Heroes, Metanarratives, and the Paradox of Masculinity in Contemporary Western Culture


Abstract (summary)

Foucault (1985) points out in The Use of Pleasure that historically sex characteristics have defined sex roles and that "the gods endowed each of the two sexes with particular qualities" (p. 158). Men, he notes in his discussion of the writings of Xenophon, were assumed to have been created "brave," while women were created with a "natural fear" (p. 158). Sex roles were perceived as essential, divinely ordered sex differences. Foucault reviews the early "aversion to anything that might denote a deliberate renunciation of the signs and privileges of the masculine role" (p. 19). He cites Seneca the Elder's condemnation of effeminate youth: "Libidinous delight in song and dance transfixes these effeminates. Braiding the hair, refining the voice till it is as caressing as a woman's, competing in bodily softness with women, beautifying themselves with filthy fineries" (p. 19). This perception persists. Men who are culturally perceived as manifesting nonmasculine qualities are considered aberrations by mainstream culture. [Chuck Palahniuk] (1996) in Fight Club, which is probably the strongest novelistic examination of this issue since the 1960s, describes American culture at the end of the 20th century as full of "a generation of men raised by women" (p. 50), men who have become as soft as "a loaf of white bread" (p. 51), men who are obsessed with the fineries of material culture — Ikea furniture, "Swedish furniture" and "clever art" (p. 46), "hand-blown green glass dishes" (p. 41), and "Njurunda coffee tables" (p. 43), sensitive men who attend support groups to find comfort from their pain. Despite their politically correct postures, these men are still generally labeled by popular culture as effeminate. The qualities associated with manhood -- those underwritten by testosterone -- are still generally equated with masculine value. In Palahniuk's novel, for example, the unnamed narrator praises his alter ego, [Tyler Durden], for "his courage and his smarts," claiming that Durden is "forceful and independent, and men look up to him and expect him to change their world" (p. 174). Durden is violent, sexually aggressive, domineering, controlling, fearless, and able to endure pain without flinching. He appears through most of the novel as the embodiment of the heroic ideal in his quest to single-handedly bring down modern civilization. In the novel, Durden is revealed in the end to be inept, his fallibility exposed, as his great plan to destroy civilization fails because he improperly mixed "nitro with paraffin" (p. 205). The myth of Durden, however, continues after his death.

Contemporary American men are caught in a paradox. On one front, they face social dynamics hostile toward those characteristics culturally defined as masculine. The solution to what has been widely perceived as hegemonic masculinity is "to distance the male self from the complex of male traits" (Ehrenreich, 1983, p. 122). On the other front, the more distanced men become from masculine traits, the less they are perceived as men. Michaelson and Aaland (1976), in a study of how masculine and feminine personality traits are perceived within culture, illustrate that men are perceived as masculine when they exhibit agency, which the Michaelson and Aaland define as behavior that is "emotionally controlled, independent, and assertive" (p. 253). Agency was also key to descriptions of admired men. The ability of men to be "sensitive" to others contributed to the admiration of men only when coupled with "control" (p. 254), which the authors labeled "androgyny" (p. 254). Women were not perceived as feminine or admired for their agency. The primary valued characteristic attributed to women was "communion" (p. 254), or "identification with and sensitivity to others" (p. 254). The hero figure encompasses both agency, in the aggrandizement of masculine accomplishment, and androgyny, in the exaltation of self-sacrifice. The first is manifest in the arrival of Achilles at the battle of Troy and the apotheosis of sports figures; the second is evident in the adoration of rescue workers and fire fighters. Even philanthropy can be characterized as controlled sacrifice for human well-being, rendering the man who donates to the public good a heroic figure.

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The mythical figuration of the hero thrives in contemporary American culture, functioning as both an unattainable ideal against which contemporary masculinity is measured and a mythical means of assuring survival. This figuration places contemporary men in a double bind, or paradox, which offers two alternatives: (1) reject traditional definitions of masculine behavior and risk being labeled by culture as less than a man, or (2) embrace the testosterone-based behaviors that define the hero figure and pursue the impossible acquisition of superhuman qualities, a goal that by its nature must result in failure.

Keywords: hero, masculinity, hero worship, testosterone, myth, contemporary culture, metanarratives

The hero figure spans western literature, from Gilgamesh to Tyler Durden (central character in Chuck Palahniuk's [1996] Fight Club). It is the oldest and most prevalent of all character types, dating from antiquity and remaining to this day the dominant figure in contemporary American narrative. Aristotle in Politiques, or Discourses of Gouverment differentiates heroes from ordinary men, noting that "we suppose the Gods and Heroes to excel men" (Aristotle, trans. 1598, p. 148). The "like equality" he argues should be accorded "men of like condition" (p. 148) does not apply to heroes, for they, like Gods, are above the terrene enterprises of common men. It is not adequate to define the hero figure as "one who prizes honour and glory above life itself and dies on the battlefield in the prime of life" (Finkelberg, 1995, p. 1) or to claim the hero figure excels in martial skills: physical strength, courage, and an innate ability to confront dangerous situations without flinching. The term, which originates from the Greek heroes, or demi-god, refers to one who is part God, part man, one who transcends the mortal and the mundane. As Klapp (1954) notes,
Because the hero exceeds in a striking way the standards required of ordinary group members, as has been said, he is a supernormal deviant, his courage, self-abnegation, devotion, and prowess, being regarded as amazing and "beyond the call of duty." Because of the requirement of transcending the mediocre, he must prove himself by exceptional acts, and the most perfect examples of heroes are to be found in legendary or mythical personages who represent in a superhumanly exaggerated way the things the group admires most. Because of their superior qualities, heroes dominate the scene of human action, symbolizing success, perfection and conquest of evil, providing a model for identification by the group -- one might say its better self. (p. 57)

The mythic hero links the world of ordinary men and the realm of the gods, serving in its earliest form as a protector and defender of ordinary lives. The purposes of a hero are twofold: (1) to bring the protective power of the gods to Earth where they serve a practical function for people, and (2) to posit the possibility of human transcendence. The first provides a heightened sense of security by implying that super-natural forces interact in mundane affairs to protect mortals from unjust ends. The second promises immortality; if man can rise to the realm of gods, then death is avoidable; Calypso's offer to Odysseus that he "should not die nor grow old, ever, in all the days to come" (Homer, pp. 142-143) renders hope for all mortal men.

Postmodern movements, which posit the erosion of cultural metanarratives, mark the latter part of the 20th century as a period of reduced influence from metanarrative doctrines. Lyotard (1979) claims of the postmodern experience, as Schwartz (1998) notes, that "narrative function... is losing its funcions, its great heroes, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal" (p. 64), that faith in metanarratives is in decline. But this "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1979, p. xxiv), as Lyotard calls it, is more localized in select regions, such as the United States, rather than globally evident. In many Middle Eastern countries, the influence of metanarratives increased during the second half of the 20th century. Davidson (1986) points out that "many world leaders see terrorism as monolithic...[and] trace all important terrorist actions -- either directly or indirectly -- to the same source" (p. 109). Organizations such as Hamas, al Qaeda, and Islamic Jihad, engender loyalty through the effectiveness of metanarratives. Their followers claim many great heroes, great dangers, great voyages, and great goals.

In America, the decline in the effectiveness of metanarratives in the second half of the 20th century can be attributed to a number of factors, including unfavorable public opinion about the Vietnam War; the Watergate scandal; an increased awareness of racial, political, economic, and gender diversity; a lingering post-nuclear distrust of science and militaristic machinery in the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; and distrust bred by cold war paranoia. Multiplicity rendered heroic metanarratives more difficult for Americans to affix to a single unified agenda. Watts (1991) notes, "in the late 1960s and early 1970s, intense agitation over civil rights, the Vietnam war, poverty, and countercultural alternative turned attention away from the 'American character' and focused it on the picture of a divided nation seen from 'the bottom up'" (p. 625).

The suicide bombings of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, revitalized metanarratives in American popular culture. The heroic figure, which had been in hibernation rather than in decline, resurfaced in the presence of a perceived threat sufficient to warrant the functional application of the heroic figure. The relationship between the perceived need for heroes and the cultural manufacture of heroes is evident in opinion polls about President Bush pre and post 9/11. Immediately prior to the September 11 attacks, Bush had a 51 percent approval rating. By late September, Bush's approval rating had hit 90 percent.(1) This drastic increase in perceived competence rises from the cultural need for superhuman leaders after the attacks.

The greater the perceived risk of human mortality, the greater a culture's need to reassure itself of potential survival; thus the greater its need to seek embodiment of the hero figure. Prior to 9/11, Americans had few heroes. After 9/11, Americans elevated numerous groups to the status of heroes. Among these were firefighters, police officers, and, for a time, mail carriers. As soon as American military action began in Afghanistan, soldiers were added to this conglomeration of heroic figures. The figuration of these occupational heroes has been, like the professions themselves, predominately male.(2) Despite the postmodern emphasis on heterogeneity that characterizes much of the 70s, 80s, and 90s, the hero figure is primarily a male figure; thus the hero figure is part of the metanarrative of masculinity, defining it as, idealized man. But the hero figure is not a representation of men per se. Porpora (1996), in a contemporary study of personal heroes, argues that "a person's heroes are better conceptualized not as idols of worship, but as an idealized reference group" (p. 211), and that heroes "are one mechanism we use to tell ourselves what it is we stand for. For those who have them, then, heroes are an important marker of identity" (p. 211).

But for men, the hero figure may function as both, operating as a transcendent object of worship, in the sense that it is often venerated without question, uncritically, and to excess,(3) and operating as an ideal, in the sense that heroic qualities serve as models for privileged masculine behavior. In the first sense, the hero figure is an unattainable object of desire that occupies the transcendent realm of the divine; in the second sense, the hero figure engenders masculine affiliation through its presumed presence in the masculine other -- that is, the man who is labeled "hero" is always other. No hero may label himself a hero without risking his heroic status.

Hero worship during the Iron Age reflects these two conflicting functions. Hack (1929) claims that "the Greeks of the Iron Age...worshipped the heroes for two reasons: first because of their superior civilization and their greatness in war, particularly displayed in their conquest of one of the wealthiest and strongest coast states in Asia Minor, and second because they believed these heroes were Greek heroes, the ancestors of the Greeks of the Iron Age. As ancestors, they were not the private property of those families which claimed descent from some particular hero, but they belonged to the whole Greek people" (p. 59). Hack's claim observes that the heroes of cult-worship were worshiper for the characteristics they were presumed to possess (e.g., their accomplishments in battle, their strength, and so on) and for their affiliation with those who worship them. The presumption of kinship is an element of hero worship, with those who worship assuming a bond with those they worship. This is related to a group's need for heroes. Partisan support can influence the effectiveness of those designated as heroes. Leifer (1995) argues that home advantage in major league sports is a result of "partisan effect of supportive local publics" (p. 83). A similar partisan effect may directly influence the effectiveness of soldiers in military conflicts and police officers in public service. In cases where the masculine role of appointed heroes is a defense directly related to survival, revering these men may positively influence their ability to execute that defense. Whether the status is deserved is irrelevant. The mythos of heroes may directly shape cultural and historical currents in the absence of any individual who can objectively manifest the heroic qualities outlined in the symbolic.

Despite the hero figure's practical benefit to a culture as a whole, it is injurious at the level of individualized masculine identity, as the qualities of the idealized hero figure are always and necessarily absent from individual men. Heroes are other even to those whom a culture labels heroes. The hero figure, as the ideal against which masculinity is judged, simultaneously denotes manhood and demotes male identity. It largely defines the masculinity to which many western men aspire and just as thoroughly defines their inevitable failure. As Kuefler (2001) points out, "For men, the dissonance in sex and gender is between an idealized rhetoric of masculinity, on the one hand, and the limitations and restrictions that prevent any
man from realizing the ideal, on the other“ (p. 3). For Kuefler, the ideal is the “social role accorded” men (p. 3). I contend that the ideal that men fail to achieve does not occupy the social space of genuine male experience but occupies the mythos of masculinity -- specifically, the idealized rhetoric Kuefler refers to is largely (if not exclusively) formed by the hero figuration -- and that the hero figure constructs, informs, and controls masculinity as it is imagined and apprehended by popular western culture.

Because mythos collapses when it enters the real, men inevitably fail to realize the masculine heroic, since the mythic must always remain abstract and exterior to lived experience. The inability of man to transcend his own mortality places acquisition of the heroic outside human experience. This is the difficulty Emerson (1850) encountered in his quest to understand human greatness. As he notes, our approach of great men is “hindered on all sides” (Representative Men, Chapter 1) despite the fact that they “seem at a distance our own” (Representative Men, Chapter 1). Because the hero resides in the abstract, because it is supra-human, men are always and necessarily inadequate embodiments of the hero figuration. Carlyle (1841), whose lectures on heroes and hero worship partly inspired Emerson’s quest, had an easier time locating heroes. Carlyle’s claims border on religious fervor:

He [the great man] is the living light-fountain, which it is good and pleasant to be near. The light which enlightens, which has enlightened the darkness of the world; and this not as a kindled lamp only, but rather as a natural luminary shining by the gift of Heaven; a flowing light-fountain, as I say, of native original insight, of manhood and heroic nobleness; -- in whose radiance all souls feel that it is well with them. (p. 2)

Carlyle’s apotheosis of the great man implies allegiance to an ideal that has no material referent (although Carlyle attaches the term to actual people). Carlyle’s great man, like Emerson’s, is a heroic figure. To believe in him requires faith. It is not surprising, then, that male religious figures are often presented as heroes, saviors, preservers of human life, and in possession of the keys to immortality. Faith in transcendental ideals is dependent on what Peirce (1931-1935) calls “tenacity” as a means for fixing beliefs. Peirce writes:

If the settlement of opinion is the sole object of inquiry, and if belief is of the nature of a habit, why should we not attain the desired end, by taking as answer to a question any we may fancy, and constantly reiterating it to ourselves, dwelling on all which may conduce to that belief, and learning to turn with contempt and hatred from anything that might disturb it? (p. 276)

Peirce points out that social impulse works against tenacity as a means of fixing belief. Likewise, the more rigid the fixation of tenacious belief, the more tension those beliefs generate as they abrade against the obstinacy of empiricism. Myth eases those tensions by appearing to manifest in the physical as observable behaviors and consensus. Because it is a hyperbolic characterization of observable phenomenon, myth, when taken on faith, is implied in experience. Although the heroic figure cannot be located in lived experience, individual acts of heroism can. The ability to envisage heroes from individual acts is linked to the ability to think in absolutes. Popora notes in his study that “the clearer the picture one has about the meaning of life, the more likely one is to have personal heroes” (p. 224). We might infer from that its opposite: the more obfuscated the meaning of life (the more difficult it is to imagine a unified meaning for life), the less likely one is to have personal heroes. Tenacity and faith are the heroic figure’s allies; complexity and reason are its adversaries.

Emerson, Carlyle, and others struggled to locate the transcendent in the terrene. Though heroic acts abound, heroes are beyond human and thus remain elusive. The title “hero” imbues on its recipient qualities (in quantities) that no man may possess; therefore, the identification of heroes in the world of lived experience requires a leap of faith. As McCormick (1953) notes of Emerson’s quest, the “nature of the great man [is]...[a] declaration of optimism...and a cry for reassurance” (p. 291). The hero figure has no empirical coefficient. To maintain the illusion that the heroic has infiltrated the mundane, close relationships with men whom the culture labels heroes must be avoided. This helps to explain why men, in general, retain emotional distance -- often at the expense of their personal relationships. The emotional detachment necessary to maintain the illusion of heroic qualities is what Daly (1973) refers to when she points out men have a “tendency to construct boundaries between the self...and the ‘other’” (p. 15). The more intimately a man is known, the less likely he is to be aligned with the hero figure; thus, the less masculine he is likely to appear.

It is important to note that, when I mention masculinity, I am not using the term as it is used in much of the scholarship published since the growth of men’s studies in the ’70s. A great deal of work on gender relies on discussions of masculinity (-ies). Some of it has illuminated issues significant to our understanding of men and masculine roles in American culture, but a surprising number of articles that attempt to define masculinity become mired in political agendas and movements. As Carrigan, Connell, and Lee (1985) note, “The political meaning of writing about masculinity turns mainly on its treatment of power. Our touchstone is the essential feminist insight that the overall relationship between men and women is one involving domination or oppression” (p. 552). Carrigan et al. recognize the adulterating effects of feminist politics on our understanding of masculinity; nevertheless they argue that it is in the “issue of social power” that “we find the bases of an adequate theory of masculinity” (p. 552). Connell (1995) provides a clear overview of the problems scholars have encountered in working toward a definition of masculinity. In pointing out that masculinity has become problematic with the increase in cultural debate over masculinity issues and themes, Connell notes that despite the influence of movements among feminists and gay activists to reshape culturally constructed notions of masculinity, popular culture still embraces the notion of a masculine essence. Connell takes to task past attempts at defining masculinity: sex-role theory, examinations of social structure, historical views of gender relations, theories of masculinity as representation, and arguments for masculinity as a psychological essence. While his objective is to fit masculinity into a sociopolitical framework that includes other fields of inquiry, mine is to extract it from those realms.

The political, social, behavioral, and sexual elements of gender relations are socially and culturally significant and illumine a great deal about the gender dynamics of human interaction, but masculinity, despite the term’s proliferation throughout public discourse, has a biological base. However a culture encodes behaviors, terminology, and gender ideologies, most world cultures define as masculine those behaviors that are linked to testosterone. This occurs independently of the gender of the person exhibiting those behaviors, since testosterone is present in men and women. Because men generally have more testosterone than women, behavioral patterns that can be traced to high levels of testosterone have been historically attributed to men. As Dabbs and Dabbs (2000) note in their study on testosterone, “Testosterone goes beyond determining the difference between males and females. The amount of testosterone affects the degree of masculinity within each sex. Regardless of whether people are male or female, they vary in how masculine they are” (p. 12). High and low levels of testosterone unquestionably affect behavior. People with high levels of testosterone are more aggressive and more concerned with sex and power than people with low levels of testosterone. How these manifest is culturally and socially influenced, but the force behind these drives is not culturally or socially constructed. People with high levels of testosterone are different from people with low levels of testosterone in the way they act and the way they think. The labeling of certain behaviors as masculine is not arbitrary; neither is the attribution of these masculine behaviors to men. The former is linked to human biochemistry, and the latter is a false generalization.

This position is unpopular among men’s studies scholars and is often vehemently dismissed. (5) Whitehead and Barrett (2001), for example, argue
that "men are not puppets of their hormones" in their claim that "masculinity [is] totally uninfluenced by biology" (p. 16), an extreme argument to make considering the preponderance of evidence relating testosterone to behavior. While the argument could be made that "masculinity" does not belong exclusively to the domain of men, the argument that masculinity has no biological precedent is untenable. Men's studies has articulated its interest in redefining masculinity in its desire to remake men — to construct, script, facilitate, or organize a kinder gentler masculinity. The ambition is admirable and the reasons for wanting masculinity to be exclusive of biology are understandable. But, as Karras (2003) points out, "to argue that gender difference is socially constructed need not deny any biological component to that difference" (p. 5), that locating "biological bases for gender difference...[does not] disprove the notion that gender is socially constructed" (p. 5).

Masculinity is, most precisely, a general term used to denote characteristics linkable to variant levels of testosterone, which has been socially and culturally associated with men as a result of a broad generalization based on observed characteristics across human populations. The hero figure is a hyperbole of those masculine characteristics, and it functions as a means to assuage an innate fear of mortality, which is inexorably linked to the human instinct for survival. Thus, the greater the threat to an individual or a group's survival, the greater the need for heroes. Furthermore, those within a threatened group who incline toward absolutes are more likely to overtly believe in heroes.

In the aftermath of 9-11, firefighters and police officers were elevated to heroic status by the citizenry, despite the specifics of how they individually behaved. In the abstract, they were more than men. To maintain their stature as near-gods, public opinion had to ignore the actuality of these men's lives. The majority of Americans maintain these men as heroes, because heroes, though illusionary, are perceived as the best defenders. Anything that revealed these men to be ordinary human beings was in their lineup. Langewiesche's (2002) American Ground chronicled cleanup of the ruins at the World Trade Center site and was controversial, not for its lack of evidence or its inaccuracy, but because it exposed the less heroic behaviors of firefighters, police, and cleanup crews (looting, for example); it humanized them. Gorman, president of the Fire Officers' Union, was critical of Langewiesche's book and organized protests by firemen at public book readings while admitting that looting took place. Gorman merely argued that looting could not be absolutely attributed to firemen, yet he claimed that Langewiesche's "accusations are completely without merit" ("Firefighters Outraged," 2002, n.p.).

Conflicts such as this are a result of contradictions between the abstract domain of masculinity and the mundane domain of masculinity -- the hero figure in conflict with the lived lives of men. Objections to Langewiesche's book are largely based on the fact that he humanized national heroes. The same reluctance to sully the hero figure with the truth is apparent in the media coverage of the war in Iraq. News from CNN and FOX showed brave, stalwart men facing off against an unseen enemy (usually with an American flag or a joyous Iraqi child somewhere in the frame). News from the BBC and Al Jazeera showed children and infants lying in hospital beds beneath bloody bandages. Ironically, looting became an issue here too. Donald Rumsfeld criticized the media for airing images of the looting in Iraq. Again, veracity was not the issue. What mattered was that those images undercut the view of American forces as heroes freeing a grateful people from oppression. These images of human folies or of the innocent dead remind us that war is fought by men against other men, not by heroes against the wicked.

Understanding the paradox confronting contemporary western men rests on understanding three mutually influential yet distinct domains: the abstract domain of the hero figure, the mundane domain of men's lived experience (where popular culture is mapped), and the biological domain of our physiology. Higher levels of testosterone fuel characteristics that manifest themselves in variant ways within culture, and are attributed to men's lives by that culture. The socially constructed ideal of the hero figure defines those characteristics. Despite changes in the national discourse on gender, little of this paradigm has been affected. Bravery and violence in men are still venerated, and, in general, overt displays of emotional sensitivity and aversion to pain in men are still disdained.

There is little difference between Odysseus slaughtering suitors in the Odyssey to regain his wife and Bruce Willis in "Die Hard" slaughtering terrorists to regain his wife. Despite overt changes in the language of American culture, there has been little covert change. Masculine men are still viewed as sexier and more successful. Many masculine behaviors that have been openly condemned are still rewarded. Mike Tyson remains a central cultural figure despite a rape conviction and a bestial public display in the ring against Evander Holyfield. Arnold Swartzenegger was elected governor of California despite the accusations of 16 women that he groped them. While these issues are more complicated than these single issues, the perception of masculine traits does influence the social complex of human interaction.

Foucault (1985) points out in The Use of Pleasure that historically sex characteristics have defined sex roles and that "the gods endowed each of the two sexes with particular qualities" (p. 158). Men, he notes in his discussion of the writings of Xenophon, were assumed to have been created "brave," while women were created with a "natural fear" (p. 158). Sex roles were perceived as essential, divinely ordered sex differences. Foucault reviews the early "aversion to anything that might denote a deliberate renunciation of the signs and privileges of the masculine role" (p. 19). He cites Seneca the Elder's condemnation of effeminate youth: " 'Libidinous delight in song and dance transfixes these effeminates. Braiding the hair, refining the voice till it is as coarsening as a woman's, competing in bodily softness with women, beautifying themselves with filthy fineries'" (p. 19). This perception persists. Men who are culturally perceived as manifesting nonmasculine qualities are considered aberrations by mainstream culture.

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Men are covertly rewarded by culture for exhibiting agency and androgyny (as Michaelson and Aaland use the term), yet criticized for exhibiting behaviors associated with those traits. They are in a double bind, unable to escape the demands of the hero figure without abnegating their masculinity and thus sacrificing the silent approbation of culture, yet often drawn by a sense of justice toward renunciation of hegemonic masculinity. In seeking manhood at its fullest, they must pursue heroic status, but the achievement of that status can only be chimeric and requires alienation and abject solitude. Thus they either seek the impossible or abandon their cultural status as men and join the ranks of Seneca the Elder's effeminate youth. This is the paradox of contemporary American men: they either embrace the mythic figuration of the hero, which they inevitably fail to embody (except as an issue of existential bad faith), or they reject the mythic figuration of the hero and thus fail to embody the culturally coded definition of a man.

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