are universal levelers, felt and endured by friend and foe alike (Shakespeare 2007, 1957 - 8). Arguably for Hamlet, despite the wrong that Claudius has done to him, it becomes deeply paralyzing to contemplate the ultimate violence against his uncle, since that contemplation takes place within the broader intellectual spectrum of a visualization of the human condition.

As Butler elucidates, the manner in which we value a given life, is intimately related to the extent to which we are allowed to view it as “grievable” within the dominant discourses available for contemplation (Butler 2010, 7-8). The use of the phrase “shuffle off this mortal coil” by Marine A as he shot a badly injured man in the chest, subverts its original context - Hamlet’s ethical contemplation - by becoming a signifier of the reduction of humanity within the logic of war. It points to the difference between Hamlet and Marine A who echoes his words; namely that Marine A has been trained to operate in this moment without ethical deliberation, without humanizing framing, without viewing certain lives as “grievable” lives (Butler 2010; Hearn 2012).

In the audio recording, one of the most interesting moments takes place just after the shooting. Marine A speaks to the other soldiers, declaring, “it’s nothing he wouldn’t do to us”. One of them agrees, “I know, exactly”. This sentiment points to an instant in which relationality is banished and reiterated simultaneously; Marine A is actively justifying his actions in terms of the relationship between them (British soldiers) and the Taliban, and simultaneously delineating it as one of mutual unrecognizability. He shuts down

the possibility of seeing a person lying dead on the ground, of understanding that this person is human like him, by defining him in terms of his capacity to do them harm (Butler 2010). He recognizes his vulnerability to the Other, but he must not accept it, he must eliminate it. Many of those interviewed in the BBC documentary and those who comment beneath the YouTube version of the audio recording cite a similar rationale, referencing the things Taliban militias have done or would like to do to British soldiers (Terrill 2014). Cohn and Weber point out that the need to eliminate any potential for mercy, is central to the cultivation of military masculinity and central to war (Cohn 1999, 465-6). Joanna Burke (interviewed for the BBC documentary) comments that without such logic, what would remain for soldiers would be a terrible guilt (Terrill 2014). Indeed in Hamlet, part of what cripples him psychologically is his inability to utterly dehumanize his enemy, meaning that he is caught between the guilt of duty, and the guilt of committing terrible violence. This guilt simply cannot be allowed in the logic of war, since it would utterly curtail the capacity of soldiers to 'do their duty', which is seen as so vital to their role by so many of those who chose to comment on YouTube.

While Marine A is perceived on the one hand as a murderer, his actions in the context of war are probably not remotely exceptional. In fact, the comments left beneath the YouTube video of the incident as well as an analysis of the support website *Justice for Marine A*, are informative in this regard. Commentary is mixed but a great deal refers to the fact that the injured man was an enemy, that he would have and did do the same to Brits, that he deserves death because of who he is, that the public and the state should support a soldier who was doing his duty, that exceptional measures are warranted in war, and who among

us is fit to judge such heroes without knowing what they've gone through. One commentator angrily decrying "do-gooders" suggests in capital letters that "war is war" and such things are what happen in war. The BBC documentary about the incident interviews protesting Britons who suggest that Marine A is simply a hero who was doing his job (Terrill 2014). What becomes obvious is that this incident is not perceived as drastically exceptional, and in fact it is seen as obviously unexceptional by many. If you were to sum up the gist of both critical and supportive commentary in the BBC documentary and under the YouTube video/audio, it would be with the suggestion that acts such as this are inevitable in the context of war. Any acceptance of the logic of war therefore requires implicit or explicit acceptance of the necessity of dehumanizing the enemy enough to kill them in whatever way available at the time (Hearn 2012, 46; Mann 2014).

Military Masculinity as Performance

Hamlet is attempting to access a kind of militarized masculinity, in order to kill an enemy and regain control of his country but he cannot. Janet Adelman has argued that the entire trend of Hamlet's narrative is interwoven and dependent on the need to purge notions of a decadent, unpredictable and contaminating femininity from the play, the hero and the body politic of Denmark (Adelman 1992, 11-37). Adelman states that Hamlet attempts "to locate a point of origin for the staleness of the world and his own pull toward death" and "discovers this point of origin in his mother's body", which becomes conflated with corporal and psychological femininity generally (1992, 17). Adelman highlights the play's linguistic invocations of Eve and original sin as located within the maternal body,

and the deep psychological disgust Hamlet manifests towards notions of the feminine and female sexuality (p. 36) echoing the links scholars have drawn between the expulsion, repression or degradation of the feminine and the logics of war and soldiering (see Cockburn 2008; Enloe 2013; Goldstein 2001; Whitworth 2004). It is only upon the death (destruction) of his mother, this origin of feminine contamination, that Hamlet fulfills his heroic duty and kills his enemy, earning a *military* burial (“the rites of war”) (Shakespeare 2007, 1997, 1999).

For Pin-Fat and Stern the female/feminised body in the masculine sphere of the military will always be expelled, re-signified, generative of deep unease since ‘the markings of masculinity make possible the workings of the military only if they are maintained as seemingly distinct and, indeed, dichotomous’ (Pin-fat and Stern 2005, 33). In dialogue around the film *Saving Private Ryan*, Cynthia Weber and Carol Cohn discuss how the feminine is banished from the masculine domain of the military, both in aesthetic and in praxis (Cohn 1999). This notion transcends particular men or women, and centers on the premise that the feminine is soft, emotional, and a potentially dangerous impediment for the duties of war-fighting (Basham 2013, 54; Welland 2013). The feminine is associated with the inappropriate desire to spare the life of the enemy Other, a desire which must be purged from the masculinized military domain of violent action, and Cohn and Weber point out that this purging and dichotomizing is a central foundation of the military mentality (Cohn 1999, 461).

The BBC documentary examining the Marine A killing interviews multiple other (male) soldiers and one points out that the notion of obeying rules of engagement (designed to be more humane and restrained) in the context of war

is feminized. He suggests that in Afghanistan you can: “walk around being the weak security force or...project an air of Taliban masculinity”. There is an understanding that to stay alive and do your job in this context you must “equalize their [the Taliban’s] brutality” (Terrill 2014). The idea that this brutality is part of what it takes to be a real man operating within the logic of war arguably allowed Marine A to do what he did. Mann cites research linking mass shootings in the US to misplaced attempts to access an unattainable masculine identity, and the Marine A incident, situated as it was within a pressure-cooker context taps into similar trend towards relying upon violence in an effort to exist within a gendered logic (Mann 2014, 120-1).

These gender dynamics are exemplified in the BBC documentary by a soldier stationed at the same Helmand base as Marine A whose vitriolic hatred for the Taliban is both gendered and uncontrollable. He labels them feminized “pussies”, men who do not live up to the masculine ideal since they have women and children doing their dirty work for them, and the soldier exclaims aggressively that he hates them, all of them (Terrill 2014). So on the one hand, the Taliban exemplify a brutal masculinity that must be equaled if the British forces are not to be perceived as weak, on the other they are feminized Others, failing by idealized masculine standards. This paradox is central to the capacity of the soldiers to dehumanize the enemy, calling upon contradicting or hybridized gendered frames, to denigrate them and distance them from the soldiers themselves and the stable heterosexual masculine normality to which militarism aspires (Basham 2013; Hearn 2012, 46; Sjoberg 2014; Welland 2013).

A key factor that polices military masculinity is the possibility of gendered shame befalling those who cannot live up to a masculine ideal. The word shame

is indebted to terms meaning “to cover, to veil, to hide” which is indicative of its impact on individuals (Pattison 2000, 40). When shamed, we physically and mentally withdraw. We feel undone, cripplingly self-conscious, debilitating aware of our own perceived inadequacy and totally unable to manage the impact of that awareness (p. 41). Crucially, shame is so viscerally and emotionally powerful that it shuts down cognition. Shame is anathema to considered thought, to processes of thinking, and therefore to moral deliberation. Moreover shame gathers momentum, if reiterated and referred to habitually, and in cultural discourse, it can produce a sustained feeling of urgency. There is a need to rectify the imbalance felt in ones sense of self, to eliminate shame via “hyperbolic displays of agency” manifesting in aggression or violence (Mann 2014, 41, 117). Martha Nussbaum (2004) and Judith Jordan (1989) note that shame denies the possibility of empathy. Mann goes a step further and argues that in order to banish shame, there is a need to humiliate others, to practice violence upon them in order to reassert the broken sense of self (2014, 117, 124).

Shame taps into the deepest roots of identity structures, and therefore unsurprisingly it can have strongly gendered implications and causes. Feminist scholars have pointed to the role of basic military training in generating gendered shame (Goldstein 2001; Whitworth 2004). If a male soldier is perceived as weak, failing or overly thoughtful, he is associated with the feminine. He is a “pussy”, a “faggot” a “little bitch” (Mann 2014, 212). His gendered identity becomes vulnerable, the notion of the feminine becomes a weapon which can disrupt his most personal sense of self-worth. In the audio recording of the Marine A incident the soldiers refer to their enemy as a “cunt”, an expletive which, similar to “fuck” (also used by the soldiers), has a specifically

gendered connotation (McKinnon 1989, 4). This word seems to function as the visceral expression of disgust at the feminine; the attempt to expel or purge the female, for the soldiers to force gendered shame upon the enemy Other. Mann argues that shame in the masculine domain provokes the feminization of others in an attempt for the shamed subject(s) to recover their sense of self (2014). The actions of Marine A can therefore be understood as a product of gendered shame, abstracted through the cultural and behavioural framework of military training and practice (Sasson-Levy 2003). A gendered “shame-to-power conversion”³ (Mann 2014, 131 - 140) by the soldiers is visible in the feminizing and killing of the injured Afghan insurgent; Marine A manifests the desire to control his identity in an uncontrollable context, to regain agency by denying agency to the Other, shaming him, dehumanizing him, committing violence against him and in doing so striving to regain some semblance of the promised military masculine power (Mann 2014; Richter-Montpetit 2007; Welland 2013).

Scholars have pointed out that behavioural expectations generated by military masculinities are becoming disconnected from actual soldiering tasks. As Richter-Montpetit argues, citing Whitworth, this disconnect renders masculine identities in the military “inherently fragile”. There are “discrepancies between the myth/promise-fueled expectations fostered in military training on the one hand, and the unstable and uncontrollable reality of war on the other” (Richter-Montpetit 2007, 45). Duncanson writes about peacekeeper masculinity as a modification of the traditional military masculine framework to include more previously feminized tasks (2013, 95). Similarly Welland argues that

³ This is where the fear of gendered shaming is banished through the use of power and dominance over an enemy Other (see Mann 2014, 131 - 140).

asexuality and discipline are hard won myths through which the homosocial behavior and feminized tasks of solidering are obfuscated (Welland 2013). These frameworks signal the adaptation of masculine identity structures in the face of the shifting conduct and requirements of war, that often include peace-related activities and population engagement (Duncanson 2013; Paris 2013). However there is an inherent tension in the ability of individuals to adapt to “softer” tasks (like peacekeeping), and to reconcile their ideas and expectations about militarized masculine practice with the situations they find themselves in and the tasks they perform (Duncanson 2013; Welland 2013). There is often a sense that soldiers are trained to be masculine and then paradoxically expected to carry out feminized activities (Welland 2013). The military masculinities which Mann (2014, 125) argues are fostered in basic-training through gendered shaming, require an outlet, yet the possibilities for banishing this shame through demonstrations of military masculinity are becoming more restricted and more confused in the modern, hybridized, and regulated military climate. Violent outbursts are hardly pathological in this context, but the logical corollary of the logic of war which relies on contradictions, psychological pressures and Othering (Welland 2013). The relationship between gendered shame, acts of violence/killing (such as in the Marine A case) and military masculinity can be further elucidated by looking at the parallels between this context and Hamlet’s.

The notion of femininity is deeply connected to ideas around shame, humiliation and original sin in *Hamlet* (Adelman 1992). For Adelman, what Hamlet battles in the text is the shameful “subjection of male to female” inherent in his inability to act decisively, and she argues that the whole story is centered on combatting the contamination of the feminine. This echoes Cohn and Weber’s

point that military praxis requires a “purging of the feminine” (Cohn 1999, 462). Thus the aesthetic of gendered shame and pre-emptive gender crisis that *Hamlet* demonstrates offers an insightful parallel into the dangerous psychological consequences of the required “shame-to-power conversion” in military masculinities (Mann 2014, 131 - 40). Through this aesthetic lens pathological acts of violence committed by soldiers can be seen as a way of trying to regain ownership of the gendered self. To attempt to banish shame and the linked possibility of being contaminated by femininity. The Marine A incident might not have been understood as gendered, but as mentioned above, one of the justifications for his actions offered by a fellow soldier was that the British feel feminized and weak in Afghanistan, and must try to emulate or equal what he called “Taliban masculinity” (Terrill 2014). These gendered parallels between Marine A and *Hamlet* thus require us to contemplate the effects of institutional destabilization of gender identity, of forcing soldiers to prove their gender and thus selfhood, according to the unattainable and unrealistic parameters characteristic of the logic of war.

Performing violence and the Political

In this last section the article links the performativity of the Marine A incident, both in its original form and due to its subsequent public availability, and the meta-theatricality of murder in *Hamlet*. I argue that the Marine A incident echoes Shakespeare’s play due to its particularly gendered drama and by virtue of the fact that both contexts include mediated performances.

In *Hamlet* there is a particular power associated with the performance of murder - Hamlet arranges a play version of his father’s murder in order to

confirm his suspicions about the culprits - but it is also a display of bravado. The play is the means through which Hamlet makes Claudius afraid, through which he tries to demonstrate his capacity to avenge his father like a real man. Performance here is gendered, Hamlet uses theatricality to demonstrate and justify his own capacity and desire to kill, to fulfill his gendered filial duty (Shakespeare 2007, 1952 - 6). The video/audio recording of Marine A shooting the insurgent is also notable for its theatricality. Not only is the use of the Shakespeare quote performative in and of itself, but the whole scene demonstrates a strange staginess. This was noted in the BBC documentary where one marine commented that Marine A was putting on an act of bravado highly common in the context of war. He suggested that it is an "air of drama that comes with command...a bit of bravado" (Terrill 2014). Arguably, the performance of hyper-masculine aggression and callous detachment is a mechanism for leadership in the military, a way to show those in your command that gender is on your side, and that like a real military man, you have the situation under control. Performance is an under-theorized but vital component of warfare (see Higate and Henry 2009), and the fact that Hamlet uses a theatrical production to frighten his enemy resonates with modern war practice. Mann points out that soldiers often fight because they are embarrassed not to be seen as brave and masculine in a gendered theatre (Mann 2014). Performance is vital for attempting to display masculine bravado, to banish fear through pretense and drama, and thus is significant first at the individual level, yet also by its very nature transcends this level of significance.

An examination of performativity is a central tenet of meaning within an aesthetic methodology and intertextual analysis. Bauman and Briggs state that

performances move various discursive components “into a reflexive arena where they can be examined critically” (1990, 60) Thus “performative infrastructure” (particularly in war) is the locus where “meanings are produced, identities constituted, social relations established”, yet on a more universal scale it also allows for “political and ethical outcomes [to be] ...made more or less possible” (Bialasiewicz et al. 2007, 2). Hamlet uses performance to move his father’s murder from suspicion to reality, from internal to public, from personal to political (the play is staged in the Royal Court); “[p]erformance puts the act of speaking on display – objectifies it, lifts it to a degree from its interactional setting and opens it to scrutiny by an audience” (Bauman and Briggs 1990, 73).

The act of violence committed by Marine A was made visible by the accidental recording on his fellow soldier’s head camera and remains visible through media representation and online advocacy such as the website *Justice for Marine A* (JFMA).⁴ These mediated performances of killing are defined by the masculine aesthetic of war. The performance of murder in *Hamlet* is meta-theatrical, meaning it is a play within a play and equally the audio recording of the incident functions as a performance, a piece of drama available for public consumption yet it simultaneously exists within the wider performance of a nation at war. Thus, even as a singular act, it must necessarily signal the deeply political, structurally gendered consequences of state-sanctioned killing (Sjoberg 2014). If the audio recording on YouTube is understood as a play within a play, the politically constituted framing of war is the larger piece of gendered aesthetics and theatricality (Mann 2006). The citational expression, evoking *Hamlet*, contributes to a particular aesthetic event and “aesthetic events register

⁴ This website can be found at: <http://www.justiceformarinea.com/>

a double moment, which, at its most basic, is both a destabilizing aesthetic or performative experience where thought is made strange to itself and a moment of reflection on the aesthetic, political or ethical consequences of this experience” (Frost 2010, 436).

The combined performativity of the *Hamlet* quote and the framing of Marine A’s fate as tragic on the website JFMA evoke a heroic military masculinity through a tragic aesthetic. Aristotle argues in the *Poetics* that a tragic hero provokes pity and fear, pity because of this tragic fate and fear because his fate could have belonged to any other (Erskine and Lebow 2012, 3). JFMA seeks to draw upon the pity and fear that resonate with a tragic aesthetic by portraying Marine A as a kind of heroic everyman. He is a masculine character, and his love of sport (a manly pursuit) particularly rugby and swimming (in which he achieved a ‘life-saving certificate’) is hugely emphasized; he is depicted as normal guy with a mum and dad, who loves his nieces and nephews and squeezes in a round of golf when he can. Equally his extraordinary military masculine heroism is highlighted on the JFMA Facebook page,⁵ which proclaims slogans such as “Never Was So Much Owed By So Many” and “He Put His Life on the Line for Us” in posters of Marine A.

Equally JFMA seeks to emphasize in the Marine A incident, the presence of an impossible ethical choice as set out by the core of a tragic dilemma. The home page of the website has only one sentence of content text: “Sgt Alexander Blackman has been sentenced to 8 years to life for allegedly killing a Taliban insurgent who moments before was trying to kill him and the men under his command”. Implicit in this sentence is the same sentiment expressed by those

⁵ This is available at <https://www.facebook.com/justiceformarineA/>

who commented under the YouTube audio: war is war and the ethics of life and death are not the same in war. Erskine and Lebow suggest that “an appreciation of tragedy... has the potential to inform our thinking about the perceived dilemmas that arise in war when there appear to be multiple, conflicting obligations and, therefore, no obvious right course of action” (2012, 11). JFMA taps into this idea, reiterating the notion of the fog of war and the allegiance of a soldier to his country as legitimizing action that may otherwise be understood as wrongful killing.

A central ethical difference between Greek and Shakespearean tragedy is the reduction of the role of fate and the centrality of individual moral responsibility in the latter (Erskine and Lebow 2012, 5). Even as *Hamlet*, just as JFMA’s narrative, ‘illustrates how complex and contradictory the ethical imperatives that make their demands on us are’, it is this personal moral responsibility for killing which paralyzes Hamlet as he contemplates his enemy’s humanity (Frost 2012, 31). The question of moral responsibility starkly pursued through a murder trial and judgment, destabilize the tragic aesthetic of JFMA and those who support Marine A as a militarized masculine hero killing bravely in the name of war, yet they also make the story a tragic narrative in the first place by signaling seemingly incompatible ethical frameworks (civilian law and war time actions). The aesthetic lens through which Marine A and Hamlet are linked across worlds brings to bear a contemplation of wider complicity in Marine A’s actions, confronting the public domain with its own framing, marking the killing as a political act, and elucidating the fact that ‘what is considered legitimate and controlled violence, or illegitimate and uncontrolled violence is not always so ‘neat’” (Welland 2013, 899). It is evident in the words of the YouTube comments,

the JFMA website, and supporter sentiments in the BBC documentary that military masculinity provides a safe space through which to rationalize death, killing and relational vulnerability, to make it easier to consume a moment of ethical confusion and violence brought about through the actions of a legitimate state at war. The depiction of Marine A as a tragic masculine hero is both inverted and supported by the most direct reference to a tragic hero in the entire incident – an intertextual evocation of Hamlet who is perhaps one of culture’s most famous tragic heroes. In other words, this evocation shines a light on both Marine A’s lack of ethical contemplation and inhumanity, and the fundamentally difficult, violence-oriented conditions and mode of interpretation in which his act is situated, in which we are all complicit and for which he alone cannot be to blame. This citational instant draws both parallels and distinctions that are gendered and relational, rendering a killing in Afghanistan visible in a different light through an aesthetic lens, and equally illustrating that it has wider gendered and political significance.

Conclusion:

Arguably, the performance of killing, so external to everyday life for most, must surely create (in aesthetic terms) a “momentary arrest of our interpretative faculties” (Shapiro 2006, 657). It exists in a space of affective dissonance, outside the realm of normal perception to the extent that we struggle briefly to allocate it concrete meanings. For the Marine A killing, in the space between experiencing violence performed and understanding it, came the framing of tragedy, military masculinity and enmity as ordinary. These frames help guide and reinstate the interpretive facilities, re-establishing for members of the audience, the capacity

to process the performative experience. Hamlet's dying wish is that his story be told, that his heroism in killing his enemy, not his agonizing ethical contemplation, be immortalized by the telling of his story, while Hamlet's actions are interpreted/celebrated/solidified as heroic through the manly honour of a military burial (Shakespeare 2007, 1998, 1999). The citational link between Marine A and *Hamlet*, and a subsequent exploration of what this might mean for military masculinity, provokes an understanding that in both cases the construction of military masculinity is as much in the drama, the performance, the witnessing, mediating, and telling of violence and killing, as it is in the original act.

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