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HENRY JENKINS III

"Never Trust a Snake": WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama

See, your problem is that you're looking at this as a *wrestling* battle—two guys getting into the ring together to see who's the better athlete. But it goes so much deeper than that. Yes, wrestling's involved. Yes, we're going to pound each other's flesh, slam each other's bodies and hurt each other really bad. But there's more at stake than just wrestling, my man. There's a morality play. Randy Savage thinks he represents the light of righteousness. But you know, it takes an awful lot of light to illuminate a dark kingdom.—Jake "The Snake" Roberts, Interview in *WWF Magazine*

**There are people who think that wrestling is an ignoble sport. Wrestling is not a sport, it is a spectacle, and it is no more ignoble to attend a wrestled performance of Suffering than a performance of the sorrows of Arnolphe or Andromaque.
—Roland Barthes, "The World of Wrestling"**

Like World Wrestling Federation superstar Jake "The Snake" Roberts, Roland Barthes saw wrestling as a "morality play," a curious hybrid of sports and theater. For Barthes, wrestling was at once a "spectacle of excess," evoking the pleasure of grandiloquent gestures and violent contact, and a lower form of tragedy, where issues of morality, ethics, and politics were staged. Wrestling enthusiasts have no interest in seeing a fair fight but rather hope for a satisfying restaging of the ageless struggle be-

tween the "perfect bastard" and the suffering hero (Barthes 1982: 25). What wrestling offers its spectators, Barthes tells us, is a story of treachery and revenge, "the intolerable spectacle of powerlessness" and the exhilaration of the hero's victorious return from near-collapse. Wrestling, like conventional melodrama, externalizes emotion, mapping it onto the combatant's bodies and transforming their physical competition into a search for moral order. Restraint or subtlety has little place in such a world. Everything that matters must be displayed, publicly, unambiguously, and unmercilessly.

Barthes's account focuses entirely upon the one-on-one match as isolated event within which each gesture must be instantly legible apart from any larger context of expectations and associations: "One must always understand everything on the spot" (Barthes 1982: 29). Barthes could not have predicted how this focus upon the discrete event or the isolated gesture would be transformed through the narrative mechanisms of television. On television, where wrestling comes with a cast of continuing characters, no single match is self-enclosed; rather, personal conflicts unfold across a number of fights, interviews, and enacted encounters. Television wrestling offers its viewers complexly plotted, ongoing narratives of professional ambition, personal suffering, friendship and alliance, betrayal and reversal of fortune. Matches still offer their share of acrobatic spectacle, snake handling, fire eating, and colorful costumes. They are, as such, immediately accessible to the casual viewer, yet they reward the informed spectator for whom each body slam and double-arm *suplex* bears specific narrative consequences. A demand for closure is satisfied at the level of individual events, but those matches are always contained within a larger narrative trajectory which is itself fluid and open.

The WWF broadcast provides us with multiple sources of identification, multiple protagonists locked in their own moral struggles against the forces of evil. The proliferation of champion titles—the WWF World Champion belt, the Million Dollar belt, the Tag Team champion belt, the Intercontinental champion belt—allows for multiple lines of narrative development, each centering around its own cluster of affiliations and antagonisms. The resolution of one title competition at a major event does little to stabilize the program universe, since there are always more belts to be won and lost, and in any case, each match can always be followed by a rematch which reopens old issues. Outcomes may be inconclusive because of count-outs or disqualifications, requiring future rematches. Accidents may result in surprising shifts in moral and paradigmatic alignment. Good guys betray their comrades and form uneasy alliances with the forces of evil; rule-breakers undergo redemption after suffering crushing defeats.

The economic rationale for this constant "buildup" and deferral of narrative interests is obvious. The World Wrestling Federation (WWF) knows how to use its five weekly television series and its glossy monthly magazine to ensure subscription to its four annual pay-per-view events and occasional pay-per-view specials.[1] Enigmas are raised during the free broadcasts which will be resolved only for a paying audience. Much of the weekly broadcast consists of interviews with the wrestlers about their forthcoming bouts, staged scenes providing background on their antagonisms, and in-the-ring encounters between WWF stars and sparring partners which provide a backdrop for speculations about forthcoming plot developments. Read cynically, the broadcast consists purely of commercial exploitation. Yet this promotion also has important aesthetic consequences, heightening the melodramatic dimensions of the staged fights and transforming televised wrestling into a form of serial fiction for men.

Recent scholarship has focused on serial fiction as a particularly feminine form (Fiske 1987; Modeleski 1982; Feuer 1984: 4–16). Television wrestling runs counter to such a sharply drawn distinction: its characteristic subject matter (the homosocial relations between men, the professional sphere rather than the domestic sphere, the focus on physical means to resolve conflicts) draws on generic traditions which critics have identified as characteristically masculine; its mode of presentation (its seriality, its appeal to viewer speculation and gossip) suggests genres often labeled feminine. These contradictions may reflect wrestling's uneasy status as masculine melodrama. Critics often restrict their discussion of melodrama to the domestic melodrama, a form particularly associated with feminine interests and targeted at female audiences.[2] Such a definition ignores the influence of melodrama on a broader range of genres, including some, such as the western or the social-problem drama, which focus on a masculine sphere of public action. Our inability to talk meaningfully about masculine melodrama stems from contemporary cultural taboos against masculine emotion. Men within our culture tend to avoid self-examination and to hide from sentiment, expressing disdain for the melodramatic. After all, we are told, "real men don't cry." Yet masculine avoidance of public display of emotion does not mean that men lack feelings or that they do not need some outlet for ex-

pressing them. Patriarchy consequently constructs alternative means of releasing and managing masculine emotion while preserving the myth of the stoic male. A first step toward reconsidering the place of male affective experience may be to account for the persistence of melodramatic conventions within those forms of entertainment that "real men" do embrace—horror films, westerns, country songs, tabloid newspapers, television wrestling, and the like. By looking more closely at these forms of sanctioned emotional release for men, we may be able to locate some of the central contradictions within our contemporary constructions of masculinity.

This essay will thus consider WWF wrestling as a melodramatic form addressed to a working-class male audience. In focusing on this particular audience here, I do not mean to suggest that this is the only audience interested in such programming. The WWF's multifocused narrative creates space for multiple audience segments—children, young and older women, gays, etc.—who take their own pleasures in its narrative. Nor does my focus on the melodramatic imply that televised wrestling is not readable in terms of other generic traditions, such as the carnivalesque tradition John Fiske (1989: chap. 4) locates. My subtitle, "WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama," signals my focus on one of a number of possible readings of the program. As Peter Rabinowitz has suggested, "Reading is always 'reading as,'" and our decision about a generic frame shapes subsequent aspects of our interpretations (1985: 421). This essay, thus, reads wrestling *as* masculine melodrama, placing particular emphasis upon its relationship to a masculine audience and a melodramatic tradition. Such a focus invites an inquiry into the complex interplay of affect, masculinity, and class, issues which surface in both the formal and the thematic features of televised wrestling, in its characteristic narrative structure(s), its audience address, its treatment of male bonding, and its appeal to populist imagery.

PLAYING WITH OUR FEELINGS

Norbert Elias's and Eric Dunning's path-breaking study *The Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process* (1986) invites us to reconsider the affective dimensions of athletic competition. According to their account, modern civilization demands restraint on instinctive and affective experience, a process of repression and sublimation which they call the "civilizing process." Elias has spent much of his intellectual life tracing the gradual process by which Western civilization has intensified its demands for bodily and emotional control, rejecting the emotional volatility and bodily abandon that characterized Europe during the Middle Ages: "Social survival and success in these [contemporary] societies depend . . . on a reliable armour, not too strong and not too weak, of individual self-restraint. In such societies, there is only a comparatively limited scope for the show of strong feelings, of strong antipathies towards and dislike of other people, let alone of hot anger, wild hatred or the urge to hit someone over the head" (Elias and Dunning 1986: 41). Such feelings do not disappear, but they are contained by social expectations: "To see grown-up men and women shaken by tears and abandon themselves to their bitter sorrow in public . . . or beat each other savagely under the impact of their violent excitement [experiences more common during the Middle Ages] has ceased to be regarded as normal. It is usually a matter of embarrassment for the onlooker and often a matter of shame or regret for those who have allowed themselves to be carried away by their excitement" (Elias and Dunning 1986: 64–65). What is at stake here is not the intensity of feeling but our discomfort about its spectacular display. Emotion may be strongly felt, but it must be rendered invisible, private, personal; emotion must not be allowed to have a decisive impact upon social interactions. Emotional openness is read as a sign of vulnerability, while emotional restraint is the marker of social integration. Leaders are to master emotions rather than to be mastered by them. Yet, as Elias writes, "We do not stop feeling. We only prevent or delay our acting in accordance with it" (111). Elias traces the process by which this emotional control has moved from being outwardly imposed by rules of conduct to an internalized and largely unconscious aspect of our personalities. The totality of this restraint exacts its own social costs, creating psychic tensions which somehow must be redirected and released within socially approved limitations.

Sports, he argues, constitute one of many institutions which society creates for the production and expression of affective excitement (Elias and Dunning 1986: 49). Sports must somehow reconcile two contradictory functions—"the pleasurable de-controlling of human feelings, the full evocation of an enjoyable excitement on the one hand and on the other the maintenance of a set of checks to keep the pleasantly de-controlled emotions under control" (49). These two functions are never fully resolved, resulting in the

occasional hooliganism as excitement outstrips social control. Yet the conventionality of sports and the removal of the real-world consequences of physical combat (in short, sport's status as adult play) facilitate a controlled and sanctioned release from ordinary affective restraints. The ability to resolve conflicts through a prespecified moment of arbitrary closure delimits the spectator's emotional experience. Perhaps most important, sports offer a shared emotional experience, one which reasserts the desirability of belonging to a community.

Elias and Dunning are sensitive to the class implications in this argument: the "civilizing process" began at the center of "court society" with the aristocracy and spread outward to merchants wishing access to the realms of social and economic power and to the servants who must become unintrusive participants in their masters' lives. Elias and Dunning argue that these class distinctions still surface in the very different forms of emotional display tolerated at the legitimate theater (which provides an emotional outlet for bourgeois spectators) and the sports arena (which provides a space for working-class excitement): the theater audience is to "be moved without moving," to restrain emotional display until the conclusion, when it may be indicated through their applause; while for the sports audience, "motion and emotion are intimately linked," and emotional display is immediate and uncensored (Elias and Dunning 1986: 50). The same distinctions separate upper-class sports (tennis, polo, golf), which allow minimal emotional expression, from lower-class sports (boxing, wrestling, soccer), which demand more overt affective display. Of course, such spectacles also allow the possibility for upper- or middle-class patrons to "slum it," to adopt working-class attitudes and sensibilities while engaging with the earthy spectacle of the wrestling match. They can play at being working-class (with working class norms experienced as a remasculinization of yuppie minds and bodies), can imagine themselves as down to earth, with the people, safe in the knowledge that they can go back to the office the next morning without too much embarrassment at what is a ritualized release of repressed emotions.

Oddly absent from their account is any acknowledgment of the gender-specificity of the rules governing emotional display. Social conventions have traditionally restricted the public expression of sorrow or affection by men and of anger or laughter by women. Men stereotypically learn to translate their softer feelings into physical aggressiveness, while women convert their rage into the shedding of tears. Such a culture provides gender-specific spaces for emotional release which are consistent with dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity—melodrama (and its various manifestations in soap opera or romance) for women, sports for men. Elias's and Dunning's emphasis upon the affective dimensions of sports allows us to more accurately (albeit schematically) map the similarities and differences between sports and melodrama. Melodrama links female affect to domesticity, sentimentality, and vulnerability, while sports links male affect to physical prowess, competition, and mastery. Melodrama explores the concerns of the private sphere, sports those of the public. Melodrama announces its fictional status, while sports claims for itself the status of reality. Melodrama allows for the shedding of tears, while sports solicits shouts, cheers, and boos. Crying, a characteristically feminine form of emotional display, embodies internalized emotion; tears are quiet and passive. Shouting, the preferred outlet for male affect, embodies externalized emotion; it is aggressive and noisy. Women cry from a position of emotional (and often social) vulnerability; men shout from a position of physical and social strength (however illusory).

WWF wrestling, as a form which bridges the gap between sport and melodrama, allows for the spectacle of male physical prowess (a display which is greeted by shouts and boos) but also for the exploration of the emotional and moral life of its combatants. WWF wrestling focuses on both the public and the private, links nonfictional forms with fictional content, and embeds the competitive dimensions of sports within a larger narrative framework which emphasizes the personal consequences of that competition. The "sports entertainment" of WWF wrestling adopts the narrative and thematic structures implicit within traditional sports and heightens them to ensure the maximum emotional impact. At the same time, WWF wrestling adopts the personal, social, and moral conflicts that characterized nineteenth-century theatrical melodrama and enacts them in terms of physical combat between male athletes. In doing so, it foregrounds aspects of masculine mythology which have a particular significance for its predominantly working-class male audience—the experience of vulnerability, the possibilities of male trust and intimacy, and the populist myth of the national community.

REMAKING SPORTS

Elias and Dunning offer a vivid description of the dramaturgy of the ideal soccer match: "a prolonged battle on the football field between teams which are well matched in skill and strength . . . a game which sways to and fro, in which the teams are so evenly matched that first one, then the other scores" (1986). The emotional consequences of the close and heated action are viscerally felt by the spectators. Each subsequent play intensifies their response, "until the tension reaches a point where it can just be borne and contained without getting out of hand." A decisive climax rewards this active engagement with "the happiness of triumph and jubilation" (Elias and Dunning 1986: 86–87). The writers emphasize many traits which football shares with melodrama—the clear opposition between characters, the sharp alignment of audience identification, abrupt shifts in fortune, and an emotionally satisfying resolution. Yet there is an important difference. While melodrama guarantees emotional release through its conformity to tried and true generic structures, actual athletic competition, unlike staged wrestling, is unrehearsed and unscripted. Matches such as the ones Elias and Dunning describe are relatively rare, since so much is left to chance. Where the actual competition lacks narrative interest, that gap must be filled by sports commentary which evokes and intensifies the audience's investment. However, as Barthes notes, wrestling is not a sport but rather a form of popular theater, and, as such, the events are staged to ensure maximum emotional impact, structured around a consistent reversal of fortunes and a satisfying climax. There is something at stake in every match—something more than who possesses the title belts.

As a consequence, wrestling heightens the emotional experience offered by traditional sports and directs it toward a more specific vision of the social and moral order. Peter Brooks (1976) argues that melodrama provides a post-sacred society with a means of mapping its basic moral and ethical beliefs, of making the world morally legible. Similarly, wrestling, Barthes argues, takes as its central problematic the restoration of moral order, the creation of a just society from a world where the powerful rule. Within the World Wrestling Federation, this battle for a higher justice is staged through a contest for the title belts. Like traditional melodrama, wrestling operates within a dualistic universe: each participant is either a good guy or a villain, a "fan favorite" or a "rule breaker." Good guys rarely fight good guys; bad guys rarely fight bad guys. Championship is sometimes unjustly granted to rule-breakers but ultimately belongs to the virtuous. WWF wrestling offers its viewers a story of justice perverted and restored, innocence misrecognized and recognized, strength used and abused.

MIGHT MAKES RIGHT

Within traditional sports, competition is impersonal, the product of prescribed rules which assign competitors on the basis of their standings or on some prespecified form of rotation. Rivalries do, of course, arise within this system and are the stuff of the daily sports page, but many games do not carry this added affective significance. Within the WWF, however, all competition depends upon intense rivalry. Each fight requires the creation of a social and moral opposition and often stems from a personal grievance. Irwin R. Schyster (IRS) falsely accuses the Big Boss Man's mother of tax evasion and threatens to throw her in jail. Sid Justice betrays Hulk Hogan's friendship, turning his back on his tag team partner in the middle of a major match and allowing him to be beaten to a pulp by his opponents, Ric Flair and the Undertaker. Fisticuffs break out between Bret Hart and his brother, "Rocket," during a special "Family Feud" match which awakens long-simmering sibling rivalries. Such offenses require retribution within a world which sees trial by combat as the preferred means of resolving all disputes. Someone has to "pay" for these outrages, and the exacting of payment will occur in the squared ring.

The core myth of WWF wrestling is a fascistic one: ultimately, might makes right; moral authority is linked directly to the possession of physical strength, while evil operates through stealth and craftiness (mental rather than physical sources of power). The appeal of such a myth to a working-class audience should be obvious. In the realm of their everyday experience, strength often gets subordinated into alienated labor. Powerful bodies become the means of their economic exploitation rather than a resource for bettering their lot. In WWF wrestling, physical strength reemerges as a tool for personal empowerment, a means of striking back against personal and moral injustices. Valerie Walkerdine argues that the *Rocky* films, which display a similar appeal, offer "fantasies of omnipotence, heroism, and salvation . . . a counterpoint to the experience of oppression and powerlessness" (Walkerdine 1986: 172–74). Images of fighting, Walkerdine argues, "embody

a class-specific and gendered use of the body," which ennobles the physical skills possessed by the working-class spectator: "Physical violence is presented as the only open to those whose lot is manual and not intellectual labor. . . . The fantasy of the fighter is the fantasy of a working-class male omnipotence over the forces of humiliating oppression which mutilate and break the body in manual labor" (173).

A central concern within wrestling, then, is how physical strength can ensure triumph over one's abusers, how one can rise from defeat and regain dignity through hand-to-hand combat. Bad guys cheat to win. They manipulate the system and step outside the rules. They use deception, misdirection, subterfuge, and trickery. Rarely do they win fairly. They smuggle weapons into the ring to attack their opponents while their managers distract the referees. They unwrap the turnbuckle pads and slam their foes heads into metal posts. They adopt choke holds to suffocate them or zap them with cattle prods. Million Dollar Man purposefully focuses his force upon Roddy Piper's wounded knee, doing everything he can to injure him permanently. Such atrocities require rematches to ensure justice; the underdog heroes return next month and, through sheer determination and willpower, battle their protagonists into submission.

Such plots allow for the sterilization of the WWF narrative, forestalling its resolution, intensifying its emotional impact. Yet at the same time, the individual match must be made narratively satisfying on its own terms, and so, in practice, such injustices do not stand. Even though the match is over and its official outcome determined, the hero shoves the referee aside and, with renewed energy, bests his opponent in a fair (if nonbinding) fight. Whatever the outcome, most fights end with the protagonist standing proudly in the center of the ring, while his badly beaten antagonist retreats shamefully to his dressing room. Justice triumphs both in the long run and in the short run. For the casual viewer, it is the immediate presentation of triumphant innocence that matters, that satisfactorily resolves the drama. Yet for the WWF fan, what matters is the ultimate pursuit of justice as it unfolds through the complexly intertwined stories of the many different wrestlers.

BODY DOUBLES

Melodramatic wrestling allows working-class men to confront their own feelings of vulnerability, their own frustrations at a world which promises them patriarchal authority but which is experienced through relations of economic subordination. Gender identities are most rigidly policed in working-class male culture, since unable to act *as* men, they are forced to act *like* men, with a failure to assume the proper role the source of added humiliation. WWF wrestling offers a utopian alternative to the situation, allowing a movement from victimization toward mastery. Such a scenario requires both the creation and the constant rearticulation of moral distinctions. Morality is defined, first and foremost, through personal antagonisms. As Christine Gledhill has written of traditional melodrama, "Innocence and villainy construct each other: while the villain is necessary to the production and revelation of innocence, innocence defines the boundaries of the forbidden which that villain breaks" (1987: 21). In the most aesthetically pleasing and emotionally gripping matches, these personal antagonisms reflect much deeper mythological oppositions—the struggles between rich and poor, black and white, urban and rural, America and the world. Each character stands for something, draws symbolic meaning by borrowing stereotypes already in broader circulation. An important role played by color commentary is to inscribe and reinscribe the basic mythic oppositions at play within a given match. Here, the moral dualisms of masculine melodrama finds its voice through exchanges between two announcers, one (Mean Gene Okerlund) articulating the protagonist's virtues, the other (Bobby "the brain" Heenan) justifying the rule-breaker's transgressions.

Wrestlers are often cast as doppelgängers, similar yet morally opposite figures. Consider, for example, how *WWF Magazine* characterizes a contest between the evil Mountie and the heroic Big Boss Man: "In the conflict are Big Boss Man's and the Mountie's personal philosophies: the enforcement of the law vs. taking the law into one's own hands, the nightstick vs. the cattle prod, weakening a foe with the spike slam vs. disabling him with the nerve-crushing carotid control technique." (Greenberg 1991a: 40). The Canadian Mountie stands on one page, dressed in his bright red uniform, clutching his cattle prod and snarling. The former Georgia prison guard, Big Boss Man, stands on the other, dressed in his pale blue uniform, clutching an open pair of handcuffs, with a look of quiet earnestness. At this moment the two opponents seem to be made for each other, as if no other possible contest could bear so much meaning, though the Big Boss Man and the Mountie will pair off against other challengers in the next major event.

The most successful wrestlers are those who provoke immediate emo-

tional commitments (either positive or negative) and are open to constant rearticulation, who can be fit into a number of different conflicts and retain semiotic value. Hulk Hogan may stand as the defender of freedom in his feud with Sgt. Slaughter, as innocence betrayed by an ambitious friend in his contest against Sid Justice, and as an aging athlete confronting and overcoming the threat of death in his battle with the Undertaker. Big Boss Man may defend the interests of the economically depressed against the Repo Man, make the streets safe from the Nasty Boys, and assert honest law enforcement in the face of the Mountie's bad example.

The introduction of new characters requires their careful integration into the WWF's moral universe before their first match can be fought. We need to know where they will stand in relation to the other protagonists and antagonists. The arrival of Tatanka on the WWF roster was preceded by a series of segments showing the Native American hero visiting the tribal elders, undergoing rites of initiation, explaining the meaning of his haircut, makeup, costume, and war shout. His ridicule by the fashion-minded Rick "the Model" Martel introduced his first antagonism and ensured the viewer's recognition of his essential goodness.

Much of the weekly broadcasts centers on the manufacturing of these moral distinctions and the creation of these basic antagonisms. A classic example might be the breakup of the Rockers. A series of accidents and minor disagreements sparked a public showdown on Brutus "the Barber" Beefcake's Barber Shop, a special program segment. Shawn Michaels appeared at the interview, dressed in black leather and wearing sunglasses (already adopting iconography signaling his shift toward the dark side). After a pretense of reconciliation and a series of clips reviewing their past together, Michaels shoved his partner, Marty Jannetty, through the barbershop window, amid Brutus's impotent protests.[3] The decision to feature the two team members as independent combatants required the creation of moral difference, while the disintegration of their partnership fit perfectly within the program's familiar doppelgänger structure. *WWF Magazine* portrayed the events in terms of the biblical story of Cain and Abel, as the rivalry of "two brothers": "[The Rockers] were as close as brothers. They did everything together, in and out of the ring. But Michaels grew jealous of Jannetty and became impatient to succeed. While Jannetty was content to bide his time, work steadily to improve with the knowledge that championships don't come easily in the WWF, Michaels decided he wanted it all now—and all for himself" ("Mark of Cain" 1992: 41).

If an earlier profile had questioned whether the two had "separate identities," this reporter has no trouble making moral distinctions between the patient Jannetty and the impatient Michaels. Subsequent broadcasts would link Michaels professionally and romantically with Sensational Sherri, a woman whose seductive charms have been the downfall of many WWF champs. As a manager, Sherri is noted for her habit of smuggling foreign objects to ringside in her purse and interfering in the matches to ensure her man's victory. Sherri, who had previously been involved with Million Dollar Man Ted Dibiase, announced that she would use her "Teddy Bear's" money to back Michaels's solo career, linking his betrayal of his partner to her own greedy and adulterous impulses. All of these plot twists differentiate Jannetty and Michaels, aligning spectator identification with the morally superior partner. Michaels's paramount moral failing is his all-consuming ambition, his desire to dominate rather than work alongside his long-time partner.

The Rockers' story points to the contradictory status of personal advancement within the WWF narrative: these stories hinge upon fantasies of upward mobility, yet ambition is just as often regarded in negative terms, as ultimately corrupting. Such a view of ambition reflects the experience of people who have worked hard all of their lives without much advancement and therefore remain profoundly suspicious of those on top. Wrestling speaks to those who recognize that upward mobility often has little to do with personal merit and a lot to do with a willingness to stomp on those who get in your way. Virtue, in the WWF moral universe, is often defined by a willingness to temper ambition through personal loyalties, through affiliation with others, while vice comes from putting self-interest ahead of everything else. This distrust of self-gain was vividly illustrated during a bout between Rowdy Roddy Piper and Bret "the Hitman" Hart at the 1992 *Wrestlemania*. This competition uncharacteristically centered on two good guys. As a result, most viewers suspected that one fighter would ultimately be driven to base conduct by personal desire for the Intercontinental Championship belt. Such speculations were encouraged by ambiguous signs from the combatants during "buildup" interviews and exploited during the match through a number of gestures which indicate moral indecision: Rowdy stood ready to

club Hart with an illegal foreign object; the camera cut repeatedly to close-ups of his face as he struggled with his conscience before casting the object aside and continuing a fair fight. In the end, however, the two long-time friends embraced each other as Piper congratulated Hart on a more or less fairly won fight. The program situated this bout as a sharp contrast to the feud between Hulk Hogan and Sid Justice, the major attraction at this pay-per-view event. Their budding friendship had been totally destroyed by Justice's overriding desire to dominate the WWF: "I'm gonna crack the head of somebody big in the WWF. . . . No longer is this Farmboy from Arkansas gonna take a back seat to anybody" ("WWF Superstars" 1992: 18). Rowdy and Hart value their friendship over their ambition; Justice lets nothing stand in the way of his quest for power.

PERFECT BASTARDS

WWF wrestlers are not rounded characters; the spectacle has little room for the novelistic, and here the form may push the melodramatic imagination to its logical extremes. WWF wrestlers experience no internal conflicts which might blur their moral distinctiveness. Rather, they often display the "undividedness" that Robert Heilman sees as a defining aspect of nineteenth-century melodramatic characters: "[The melodramatic character displays] oneness of feeling as competitor, crusader, aggressor; as defender counter-attacker, fighter for survival; he may be assertive or compelled, questing or resistant, obsessed or desperate; he may triumph or lose, be victor or victim, exert pressure or be pressed. Always he is undivided, unperplexed by alternatives, untorn by divergent impulses; all of his strength or weakness faces in one direction" (1973: 53).

The WWF athletes sketch their moral failings in broad profile: the Mountie pounds on his chest and roars, "I am the Mountie," convinced that no one can contest his superiority, yet as soon as the match gets rough, he slides under the ropes and tries to hide behind his scrawny manager. The Million Dollar Man shoves hundred-dollar bills into the mouths of his defeated opponents, while Sherri paints her face with gilded dollar signs to mark her possession by the highest bidder. Ravishing Rick Rude wears pictures of his opponents on his arse, relishing his own vulgarity. Virtue similarly displays itself without fear of misrecognition. Hacksaw Jim Duggan clutches an American flag in one hand and a two-by-four in the other.

(*top*) "Everyone Has a Price": The Million Dollar Man laughs at human corruptibility. (*bottom*) Painted Woman: Sensational Sherri gilds her face with dollar signs to suggest her possession by the Million Dollar Man.

The need for a constant recombination of a fixed number of characters requires occasional shifts in moral allegiances (as occurred with the breakup of the Rockers). Characters may undergo redemption or seduction, but these shifts typically occur quickly and without much ambiguity. There is rarely any lingering doubt or moral fence-straddling. Such characters are good one week and evil the next. Jake "the Snake" Roberts, a long-time hero—albeit one who enjoys his distance from the other protagonists—uncharacteristically offered to help the Ultimate Warrior prepare for his fight against the Undertaker. Their grim preparations unfolded over several weeks, with Jake

forcing the Warrior to undergo progressively more twisted rituals—locking him into a coffin, burying him alive—until finally Jake shoved him into a room full of venomous snakes. Bitten by Jake's cobra, Lucifer, the Ultimate Warrior staggered toward his friend, who simply brushed him aside. As the camera pulled back to show the Undertaker standing side by side with Jake, the turncoat, laughed, "Never trust a snake." From that moment forward, Jake was portrayed as totally evil, Barthes's perfect bastard. Jake attacks Macho man Randy Savage's bride, Elizabeth, on their wedding day and terrorizes the couple every chance he gets.

The program provides no motivation for such outrages, though commentary both in the broadcasts and in the pages of the wrestling magazines constantly invites such speculation: "What makes Jake hate Savage and his bride so fiercely? Why does he get his jollies—as he admits—from tormenting her?" What Peter Brooks said about villains of traditional melodrama holds equally well here: "Evil in the world of melodrama does not need justification; it exists, simply.... And the less it is adequately motivated, the more this evil appears simply volitional, the product of pure will" (1976: 34). Jake is evil because he is a snake; it's in his character and nothing can change him, even though in this case, less than a year ago, Jake was as essentially good as he is now totally demented. We know Jake is evil and without redemption, because he tells us so, over and over:

> I'm not really sure I have any soul at all.... Once I get involved in something—no matter how demented, no matter how treacherous, no matter how far off the mark it is from normal standards—I never back down. I just keep on going, deeper and deeper into blackness, far past the point where any sensible person would venture. You see, a person with a conscience—a person with a soul—would be frightened by the sordid world I frequent. But Jake the Snake isn't scared at all. To tell you the truth, I can't get enough of it. ("WWF Interview" 1992: 17)

Jake recognizes and acknowledges his villainy; he names it publicly and unrepentantly.

Peter Brooks sees such a process of "self-nomination" as an essential feature of the melodramatic imagination: "Nothing is spared because nothing is left unsaid; the characters stand on stage and utter the unspeakable, give voice to their deepest feelings, dramatize through their heightened and polarized words and gestures the whole lesson of their relationship" (1976:

"Never Trust a Snake": Jake "The Snake" Roberts contemplates the nature of his own evil.

4). The soliloquy, that stock device of traditional melodrama, is alive and well in WWF wrestling. Wrestlers look directly into the audience and shove their fists toward the camera; they proclaim their personal credos and describe their sufferings. Tag team partners repeat their dedication to each other and their plans to dominate their challengers. Villains profess their evil intentions and vow to perform various forms of mayhem upon their opponents. Their rhetoric is excessively metaphoric, transforming every fight into a life-and-death struggle. Much as nineteenth-century theatrical melodrama used denotative music to define the characters' moral stances, the wrestlers' entry into the arena is preceded by theme songs which encapsulate their personalities. Hulk's song describes him as "a real American hero" who "fights for the rights of every man." The Million Dollar Man's jingle proclaims his compelling interest in "money, money, money," while Jake's song repeats "trust me, trust me, trust me."

This public declaration ensures the constant moral legibility of the WWF narrative and thereby maximizes the audience's own emotional response. Spectators come to the arena or turn on the program to express intense emotion—to cheer the hero, to boo and jeer the villain—without moral ambiguity or emotional complexity. (Wrestling fans sometimes choose to root for the villains, taking pleasure in their inversion of the WWF's moral universe, yet even this perverse pleasure requires moral legibility.) Operating within a world of absolutes, WWF wrestlers wear their hearts on their sleeves (or, in Ravishing Rick Rude's case, on the seat of their pants) and project their emotions from every inch of their bodies. Much as in classic melodrama, ex-

ternal actions reveal internal states; moral disagreements demand physical expressions. As Brooks writes, "Emotions are given a full acting-out, a full representation before our eyes. . . . Nothing is *under*stated, all is *over*stated" (1976: 41). The Million Dollar Man cowers, covering his face and retreating, crawling on hands and knees backward across the ring. Sherri shouts at the top of her lungs and pounds the floor with her high-heel shoe. Rowdy Roddy Piper gets his dander up and charges into the ring. With a burst of furious energy, he swings madly at his opponents, forcing them to scatter right and left. Roddy spits in the Million Dollar Man's eyes, flings his sweaty shirt in his face, or grabs Sherri, rips off her dress, throws her over his knee, and spanks her. Such characters embody the shameful spectacle of emotional display, acting as focal points for the audience's own expression of otherwise repressed affect.

INVINCIBLE VICTIMS

Fans eagerly anticipate these excessive gestures as the most appropriate means of conveying the characters' moral attitudes. Through a process of simplification, the wrestler's body has been reduced to a series of iconic surfaces and stock attitudes. We know not only how the performer is apt to respond to a given situation but what bodily means will be adopted to express that response. Wrestlers perform less with their eyes and hands than with their arms and legs and with their deep, resounding voices. Earthquake's bass rumble and Roddy's fiery outbursts, Ric Flair's vicious laughter and Macho Man's red-faced indignation are "too much" for the small screen, yet they articulate feelings that are too intense to be contained.

This process of simplification and exaggeration transforms the wrestlers into cartoonish figures who may slam each other's heads into iron steps, throw each other onto wooden floors, smash each other with steel chairs, land with their full weight on the other's prone stomach, and emerge without a scratch, ready to fight again. Moral conflict will continue unabated; no defeat can be final within a world where the characters are omnipotent. If traditional melodrama foregrounded long-suffering women's endurance of whatever injustices the world might throw against them, WWF wrestling centers around male victims who ultimately refuse to accept any more abuse and fight back against the aggressors.

Such a scenario allows men to acknowledge their own vulnerability, safe in the knowledge that their masculine potency will ultimately be restored and that they will be strong enough to overcome the forces which subordinate them. Hulk Hogan has perfected the image of the martyred hero who somehow captures victory from the closing jaws of defeat. Badly beaten in a fight, Hulk lies in a crumpled heap. The referee lifts his limp arms up, once, twice, ready to call the fight, when the crowd begins to clap and stomp. The mighty hero rises slowly, painfully to his feet, rejuvenated by the crowd's response. Blood streams through his blond hair and drips across his face, but he whips it aside with a broad swing of his mighty arms. Hulk turns to face his now-terrified assailant.

"SEEING IS BELIEVING"

Such broad theatricality cuts against wrestling's tradition of pseudorealism; the programs' formats mimic the structures and visual styles of nonfiction television, of sports coverage, news broadcasts, and talk shows. The fiction is, of course, that all of this fighting is authentic, spontaneous, unscripted. The WWF narrative preserves the illusion at all costs. There is no stepping outside the fiction, no acknowledgment of the production process or the act of authorship. When the performers are featured in *WWF Magazine*, they are profiled in character. Story segments are told in the form of late-breaking news reports or framed as interviews. The commentators are taken by surprise, interrupted by seemingly unplanned occurrences. During one broadcast, Jake the Snake captured Macho Man, dragging him into the ring. Jake tied him to the ropes and menaced him with a cobra which sprang and bit him on the forearm. The camera was jostled from side to side by people racing to Macho's assistance and panned abruptly trying to follow his hysterical wife as she ran in horror to ringside. A reaction shot shows a child in the audience reduced to tears by this brutal spectacle. Yet, at the same time, the camera refused to show us an image "too shocking" for broadcast. Macho Man's arm and the snake's gaping mouth were censored, blocked by white bars, not unlike the blue dot that covered the witness's face at the William Kennedy Smith rape trial that same week. (A few weeks later, the "uncensored" footage was at last shown, during a primetime broadcast, so that viewers could see "what really happened.") The plot lines are thus told through public moments where a camera could plausibly be present, though such moments allow us insight into the characters' pri-

"Seeing is Believing": Jake "The Snake" Roberts's deadly cobra bites into "Macho Man" Randy Savage's arm.

vate motivations. Such campy self-acknowledgment may be part of what makes male spectators' affective engagement with this melodramatic form safe and acceptable within a traditionally masculine culture which otherwise backs away from overt emotional display. Whenever the emotions become too intense, there is always a way of pulling back, laughing at what might otherwise provoke tears. WWF wrestling, at another level, provokes authentic pain and rage, particularly when it embraces populist myths of economic exploitation and class solidarity, feeds a hunger for homosocial bonding, or speaks to utopian fantasies of empowerment. The gap between the campy and the earnest reception of wrestling may reflect the double role which Elias and Dunning ascribe to traditional sports: the need to allow for the de-controlling of powerful affects while at the same time regulating their expression and ensuring their ultimate containment. The melodramatic aspects are what trigger emotional release, while the campy aspects contain it within safe bounds. The plots of wrestling cut close to the bone, inciting racial and class antagonisms that rarely surface this overtly elsewhere in popular culture, while comic exaggeration ensures that such images can never fully be taken seriously.

ROMANCE IN THE RING

WWF's plots center on the classic materials of melodrama: "false accusation. . . . innocence beleaguered, virtue triumphant, eternal fidelity, mysterious identity, lovers reconciled, fraudulence revealed, threats survived,

enemies foiled" (Heilman 1968: 76). The ongoing romance of Macho and Elizabeth bears all of the classic traces of the sentimental novel. The virginal Miss Elizabeth, who almost always dresses in lacy white, stands as the embodiment of womanly virtues. WWF fans were fascinated by her struggle to civilize her impassioned and often uncontrollable Macho Man, withstanding constant bouts of unreasoning jealousy, tempering his dirty tactics. As a profile of Miss Elizabeth explained, "She embodies the spirit of a grassroots American wife. She cares for her man. She provides him with comfort in the midst of chaos. She provides him with a sense of unity when his world seems to be disintegrating. Elizabeth calmly handles these difficult situations with grace and tact" ("Elizabeth Balancing" 1992). WWF fans watched the course of their romance for years, as Macho rejected her, taking up with the sensuous and anything-but-virtuous Sherri, but he was reunited with Elizabeth following a devastating defeat in a career-ending match against the Ultimate Warrior. They followed her efforts to rebuild her Macho Man's self-confidence, his fumbling attempts to propose to her, and their spectacular pay-per-view wedding. They watched as the beloved couple were attacked during their wedding party by Jake and the Undertaker, as Macho begged the WWF management to reinstate him so that he could avenge himself and his wife against this outrage, and as he finally returned to the ring and defeated the heartless Snake during a specially scheduled event. No sooner was this conflict resolved than Ric Flair produced incriminating photographs which he claimed show that Elizabeth was his former lover. In a locker-room interview, Ric and Mr. Perfect revealed the photographs as evidence that Miss Elizabeth is "damaged goods," while the fumbling announcer struggled to protect Elizabeth's previously unquestioned virtue. Once again, this domestic crisis motivated a forthcoming bout, creating narrative interest as the all but inarticulate Macho defended his wife with his muscles.

The Macho Man–Elizabeth romance is unusual in its heavy focus on domestic relations, though not unique: Sherri's romantic entanglements with the Million Dollar Man and Shawn Michaels offer a similar (albeit morally opposite) narrative, while the complex family drama of the Hart family (whose patriarch, Stu, was a long-time wrestler and whose four sons have all enjoyed WWF careers) has motivated images of both fraternal solidarity and sibling rivalry. More often, however, the masculine melodrama of WWF wrestling centers on the relationships between men, occupying a homosocial space which has little room for female intrusions. There are, after all,

only two women in the WWF universe—the domestic angel, Elizabeth, and the scheming whore, Sherri. A more typical story involved Virgil, the black bodyguard of the Million Dollar Man, who, after years of being subjected to his boss's humiliating whims, decided to strike back, to challenge his one-time master to a fight for possession of his "Million Dollar Belt." Virgil was befriended by the feisty Scotsman Rowdy Roddy Piper, who taught him to stand tall and broad. The two men fought side by side to ensure the black man's dignity. The antagonism between Virgil and the Million Dollar Man provoked class warfare, while the friendship between Virgil and Roddy marked the uneasy courtship between men.

Here and elsewhere, WWF wrestling operates along the gap that separates our cultural ideal of male autonomy and the reality of alienation, themes that emerge most vividly within tag team competition. The fighter, that omnipotent muscle machine, steps alone, with complete confidence, into the ring, ready to do battle with his opponent. As the fight progresses, he is beaten down, unable to manage without assistance. Struggling to the ropes, he must admit that he needs another man. His partner reaches out to him while he crawls along the floor, inching toward that embrace. The image of the two hands, barely touching, and the two men, working together to overcome their problems, seems rich with what Eve Sedgwick calls "male homosocial desire" (Sedgwick 1985). That such a fantasy is played out involving men whose physical appearance exaggerates all of the secondary masculine characteristics frees male spectators from social taboos which prohibit the open exploration of male intimacy. In their own brutish language, the men express what it is like to need (and desire?) another man. Consider, for example, how *WWF Magazine* characterizes the growing friendship between Jake the Snake and Andre the Giant: "At a glance, Andre gives the impression of granite—unshakable, immutable and omnipotent. Inside, there is a different Andre. His massive size and power belie the fact that his spirit is as fragile as anyone's. And that spirit was more bruised than was his body. Like Andre, Jake projects a sense of detachment from the world of the average guy. Like Andre, Jake has an inner self that is more vulnerable than his outer shell" ("Meeting of the Minds" 1991: 52).

The story describes their first tentative overtures, their attempts to overcome old animosities, and their growing dependency on each other for physical and emotional support. As Jake explains: "Andre was afraid of serpents. I was afraid of people—not of confronting people, but of getting close

to them. We began to talk. Slow talk. Nothing talk. Getting to know one another. The talk got deeper. . . . I never asked for help from anybody. I never will. But Andre decided to help me; I won't turn him down. I guess we help one another. You might call it a meeting of the minds" ("Meeting of the Minds" 1991: 52). Jake's language carefully, hesitantly negotiates between male ideals of individual autonomy ("I never asked for help") and an end to the isolation and loneliness such independence creates. Will Jake find this ideal friendship with a man who was once his bitter enemy, or does he simply lay himself open to new injuries? These images of powerful men whose hulking bodies mask hidden pains speak to longings which the entire structure of patriarchy desperately denies.

Such a narrative explores the links that bind and the barriers that separate men. Yet, at the same time, its recurring images of betrayed friendship and violated trust rationalize the refusal to let down barriers. Texas Tornado describes his relationship to his former tag team partner: "I know the Warrior as well as any man in the World Wrestling Federation. . . . Of course, in wrestling, you never get too close with anybody because one day you might be facing him on the other side of the ring. Still, Warrior and I have traveled and trained together. We've shared things" (Greenberg 1991b: 52). Wrestling operates within a carefully policed zone, a squared ring, that allows for the representation of intense homosocial desire but also erects strong barriers against too much risk and intimacy. The wrestlers "share things," but they are not allowed to get "too close."

Consider what happened when the Beverly Brothers met the Bushwhackers at a live WWF event at the Boston Gardens. The two brothers, clad in lavender tights, hugged each other before the match, and their down-under opponents, in their big boots and work clothes, turned upon them in a flash, "queer baiting" and then "gay bashing" the Beverly Brothers. I sat there with fear and loathing as I heard thousands of men, women, and children shouting, "Faggot, faggot, faggot." I was perplexed at how such a representation could push so far and spark such an intense response. The chanting continued for five, ten minutes, as the Bushwhackers stomped their feet and waved their khaki caps with glee, determined to drive their "effeminate" opponents from the ring. The Beverly Brothers protested, pouted, and finally submitted, unable to stand firm against their tormentors. What may have necessitated this homophobic spectacle was the need of both performers and spectators to control potential readings of the Bushwhackers'

own physically intimate relationship. The Bushwhackers, Butch and Luke, are constantly defined as polymorphously perverse and indiscriminately oral, licking the faces of innocent spectators or engaging in mutual face-wetting as a symbolic gesture of their mutual commitment. By defining the Beverly "Sisters" as "faggots," as outside of acceptable masculinity, the Bushwhackers created a space where homosocial desire could be more freely expressed without danger of its calling into question their gender identity or sexual preference. This moment seems emblematic of the way wrestling more generally operates—creating a realm of male action which is primarily an excuse for the display of masculine emotion (and even for homoerotic contact) while ensuring that nothing which occurs there can raise any questions about the participant's "manhood."[4]

POPULIST PLEASURES

One key way that wrestling contains this homoerotic potential is through the displacement of issues of homosocial bonding onto a broader political and economic terrain. If, as feminism has historically claimed, the personal is the political, traditional masculinity has often acknowledged its personal vulnerabilities only through evolving more abstract political categories. Populist politics, no less than sports, has been a space of male emotional expression, where personal pains and sufferings can be openly acknowledged only through allegorical rhetoric and passionate oratory. Melodramatic wrestling's focus on the professional rather than the personal sphere facilitates this shift from the friendship ties between individual males to the political ties between all working men. The erotics of male homosocial desire is sublimated into a hunger for the populist community, while images of economic exploitation are often charged with a male dread of penetration and submission.

Although rarely described in these terms, populism offers a melodramatic vision of political and economic relationships. Bruce Palmer argues that populism is characterized by its focus on a tangible reality of immediate experience rather than political abstraction, its emphasis on personal rather than impersonal causation, and its appeal to sentimentality rather than rationality (all traits commonly associated with the melodramatic). As he summarizes the basic axioms of the southern populist movement, "what is most real and most important in the world was that which was most tangible, that which could be seen and touched. . . . People made things move and if some people were moved more than movers, it was because others, more powerful, moved them" (Palmer 1980: 3). American populism sees virtue as originating through physical labor, as a trait possessed by those who are closest to the moment of production (and therefore embodied through manual strength), while moral transgression, particularly greed and ruthlessness, reflects alienation from the production process (often embodied as physical frailty and sniveling cowardice). Populism understands politics through the social relations between individuals rather than groups, though individuals are understood in larger allegorical categories—the simple farmer vs. the slick Wall Street lawyer, the factory worker vs. the scheming boss, the small businessman vs. the Washington bureaucrat, the American voter vs. the party bosses. Social changes come, within this model, through personal redemption rather than systemic change. A populist utopia would be a community within which individuals recognized their common interests and respected their mutual responsibilities. As Palmer explains, "The only decent society was one in which each person looked out for every other one, a society in which *all* people enjoyed equal rights and the benefits of their labor" (1980: 5). Such a movement made common cause between workers and farmers (and its most progressive forms, between whites and blacks) in their mutual struggle for survival against the forces of capitalist expansion and technological change.

If populism draws on melodramatic rhetoric, populism has also provided the core myths by which the masculine melodrama has historically operated. French melodrama might concern itself with the struggles of the aristocracy and the bourgeois; American faith in a classless society translated these same conventions into narratives about scheming bankers and virtuous yeomen, stock figures within the populist vision. American melodrama, David Grimsted tells us, imagines a democratic universe which rewards a commitment to fraternity and hard work and demonizes appeals to privilege (1968). Michael Denning argues that the sentimental fiction provided by turn-of-the-century dime novels similarly interpreted the economic relations between labor and capital within essentially melodramatic terms (Denning 1987: 80). While such visions of American democracy were not automatically populist and often lent themselves to middle-class social reform,

melodrama was always available as a vehicle for populist allegory, especially within masculine forms which displace melodrama's characteristic interest in the domestic into the public sphere.

In that sense, melodramatic wrestling fits squarely within the larger tradition of masculine melodrama and populist politics. What is striking about the mythology of WWF wrestling is how explicitly its central conflicts evoke class antagonisms. Its villains offer vivid images of capitalist greed and conspicuous consumption. The Million Dollar Man wears a gold belt studded with diamonds and waves a huge wad of hundred-dollar bills. Magazine photographs and program segments have shown him driving expensive cars, eating in high-class restaurants, living in a penthouse apartment, or vacationing in his summer house at Palm Beach. What he can't grab with brute force, he buys: "Everybody has a price." In one notorious episode, he bribed Andre the Giant to turn over to him the sacred WWF championship belt; another time, he plotted the hostile takeover of the WWF. Similarly, Ric Flair brags constantly about his wealth and influence: "I'll pull up [to the match] in my stretch limousine with a bottle of Dom Perignon in one hand and a fine-looking woman holding the other. The only thing I'll be worried about is if the champagne stays cold enough" ("WWF Superstars" 1992: 18). Mean Gene Okerlund interviews him on his yacht, *Gypsy*, as he chuckles over his sexual humiliation of the Macho Man and brags about his wild parties. The Model enjoys a jet-setting lifestyle, displays the "finest in clothing," and tries to market his new line of male perfumes, "the scent of the 90s, Arrogance." Irwin R. Schyster constantly threatens to audit his opponents, while Repo Man promises to foreclose on their possessions: "What's mine is mine. What's yours is mine too! . . . I've got no mercy at all for cheats. Tough luck if you've lost your job. If you can't make the payment, I'll get your car. Walk to work, Sucker" ("Personality Profile" 1992: 11).

The patriotic laborer (Hacksaw Jim Duggan), the virtuous farm boy (Hillbilly Jim), the small-town boy made good (Big Boss Man), the Horatio Alger character (Virgil, Rowdy Roddy Piper, Tito Santana) are stock figures within this morality play, much as they have been basic tropes in populist discourse for more than a century. WWF heroes hail from humble origins and can therefore act as appropriate champions within fantasies of economic empowerment and social justice. A profile introducing Sid Justice to *WWF Magazine* readers stressed his rural origins: "Sid Justice comes from the land. . . . Born and raised on a farm in Arkansas, imbued with the hard-

working values of people who rise before dawn to till the earth and milk the cows. . . . A lifestyle that is the backbone of this country" ("Salt of the Earth" 1991: 47–48). Justice developed his muscles tossing bales of hay into his grandfather's truck, and his integrity reflects the simplicity of an agrarian upbringing: "Don't confuse simplicity with stupidity. A man who learned to make the land produce its fruits has smarts." Sid Justice understands the meaning of personal commitments and the value of simple virtues in a way that would be alien to "people who get their dinner out of a cellophane package from the supermarket."

Pride in where one comes from extends as well to a recognition of racial or ethnic identities. Tito Santana returns to Mexico to rediscover his roots and takes lessons from a famous bullfighter, changing his name to El Matador. Tatanka emerges as the "leader of the New Indian Nation," demonstrating his pride in his "Native American heritage." He explains, "the tribes of all nations are embodied in me" ("Tatanka" 1992: 55). The creation of tag teams and other alliances cuts across traditional antagonisms to bring together diverse groups behind a common cause. Tag team partners Texas Tornado and El Matador, the Anglo and the Mexicano, join forces in their shared struggle against economic injustice and brute power. "Rule-breakers" are often linked to racial prejudice. The "Brain" releases a steady stream of racial slurs and epithets; the Million Dollar Man visits the "neighborhoods" to make fun of the ramshackle shack where El Matador was raised or to ridicule the crime-ridden streets where Virgil spent his youth. What WWF wrestling enacts, then, are both contemporary class antagonisms (the working man against the Million Dollar Man, the boy from the barrio against the repo man, the farmer against the IRS) and the possibilities of a class solidarity that cuts across racial boundaries, a common community of the oppressed and the marginal.

The rule-breaker's willingness to jeer at honest values and humble ancestry, to hit the proletarian protagonists with economic threats and to shove their own ill-gotten goods in their faces, intensifies the emotions surrounding their confrontations. These men are fighting for all of our dignity against these forces which keep us down, which profit from others' suffering and prosper in times of increased hardship. Big Boss Man defends his mother against false allegations leveled against her by the IRS: "My mama never had a job in her life. All she did was take care of her children and raise food on the farm down in Georgia" ("Talk with Big Boss Man" 1991: 18). Virgil

strikes back not only against the man who forced him to wipe the perspiration from his brow and pick the dirt from between his toes, but also against the conditions of economic subordination which made him dependent on that monster.

COMING TO BLOWS

Such evil must be isolated from the populist community; its origins must be identified and condemned because it represents a threat to mutual survival. This attempt to name and isolate corruption emerges in a particularly vivid fashion when Sgt. Slaughter discusses the Nasty Boys' delinquency:

> The Nasty Boys are un-American trash. You know, their hometown of Allentown is a very patriotic town. Its people have worked in the steel mills for years. Their hard work is evident in every skyscraper and building from coast to coast. Allentown's people have worked in the coal mines for years. Their hard work has kept America warm in the dead of winter. But the Nasty Boys don't come from the same Allentown I know. . . . They spit on hard-working Americans. They spit on Patriotic people. And they spit on the symbol of this great land, Old Glory herself. ("American Pride" 1992: 52)

Slaughter's rhetoric is classic populism, linking virtue and patriotism with labor, treating evil as a threat originating outside of the community which must be contained and vanquished.

This process of defining the great American community involves defining outsiders as well as insiders, and it is not simply the rich and the powerful who are excluded. There is a strong strand of nativism in the WWF's populist vision. When we move from national to international politics, the basic moral opposition shifts from the powerless against the powerful to America and its allies (the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, Canada) against its enemies (especially the Arabs and the Communists, often the Japanese). The central match at the 1993 Survivor Series, for example, pitted the "All-Americans" against the "Foreign Fanatics" (a mix that involved not only predictable villains such as Japan's massive Yokozuna but also less predictable ones, such as Finland's Ludwig and the Montrealers). The appeal to racial stereotyping, which had its progressive dimensions in the creation of champions for various oppressed minorities, resurfaces here in a profound

xenophobia. Arab wrestlers are ruthless, Asian wrestlers are fiendishly inscrutable or massive and immovable. While America is defined through its acceptance of diversity, foreign cultures are defined through their sameness, their conformity to a common image. This is true for sympathetic foreigners, such as the Bushwhackers, as it is for less sympathetic foreigners, such as Col. Mustafa and Gen. Adnan. At this level, Hulk's long-time possession of the WWF title becomes an issue of national sovereignty, with threats coming from outside not only the populist community but the American nation-state as well; "Foreign Fanatics" are trying to take what belongs always in American hands, and they must be taught that they can't mess with Uncle Sam.

America's foreign relations can be mapped through the changing alliances within the WWF: Nikolai Volkov, one of the two Bolsheviks, retired from view when the Cold War seemed on the verge of resolution, but reemerged as a spokesman for the new Eastern Europe, redefined as a citizen of Lithuania. The WWF restaged the Gulf War through a series of "Body-bag" bouts between Hulk Hogan and Sgt. Slaughter. Slaughter, a former Marine drill sergeant, was brainwashed by Iraqi operatives Col. Mustafa and Gen. Adnan. Under their sinister tutelage, he seized the WWF championship belt through brutal means and vowed to turn the entire federation and its followers into "POWs." In a series of staged incidents, Slaughter burned an American flag and ridiculed basic national institutions. The turncoat leatherneck smugly pounded his chest while his turbaned sidekick babbled incessantly in something resembling Arabic. Hulk Hogan, the all-American hero, vowed that his muscles were more powerful than patriot missiles and that he could reclaim the belt in the name of God, family, and the country. He dedicated his strength to protect the "Little Hulkamaniacs" whose mothers and fathers were serving in the Gulf. The blond-haired, blue-eyed Hulkster looked into the camera, flexing his pythons and biceps, and roared, "What ya gonna do, Sarge Slaughter, when the Red, White and Blue runs wild on you?" Hulk and Hacksaw Jim Duggan incited the crowd to chant "USA" and to jeer at the Iraqi national anthem. Here, the working-class heroes emerge as flag-waving patriots, fighting against "un-Americanism" at home and tyranny abroad.

Yet however jingoistic this enactment became, WWF's melodramatic conventions exercised a counterpressure, bridging the gap between otherwise sharply delimited ideological categories. Humiliated by a crushing defeat,

Restaging the Gulf War: Hulk Hogan and Sgt. Slaughter (accompanied by his attaché, Gen. Adnan) "draw a line in the sand."

Slaughter pulled back from his foreign allies and began a pilgrimage to various national monuments, pleading with the audience, "I want my country back." Ultimately, in a moment of reconciliation with Hacksaw Jim Duggan, the audience was asked to forgive him for his transgressions and to accept him back into the community. Sarge kneeled and kissed an American flag, Hacksaw embraced him, and the two men walked away together, arm in arm. That moment when one tired and physically wounded man accepted the embrace and assistance of another tired and psychically wounded man contained tremendous emotional intensity. Here, male homosocial desire and populist rhetoric work together to rein in the nationalistic logic of the

Gulf War narrative, to create a time and space where male vulnerability and mutual need may be publicly expressed. Here, the personal concerns which had been displaced onto populist politics reassert their powerful demands upon the male combatants and spectators to ensure an emotional resolution to a story which in the real world refused satisfying closure. The story of a soul-less turncoat and a ruthless tyrant evolved into the story of a fallen man's search for redemption and reunion, an autonomous male's hunger for companionship, and an invincible victim's quest for higher justice.

Such a moment can be described only as melodramatic, but what it offers is a peculiarly masculine form of melodrama. If traditional melodrama centers upon the moral struggle between the powerful and the vulnerable, masculine melodrama confronts the painful paradox that working-class men are powerful by virtue of their gender and vulnerable by virtue of their economic status. If traditional melodrama involves a play with affect, masculine melodrama confronts the barriers which traditional masculinity erects around the overt expression of emotion. If traditional melodrama centers on the personal consequences of social change, masculine melodrama must confront traditional masculinity's tendency to displace personal needs and desires onto the public sphere. The populist imagery of melodramatic wrestling can be understood as one way of negotiating within these competing expectations, separating economic vulnerability from any permanent threat to male potency, translating emotional expression into rage against political injustice, turning tears into shouts, and displacing homosocial desire onto the larger social community. Populism may be what makes this powerful mixture of the masculine and the melodramatic popularly accessible and what allows wrestling to become such a powerful release of repressed male emotion.

Laura Kipnis's thoughtful essay, "Reading *Hustler*" cautions us against reading popular culture (or working-class ideology) in black-and-white, either-or terms, imposing upon it our own political fantasies: "There is no guarantee that counter-hegemonic or even specifically anti-bourgeois cultural forms are necessarily also going to be progressive" (1992: 388). Kipnis finds that *Hustler* "powerfully articulates class resentments" but does so in terms which are "often only incoherent and banal when it means to be alarming and confrontational." Kipnis does not deny the profound "anti-liberalism, anti-feminism, anti-communism, and anti-progressivism" which characterizes the magazine's contents; she does not attempt to rescue Larry

Flynt for progressive politics. She does, however, see *Hustler* as speaking to an authentic discontent with middle-class values and lifestyles, as a voice that challenges entrenched authority. Kipnis's essay is controversial because it neither condemns nor romanticizes *Hustler* and because its writer struggles in print with her own conflicted feelings about pornography.

WWF wrestling poses this same problematic mixture of the antihegemonic and the reactionary. It is a fascist spectacle of male power, depicting a world where might makes right and moral authority is exercised by brute force. It engages in the worst sort of jingoistic nationalism. It evokes racial and ethnic stereotypes that demean groups even when they are intended to provide positive role models. It provokes homophobic disgust and patriarchal outrage against any and all incursions beyond heterosexual male dominance. But, as Jake the Snake reminds us, "it goes much deeper than that. . . . There's more at stake than just wrestling, man." WWF wrestling is also a form of masculine melodrama which, like its nineteenth-century precedents, lends its voice to the voiceless and champions the powerless. Wrestling allows a sanctioned space of male emotional release and offers utopian visions of the possibility of trust and intimacy within male friendship. It celebrates and encourages working-class resistance to economic injustice and political abuse. It recognizes and values the diversity of American society and imagines a world where mutual cooperation can exist between the races. In short, wrestling embodies the fundamental contradictions of the American populist tradition. The politics of WWF wrestling is punch-drunk and rambunctious, yet it builds upon authentic anger and frustrations which we cannot ignore if we want to understand the state of contemporary American culture. Wrestling makes you want to shout, and perhaps we have had too much silence.

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NOTES

1. For useful background on the historical development of television wrestling, as well as for an alternative reading of its narrative structures, see Michael Ball (1990). For a performance-centered account of WWF Wrestling, see Sharon Mazer (1990: 96–122).

2. Christine Gledhill (1987:12–13). David Thorburn similarly finds melodramatic conventions underlying much of prime-time television programming. See Thorburn (1987: 7).

3. Brutus was injured in a motorcycle accident several years ago and had his skull reconstructed; he is no longer able to fight but has come to represent the voice of aged wisdom within the WWF universe. Brutus constantly articulates the values of fairness and loyalty in the face of their abuse by the rule-breaking characters, pushing for reconciliations that might resolve old feuds, and watching as these disputes erupt and destroy his barbershop.

4. This incident could also be read as a response to a series of rumors and tabloid stories centering on the sexuality of WWF athletes. The Ultimate Warrior was "outed" by one tabloid newspaper, while charges of sexual harassment surfaced on an episode of the *Phil Donahue Show*. Complicating an easy reading of this incident is the strong popularity of wrestling within the gay male community and the existence of gay fanzines publishing sexual fantasies involving wrestlers.

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