

Suiting Up and Stripping Down: the Changing Face of (American) Hegemonic Masculinity

By Emily Friedrich

“With Superhero Masculinity, we find that modern myths called Superheroes offer us a way of “connecting with the story” as ordinary men with extraordinary goals for ourselves. Modern parables of such Superheroes offer us the idea of an “alter ego”— men who... have to “pull out the special powers” for challenges they face. Enter the Superhero instincts. In this program you are going to see eight remarkable stories, eight Superheroes, and eight or more male instincts that you cannot do without in everyday life as a man.”

- *Men's Psychology.com* advertising a course on “*Superhero masculinity*”

Released for the summer 2012 box office season, *The Avengers* made billions of dollars, garnered a gargantuan fan base, and has been labelled (not without controversy) a groundbreaking feminist superhero film (Hearns 2012). Directed by feminist Joss Whedon, *The Avengers* recalls Whedon’s previous “gender blind” casting in the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television series (Hearns 2012). As Scott Mendelson notes, “the women in *The Avengers* are absolutely equals to the respective men in their fields, and Whedon knows that this is not something that needs to be noted or explained.” (Mendelson 2012) For example, the fact that Black Widow, the only female *Avenger* superhero, is as capable as her male superhero peers, and that Agent Maria Hill is high in the ranks of the spy agency S.H.I.E.L.D., is taken for granted as an unremarkable equality between men and women. Whedon also nonchalantly populates half of the S.H.I.E.L.D. roster with women, who are not stereotyped as overly sexual or masculine (as are most female characters in action, spy, or superhero films) (Mendelson 2012). Whedon thus

normalizes and popularizes gender equality, rendering this in some ways a feminist take on the role of women in society.

There have been challenges to the assertion that women are depicted positively in this movie, particularly because *Black Widow*, although equal to her male peers, is sexualized (Hearn 2012). However, her sexualisation does not deviate from some of the other sexualisation that occurs in the film. For example, her hunky peers have been the shirtless centerpieces of hundreds of pieces of fan art and are the focus of sexualizing, lingering body-shots. Furthermore, *Black Widow* consciously manipulates her sexualisation in order to outwit her enemies. For example, *Black Widow* allows herself to be “captured”, tied to a chair, and “interrogated”, while in actuality she is interrogating her interrogators. When she has had enough, she breaks her bonds and smacks around five men at once, taking them by surprise because, seconds before, she was viewed as the stereotypical “helpless” woman. Although her appearance is hypersexual, *Black Widow* challenges the dominant views on women’s sexuality by resisting a classification into the typical sexual / “bad girl” or morally uptight / desexualized dichotomy. She is depicted as a hero who exercises agency and who uses more than her body as a means to victory.

Black Widow’s feminist characterization is interesting to examine in the context of this film’s genre. Superheroes provide a record of the values prized by society (Adamou 94), including societal gender ideals, and as such can also provide a record of societal change in attitude towards gendered hierarchies. Christina Adamou suggests several reasons for the importance analyzing superhero film, arguing that the recent rise of the production of superhero films (94) and the fact that the main characters’ bodies are “certainly not limited by human biology” (96) contribute to the importance of this genre in creating fantastical narratives of

dominant gender codes that are able to exaggerate the ability of the gendered human body. As I will explain below, the gendered audiovisual codes that can be embedded in superheroes' embodiment also play a role in this amplified expression of gender norms (105). The opportunity to examine a hyperbolic and fantastical gender narrative provides for a unique analysis.

It has also been argued that superheroes are "first and foremost [men] because only men are understood to be protectors in U.S. culture and only men have the balls to lead" (Stabile 87). Although superheroes today are more diverse than in the past, Stabile argues that to try to play with the gendered nature of superhero narratives is to "undo the whole edifice of protection upon which these stories are erected" (87), and that, as a result, attempts to depict superheroines have floundered (88). She argues that "the idea that women should neither need nor desire more protection than men remains a powerfully radical idea in Western culture" (90). The superhero genre has historically relied on the dominant gender narratives of masculinity for success.

Bearing this in mind, what contribution does Whedon's *The Avengers* make to our understanding of gender roles in our society? Stabile suggests that "[p]erhaps at the beginning of what looks to be a period of dramatic cultural change, cultural producers might begin to imagine and value forms of heroism that transcend the old, tired stereotype of the damsel in distress" (91). Does *The Avengers* challenge this stereotype, or does it only maintain a façade of being progressive? What impact does this new depiction have on our views of masculinity? I propose that *The Avengers* exemplifies how hegemonic masculinity and gender expectations are changing, but that this does not signal an end to the power of hegemonic masculinity. Although it is tempting to be optimistic about the gender roles depicted in the film, it is also important to step back and examine the film's success with a critical eye.

A theoretical examination of masculinity provides the groundwork for a practical application of this theory to the films that I am analyzing. The concept of hegemonic masculinity will be a staple of my analysis. R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity posits that there is a form of masculinity which is the most socially legitimated and powerful way of being a man in a given context (in the case of this analysis, an American / Western context). Hegemonic masculinity is often described as an "impossible ideal" in that the ability to achieve "masculine" status in general is easily undermined: the tests for manhood are never finished (Segal 239, Levant 392). Men are not often discouraged by this repeated failure because adherence to the norms constructed by this concept brings greater access to power and societal resources (which I will discuss below) (Migliaccio 228, Segal 239). Hegemonic masculinity often does not dominate other masculinities through force, but rather teases out complicity from subordinated masculinities because of these rewards (Connell 830). Other methods of ensuring compliance to a hegemonic masculine norm include overt censure, such as name-calling or violence, or more invisible measures such as removing hegemonic masculinity from the possibility of censure (834). Men (and women) often willingly try (and fail) to measure up to this standard because of privileges and pressures. Achieving hegemonic masculinity is not "natural" to any one group of men and requires constant policing of the self and others.

The necessity of policing masculinity has been the source of cultural obsession. For example, the apparent failure of men to live up to, or be able to live up to, standards of masculinity has been a recent theme in both academia and the mass media. This has given rise to a sensationalist discourse that masculinity is in danger of being abolished and is facing an unprecedented crisis (Whitehead 49, Levant 382). In fact, Stephen Whitehead goes so far as to

say that a narrative of men facing a nihilistic future, marginalized by women and socio-economic changes, “has become a highly potent... understanding of men at this point in history” (51), recognizing the wide scope of this narrative (although he expresses doubt that this is actually the case). John MacInnes has argued that masculinity in crisis has three key causes: the emasculation of men due to technological advances, the demonization of and replacement of masculine virtues, and the pressure from women’s recent successes. However, in the following paragraphs I challenge this by arguing that this falsely perpetuates a static, singular view of masculinity.

MacInnes first argues that the “material forces unleashed by the transition to a modern... technological society” have undermined masculinity, further arguing that technology is leading to the forced erasure of gender from our everyday considerations (312). However, MacInnes overlooks how embodiment remains integral to our social interactions: even if we are encouraged to look beyond gender, since when is appearance a negligible way that people circulate and communicate in the world (Halberstam 21)? Although hegemonic masculinity is not the possession of a set of inherent unchanging traits, the appearance and the performance of heterosexuality, associated with particular features of embodiment, is vital to conforming to contemporary Western standards of hegemonic masculinity. Males possessing large musculature and other bodily features attributed to masculinity, such as body hair, are associated by both men and women with increased confidence, popularity, and sexual prowess (Thilamany 103). Access to these physical markers of masculinity can directly affect a display of heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity. Connell indicates how prestige is bestowed upon boys and men who engage in and flaunt heterosexual “sexual conquests” (Connell 851). Heterosexuality is also performed through displays of power and aggressiveness, as well as control of one’s body and

space (Adamou 98). MacInnes overlooks how bodily characteristics still legitimate the means to power through hegemonic masculinity.

Furthermore, modern technology has set into motion new ways of achieving the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity. Connell suggests that the physical traits that map onto hegemonic masculinity are supplemented by “expensive technologies — computer systems, global air travel, secure communications — [that] amplify the physical powers of elite men’s bodies” (852). It is immediately observable that some celebrated elite men, who are presented as ideal male figures, do not achieve physical prowess and strength but do have access to artificial methods of doing so (for example, Donald Trump’s access to technology provides a means to power despite his interesting choice of haircut). As Robert Levant writes, “it is fashionable to be critical of industrialization and the postindustrial world, but most of us would still prefer the benefits of modernity over those offered by obsolete societies” (383). Although embodiment remains relevant to achieving hegemonic masculinity, modern technology can thus add to, or even possibly replace, physical imperatives. As these attractive new relationships between embodiment and technology are made accessible through wealth, ways of achieving power through new technology, such as the use of technology to replace or enhance bodily abilities, comes into play (Hogan 199). The benefits of modernity have been appropriated into a new gender order rather than threatening to undermine masculinity altogether.

Second, MacInnes argues that “manly virtues (heroism, independence, courage, strength, rationality, will, backbone, virility) have become vices (abuse, destruction, aggression, coldness, emotional inarticulacy, detachment, isolation)” and that this “urges men to abandon... masculinity in order to get in touch with their feelings... exchange[ing] outer social public and

political power for inner personal sacrifice and pain” (314). In other words, for MacInnes, masculinity is being forcibly replaced by other values by “society” (vaguely pointing his finger at a non-specific “They”) for men’s “own good” (a “good” that he disagrees is productive). He argues that men’s forced adoption of emotionality necessitates abandoning masculinity. This also indirectly asserts that the conformity of men to new standards of emotionality undermines men’s natural expression, stating that “the self becomes subordinated to the expectations of the self in the name of equality” (316). This comes dangerously close to suggesting that men have a “true nature” and are being forced to, and often fail to, suppress their “natural” selves (which are often suggested to be characterized by uncontrolled sexuality and violence (318)).

I disagree with MacInnes because although change is being highly recommended, I argue that it implies a supplementation, not an “abandonment” of masculine values. While MacInnes is right in observing that men can fail to live up to standards of hegemonic masculinity, he fails to account for how there is no single masculinity that repeatedly fails. Instead, as Connell discussed, multiple masculinities are central to our understanding of hegemonic masculinity. As such, MacInnes’ assertion that men are encouraged to display emotionality could be evidence of a different kind of masculinity, not the failure of a static single masculinity. Although masculinity often appears to be a static and unified totality (Halberstam 4) and as both non-performative and as excluding of “otherness”, this is not the case (Demetriou 348). Demetrakis Demetriou suggests that hegemonic masculinity can and does change through hijacking accepted methods of being a man from other masculinities (348). Demetriou emphasizes that hegemonic masculinity involves “a weaving together of multiple patterns, whose hybridity is the best possible strategy for external hegemony” in what he calls a dialectic pragmatism of a hegemonic masculine bloc

(346). In other words, hegemonic masculinity is able to incorporate elements from other masculinities and other socially-approved behaviours in order to maintain hegemony. This is in response to change through “a constant process of negotiation, translation, and reconfiguration” (355). Hybridization, Demetriou argues, is a rather sneaky strategy for the reproduction of patriarchy. While MacInnes maintains that older forms of masculinity are being replaced, they are simply being supplemented through hegemonic masculinity’s tendency to appropriate new societally-condoned ways of being. Phrasing this appropriation as a change forced upon a single masculinity by external forces obscures the implications of this change.

The changes to gender roles and expectations in contemporary Western society further exemplify hybridization. In contrast to the past, contemporary women are expected to be strong as well as beautiful, while men are expected to be sensitive in addition to the traditional expectation of strength (Tragos 541). “Progressive” values enact a double pressure to attend both traditional and modern values, negotiating a mix of the two. As Peter Tragos writes, “the notion of being a man is complex because it assumes knowing appropriate roles and behaviors, but in a time when American culture is redefining gender roles, identifying appropriate roles and behaviors becomes ambiguous and elusive” (544). As Thomas Migliaccio notes, “men can portray feminine behaviors as long as their masculine performances overshadow the feminine... [and] a man can be expressive as long as the relationships are strongly characterized by the more masculine aspect of friendships, instrumentality” (229). As a result, “men can either decrease the expressiveness in their friendships, or overemphasize the instrumentality, or potentially engage in both” (229). Therefore, the new double standard does not threaten the dominance of older hegemonic masculine values. Instead, it causes an exaggeration of masculine performances in

order to compensate for embracing traditionally feminine values. In order to legitimately ascribe to newer expectations of masculinity, a man must appear more masculine.

MacInnes' last argument is that the advances by women towards equal rights have undermined male confidence and hegemony (312). However, although "[n]ew conceptions about women as strong and independent forced men to renegotiate own their own identities" (Tragos 542) and "gender hierarchies are also affected by new configurations of women's identity and practice" (Connell 848), a traditional means of maintaining hegemonic masculinity, the refutation of the feminine, has remained largely undisturbed.

The performance of a contemporary American ideal of heterosexual hegemonic masculinity is still largely based on a rejection of homosexuality, which is equated with femininity (Demetriou 34). Meredith Li-Vollmer argues that despite new gender roles, "at various intersections of antifeminine and antihomosexual sentiment... one will find particularly powerful messages regarding the goodness of order, obedience, and normalcy versus the evilness of chaos, transgression, and deviance" and that "it is supposed to be an insult to call a man effeminate, for it means he is like a woman and therefore not as valuable as a "real" man. The popular definition of gayness is rooted in sexism" (90). A repudiation of homosexuality and the feminine is associated with maintaining societal moral values and with the maintenance of power over both women and men through hegemonic masculinity.

My dismantling of MacInnes' crisis of masculinity argument can be applied to a close reading of the masculinities in *The Avengers*, which highlights the display of hypermasculine qualities, the continued celebration of masculine virtues, and the appropriation of feminine qualities that characterize hegemonic and accepted masculinities. The relationships between the

following masculinities can be explored to exemplify how a hierarchy of masculinities continues to be legitimated and how this solidifies a claim to violence (power).

Out of all the superheroes and the villains that are depicted in *The Avengers*, Iron Man, also known as Tony Stark, is exemplary of a modern Western hegemonic ideal. Although hegemonic masculinity is almost impossible to embody, Stark is able to act as the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity in this analysis because he is a fictional character and so might actually be able to achieve the fantasy that is unattainable by any real man. The true villain of *Iron Man*, Obadiah Stane, “seems to exemplify everything that the American ideal for masculinity had previously entailed... as a father figure to Stark, Stane further fulfills the role of the patriarchal ideal” (Mason 66). Tony Stark’s defeat of this figure in *Iron Man* could be read as his installment as the ideal hegemonic masculine male.

Tony Stark begins the *Iron Man* series as an efficient, uncaring capitalist businessman with no conscience, but this changes when he is endangered by his own weaponry and must fuse with technology to survive. The technological suit of armor that transforms Stark into Iron Man exists because Stark literally has to fashion himself a new heart after he is captured by terrorists and fatally wounded. A piece of shrapnel is embedded in Stark’s chest, drawing closer and closer to his heart until he manages to fashion a high-power chest-piece, a heart replacement, that prevents the shrapnel from penetrating his real heart. This event opens his eyes to his various irresponsible actions, and so with this change in embodiment his personality also changes. For example, he begins caring about his effect on others and turning away from the weapons

industry¹. A symbolic, audiovisual reading of Iron Man's costuming is that the red (a color associated with the heart) and gold (associated with the vernacular saying "a heart of gold") plating of Iron Man "speak[s] volumes to the source of Stark's power, his heart. Imbued with a technological heart that is more powerful than his biological one, Iron Man's power comes not only from this energy source, but also from his honest desire to better the world in which he lives" (Mason 55). It is thus that this "new heart" symbolizes emotionality being appropriated and legitimated by American hegemonic masculinity, cementing Stark's ability to maintain his enactment of hegemonic masculinity through technology.

Stark is not the only superhero depicted in *The Avengers* that is characterized as sensitive. Thor, for example, although he is the stereotypical blundering strongman, is frequently shown to be emotional about his brother Loki's betrayal, wanting only for his brother to come back with him to their home. Captain America is very passionate about his country as well as being emotionally moved by the plight of several civilians caught in the midst of battle. The Hulk / Banner is shown to be repeatedly worried about accidentally harming others through his actions. The narrative of the need for emotionality is normalized, even for non-hegemonic masculinities.

Despite the sensitivity implicit in Stark's transformation, the creation of Iron Man maintains the American ideology of violent retribution and defense against any perceived threat (Mason 51). Although Stark turns away from the weapons industry in order to become "more responsible", he becomes personally more violent through the use of his technology. Stark uses this technology to eliminate anyone that he feels is a threat, for example taking revenge on the

¹ A narrative of a superhero needing to embrace sensitivity and feminization is also found in the superhero movie *Hancock* (Adamou 101), in case this information helps orient some readers who are not familiar with *Iron Man*.

terrorists that originally captured him. Additionally, Stark is presented as the only character with legitimate access to weapons and the only one with the authority to decide when the use of violence is justified. As part of his transformation, Stark authoritatively states that “I am part of a system that has 0 accountability...”, making clear his problem with the lack of accountability of weapons dealers to a higher authority. However, his problem is, really, that this accountability is not to him, as illustrated by how he continues that “until I know what direction to take... one that *I* am comfortable with and is consistent with the highest good”, he will not produce weaponry. Stark has the power to decide what this “highest good” is and it is assumed that this will necessarily coincide with his comfort. His authority is assumed in the film, and this extends to how the audience is expected to embrace his authority without question. Stark’s decision is that the Iron Man suit is the solution to “privatizing world peace”, enforcing his system of values through the use of technology to which only he has access. For example, in the second movie, he states in response to the American government’s demand that he turn over the suit that “I am Iron man, the suit and I are one, to turn it over would be to turn over myself.” Thus, “Stark’s superiority comes in his ability to literally become the weapon” (Mason 57). Stark’s use of technology cements his claim to power. Because he has had a supposed emotional awakening, we as an audience do not question his claims to this power. The Iron Man narrative challenges MacInnes’ arguments of the usurpation of masculinity by modernity and of the loss of veneration for traditional masculine virtues. Stark’s means to achieving power has not changed along with his newfound “morals”, even though these morals are grounded in emotionalization.

Stark also still engages in the sexual conquests that are integral to maintaining the appearance of heterosexuality in hegemonic masculinity. Stark is especially adept at sexual

conquest, frequently being called a playboy and engaging in the most sexual activity out of any of the characters in these films. An example of this is when the villain in *Iron Man II* tries to get an interview with a magazine reporter. Stark intrudes and the reporter does “quite the spread” for him, submitting both sexually and professionally to his desires. Stark’s automated butler also quips in *Iron Man II* “how refreshing it is to see [Stark] in a video with [his] clothing on”. This ability to assert his sexuality over others to some extent solidifies his superiority to his superhero peers, as Stark’s fellow Avengers are objects of the sexual gaze, not subject. For example, Black Widow’s sexual manipulation never threatens Stark’s position of power, as he is positioned as outside of this influence. The other superheroes are presented as eye candy who have no sexual agency, particularly Thor with his bulging muscles and Captain America with his tight-fitting spandex suit that leaves little to the imagination. Stark’s heterosexuality is repeatedly emphasized, illustrating how emotionality and traditional masculine values can coexist.

The success of each superhero in embodying the hegemonic ideal rests in each superhero’s ability to physically embody the ideal hegemonic qualities that I discussed above (such as musculature). In all three of the movies, Stark is entitled to calling out others on their lack of masculinity, frequently calling other superheroes, partners, and villains names or undermining their claims to heterosexuality in order to maintain his place in the social order. When his authority or masculinity is questioned, the subordinate masculinity is quickly put back in its place by Stark’s sharp wit, which hones in on physical qualities. As Dustin Rowles writes, “[w]hen I see Chris Hemsworth’s Thor, I see a hulking Viking, but I also see a guy who takes good care of his hair, who probably wears expensive briefs, and splashes on cologne before he saves humanity. Likewise, Captain American is built like a Mac truck, but his chest is hairless

and he clearly uses skin product”. This opens both of them to censure by Stark, my particular favorite phrase being “doth mother know you weareth her drapes?” in regards to Thor’s flowing cape. Like Captain America and Thor, The Hulk is a stereotypical “muscleman”; however, The Hulk, is often regarded as too masculine. Curiously, his problem with controlling his “inner beast” resonates with the masculinity in crisis narratives of how men, who are inherently masculine in a certain way, are being forced to try to control their masculine inner nature in the attempt to meet new “softer” ideals. The Hulk’s problem is implied to be the exception: this imperative to tame an inner natural beast is not normalized in the film, so the crisis of masculinity narrative is not espoused by the film as a norm, but as an example of abnormality. Physical masculine traits are still vital to achieving, or trying to achieve, hegemonic masculinity.

Another way that hegemonic masculinity is maintained in the film is through the emasculation and homosexualization of the villain Loki, who fits the “villain as a sissy” stereotype (Vollmer-Li 96). Loki is thin, pale, and effeminate, with long styled hair. He wears flowing, pretty robes and an excessively embellished helmet with lavish frontal horns, for which Stark takes to calling him “reindeer games.” This gendered depiction, Vollmer-Li asserts, “creates caricatures of the villains that not only present the bad guys as “girly,” but also invoke the stereotypical queer” (103). These feminine qualities are equated with his controversial ethics, as he is labelled “ruthless, destructive, and childish”, craving unbridled power. This reasserts a homonegative standard and invokes antifemininity (Vollmer-Li 105). However, the only overt misogyny committed in the film is perpetuated by the villainous Loki, who calls Black Widow a “mewling quim”. Villainy is associated with misogyny. While Loki represents the “demonization” aspect of MacInnes’ argument (how masculine virtues are now “masculine

vices”), this is presented as evidence of his femininity, not of his masculinity. The film is thus contradictory, promoting homonegativity while advocating feminism through the demonization of misogyny. *The Avengers* illustrates an embrace of the sensitivity of “new man” of the modern age through demonizing Loki’s malicious qualities, but condemns feminine appearance in men.

Overall, a narrative of masculinity in crisis is not a useful way to view the recent widespread changes to gender expectations that have been exemplified in *The Avengers*. As I have argued, hegemonic masculinity, rather than being replaced by the new expectations of the “sensitive man”, has rather become hybridized to appropriate new cultural values that have arisen because of modernity. This hybridization masks the continuing presence of traditional masculine values such as violence, homophobia, and the repudiation of the feminine while emphasizing the need for emotional expression.

The implications of the hybridization of hegemonic masculinity are debatable. Demetriou argues that this change is not inherently emancipatory for women; it can, in fact, mask the usurpation of women’s rights because hybridization appears to be progress while it is really a “messy form of camouflage” for the maintenance of a problematic gender order (Demetriou 136). Connell, on the other hand, views these changes as a sign of a new “pragmatic egalitarianism” of young men that implies “the possibility of democratizing gender relations, of abolishing power differentials, not just of reproducing hierarchy” (853). Does *The Avengers*, then, provide cause for pessimism or optimism in regards to the democratization of gender roles?

The feminist aspects of this film could be taken as a sign of progress, as Connell suggests, but we have not yet reached a state wherein we can speak of a “positive hegemony” that promotes gender equality. Although it is tempting to share in Connell’s optimism about

widespread positive democratic changes, *The Avengers* still perpetuates the traditional refutation of femininity and homosexuality. Furthermore, if hegemonic masculinity has the infinite possibility for appropriation and the ability to disguise itself as progressive, perhaps hegemonic masculinity is almost impossible to unseat. Obediah Stane, the enemy in *Iron Man*, states that “[b]y trying to rid the world of weapons, [Stark] gave it its best one ever”, and perhaps this holds true as an ominous metaphor. Whedon’s deliberate attempt to produce a feminist take on female superheroes is a step in the right direction, but we need to pay attention to what the film is perpetuating beyond this.

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