We Need New Heroes: Tracing Heroic Masculinities from Homeric Epic to Contemporary Comic Cinema

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WE NEED NEW HEROES: TRACING HEROIC MASCULINITIES FROM HOMERIC EPIC TO CONTEMPORARY COMIC CINEMA

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BY
MATTHEW GALLAGHER
CHICAGO, IL
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I could not have accomplished this without you all.
For the boys who said “no” when they were told to “act like a man.”
We need new heroes. Ones suited for the times we’re in.
—The Falcon and the Winter Soldier
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INTRODUCTION

CONSTRUCTING NARRATIVES OF HEROIC MASCULINITY FROM HOMER TO THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

For as long as stories have been told, written, and performed—long before Kevin Feige dominated box offices with the global phenomenon of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU)—heroes have been the measures of a culture. A people’s values, their fears, their hopes, their customs have all been preserved in the stories of their heroes and in recent decades, I would argue, in the stories of their superheroes. Tracing depictions of contemporary cinematic superheroes back to some of the earliest extant narratives about heroes in Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, we find that most of our heroes in the past three millennia have been men. And in the modern explosion of superhero movies’ success and popularity, we find that many of these heroes, more often than not, have been cisgender, heterosexual, white men. So what do these heroes’ masculinities have to do with the way they perform their heroism? And even more consequentially, what do these men’s heroism have to do with the way they perform their masculinities?

At this intersection of heroic identity and masculine identity, I argue that we find a static paradigm for heroism rooted in toxic, hypermasculine gender ideals that has remained largely unchanged from the ancient portrayals of masculinity in Homer’s epics.

In this thesis, I will closely examine the ways in which modern superheroes in U.S. comic cinema, by following the same gendered scripts as ancient heroes in Homer’s epics, have learned and modeled an idealized, hypermasculinity that perpetuates rigid
and harmful gender practices. I will explore how modern superheroes learn and perform their masculinity from societally accepted and glorified gender norms and regulations, internalize and perform their masculinity in accordance with those norms through their superhero persona, and replicate or modify those masculine performances after exposure to various masculinities in close social interactions with other masculine heroes, particularly those that serve as mentors or father-figures. I will compare these various modern examples with ancient paradigms from the Homeric epics to argue that modern superheroes' heroic-masculine identities are constructed in much the same way that ancient heroes’ heroic-masculine identities were constructed millennia prior. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate how the stagnant narrative structures used to tell heroes’ stories throughout time have contributed to the hegemonic ideals of hypermasculinity perpetuated by modern U.S. cinematic portrayals of male superheroes, and to consider new narrative structures that can be used to reconstruct a heroic masculinity that resists or subverts the norms of toxic, hegemonic masculinity.¹

I find it important to note, at this point, the positionality from which this thesis is produced. I, as the author, identify as a U.S. American, cisgender, heterosexual, white man who is currently able-bodied. Though I was a first-generation college student, I did complete a full four-year bachelor's degree, and after the completion of this thesis, I will be conferred a master’s degree. I name these social positions in an effort to recognize that these privileged identities in my U.S. social context have allowed me to move with great ease through my life experiences. Though the language of social justice and

¹ I want to emphasize that I am not calling ancient performances of masculinity toxic, as ideologies of sex and gender in the ancient world would not allow for the nuanced language we use to talk about gender today. What I am arguing is that the refusal to break from the scripts for performing masculinity as demonstrated in the ancient context has led to a glorified toxic masculinity in today’s culture.
liberation was not a language I began to learn until my adult life—and is a language I continue to learn—I strive to identify ways in which I can use my social positions to combat oppressive systems and regimes. Though identifying as a man, I have always performed my gender in ways that incorporated more socially viewed qualities of femininity. Because of this, when I accessed highly masculinized spaces (the high school locker room, for example), I was able to witness up close the oppressive power of hegemonic masculinities, even over other kinds of masculinities. I was forced to question why I performed my masculinity differently, if there was something wrong with me and my masculinity, and how those men learned to perform their masculinity in that way. These questions began influencing the way I saw masculinity as it appeared everywhere in my life from real-life interactions to on-screen depictions. And so, as my interests have grown and shifted, I find myself now contemplating the ways in which traditionally masculine films, like contemporary superhero movies, teach their viewers how to perform their own masculinities in oftentimes toxic and harmful ways.

**Heroic Obligations and Expectations**

I begin by answering some more fundamental questions about heroes and our fascination with them through the ages. As I contemplated the impact of this project, I began asking myself: why do we even have heroes, and how have they enchanted us for thousands of years when their stories have blended so seamlessly together? To some extent, these narratives, similar though they may be, offer a structure that satisfies our human craving for familiarity, our fascination not so much with super-human ability as much as with super-human morality, courage, perseverance. In these regards, “the study of heroes in fiction and popular culture has strengthened our understanding of [the
relationship between hero stories and the organization of wider society]” (Frisk 92). Heroic narratives reinforce the societal discourse that these qualities of morality, courage, and perseverance set one apart from the crowd, or rather set one above the crowd. Within the narratives themselves, there is an affirming recognition granted by wider society to the beings who embody these qualities. The ancient Greeks called it kleos—glory. The audiences receiving the narratives consume this given glory with hope and wonder, and perhaps even nostalgia. The recognition granted the heroic figures functions to motivate the consumers of heroic narratives to adopt those qualities for themselves. These narratives imply that if one can act the same way as their heroes—if one can be as moral, as courageous, as determined—there is the possibility they can garner that hero’s glory for themselves and assume a status in society above their current station. They affirm the notions of good and bad that are instilled in us from childhood. They perpetuate that the good are rewarded, and the bad are punished. And the super good, the ones willing to risk their own lives on behalf of others, are super rewarded. But so, too, are they expected and obligated to continue to be super.

A famous quote that comes to mind when discussing heroes and responsibility; it sits perched upon the fence between maxim and cliché. “With great power comes great responsibility,” Uncle Ben forewarns a young Peter Parker in Sam Raimi’s 2002 film, Spider-Man. It is adapted from Spider-Man’s earliest appearances in Marvel Comics’ Amazing Fantasy #15 as the closing narrative caption of the last panel: “With great power there must also come – great responsibility!” (Lee and Ditko). But the notion predates the 1962 comic with variations of it appearing in governmental frameworks,
political speeches, and religious texts. But for one of the earliest, if not the earliest, proclamation of heroes using their power out of a sense of obligation, I look to Homer. The Trojan warriors, Glaucus and Sarpedon, are contemplating their warrior-hero status, and Sarpedon explains how and why they are revered as heroes among their people:

Glaukos, why is it you and I are honored before others with pride of place, the choice meats and the filled wine cups in Lykia, and all men look on us as if we were immortals, and we are appointed a great piece of land by the banks of Xanthos, good land, orchard and vineyard, and ploughland for the planting of wheat? Therefore it is our duty in the forefront of the Lykians to take our stand, and bear our part of the blazing of battle. (*Iliad* 12.310-16)

Homer dictates a cycle of heroism contributing a third element to the power-responsibility relationship that I touched on before—glory. Sarpedon summarizes that he and Glaucus exhibited the power to defend their people, acted upon that power to do the defending, won praise and glory bestowed upon them by their people, and accepted honors and gifts from them, effectively entering a sort of cyclical contract with their society. They have the power to defend, and so they take on the responsibility, and in return society thanks them with gifts and glory, setting the expectation that the heroes continue to serve. Certainly, this model makes the embodiment of heroism all the more appealing to the common male Greek who aspired for fame and glory because it offered compensation. The emphasis on power and responsibility alone without the material

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2 Examples can be found in the “Work, surveillance and correspondence plan” from the 1793 French National Convention, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s 1945 State of the Union address, and the Gospel of Luke’s “Parable of the Faithful Servant” (12:48).

3 Citations of *The Iliad* refer to Richmond Lattimore’s translated version unless otherwise noted. Further *Iliad* citations will be abbreviated *Il*. While Lattimore uses Greek spellings of names and places, my commentary employs the more common Latinized spellings.
compensation in U.S. pop culture perpetuates the mentality that duty is something intrinsically felt and voluntarily taken up and that society need not and indeed should not, reward materially but rather with intangible fame and celebrity status (as we see throughout the MCU). So how do these films make the appeal, then, to U.S. audiences to do better and be better like the heroes on the screen? If they are not insinuating tangible, material gain the way the *Iliad* did for Greek men, what benefit is there in aspiring to be better, to be super? I argue that they offer a version of masculinity that is mistakenly understood to be accessible to all men and inherently rewarding to the man who can manage to enact it.

![Figure 1. Comic panel from *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (1962).](image)

The popularity and success of superhero films boomed (and continues to boom) in the first decades of the second millennium in large part due to the national trauma that 9/11 and the ‘War on Terror’ left on the collective American psyche. And although “American superhero films very rarely explicitly mention the events of [9/11] and the ‘War on Terror’...they are restaged and refought in allegory by very American heroes,”
contributing to an authentically American genre of film and even myth-making previously unseen since the era of the Western (McSweeny 7-8). The superhero film, descending from mythologies of the frontier and westward expansion, relies on messages that “‘real men’ are those who are strong, self-reliant, courageous and resolute...women [are] to be saved and adored...and the only answer to a problem regardless of what it might be, is righteous and redemptive violence” (McSweeny 9). Through this lens, we start to see the image of the modern, male superhero and the implicit messages transmitted about masculinity. Our superheroes, particularly when they are men (and in most cases they are), are supposed to fit a mold, to meet a set of standards that prove themselves worthy of being our heroes. One of those criteria, as McSweeny identifies, is to be a “real man,” i.e. one who is strong, independent, brave, and decisive. These static and overly emphasized qualities of being a “real man” contribute to the hypermasculinization of superheroes in film which leads to the “feting of physical strength and aggression over emotional intelligence and empathy...[and] being effortlessly muscular and imposing in stature” (D. Connell 20). So when the primary mode of reception for superhero media shifts from comic-book to film, “the audience can see (or perhaps might see the physical potential of) themselves within the source material” (D. Connell 20). In our post 9/11 era of terror and suspicion, the image of this “real man” savior-figure with big muscles and looming stature becomes an object of both internal and external desire—a modern mold of manliness that one might fashion themselves into and earn the kleos and the sex appeal of the superheroes on the

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4 Please note that this is Daniel Connell, not R.W. Connell, the masculinities studies pioneer. I will differentiate between the two using their first initial in citations.
screen. And in our society, that *kleos* and that sex appeal are more than enough compared to the choice meats and brimming cups of Homer.

**The Monomyth of Masculinity**

As previously mentioned, hero-stories are exceptionally similar when it comes to their narrative structure. Joseph Campbell, a renowned literary critic of the mid-20th century, identifies this static structure as the monomyth. Derived from the Greek words *monos* and *mythos*, the coined term could be translated as “the one story” or “the only story.” Campbell, having studied mythologies from all reaches of the globe from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean, from Mesoamerica to East Asia, and even more modern literatures from the Renaissance onward, concluded that there is a single narrative pattern that all hero-stories adhere to. Campbell defines the monomyth himself as “a separation from the world, an [initiation] to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return” (49). He elaborates that “a hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder...fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won...the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (Campbell 45). He further outlines the subcomponents of each phase of separation, initiation, and return, but with variations and either-or’s enough to make a choose-your-own-hero-adventure. The primary separation-initiation-return cycle is the narrative structure on which I will focus to trace the narratives of modern superheroes in relation to masculinity.

The classic (though extended) example that vividly depicts the concept of the monomyth is the story of Odysseus laid out in Homer’s *Odyssey*. Odysseus, King of Ithaca, is recruited in to be a chieftain in the Trojan War for the Greeks, setting the
monomyth into motion with the first stage of separation. While separated from his homeland and his family, Odysseus is “initiated” into the hero’s journey as he wars with Trojans and leads his squadron of Ithacan soldier for ten years, plots the sacking of Troy via the Trojan Horse, and spends another ten years encountering and overcoming monsters, witches, and strangers, further proving his heroic skill and wit. But ultimately, after twenty years, he returns to Ithaca with gifts of gold and an abundance of glory, defeats (by brutally slaughtering) the suitors vying for his wife’s hand in marriage, reclaims his place as king, and bestows the gifts won in his ventures upon the loyal members of his house. It takes twenty years, but he fulfils the monomyth formula of separation, initiation, and return. Campbell offers similar accounts of this structure in ancient contexts of the Buddha’s enlightenment and Moses’ communion with God on Mount Sinai (45–49), and we can almost always (though sometimes less obviously) map this same structure onto contemporary superhero films.

In Jon Favreau’s *Iron Man* from 2008, the inaugural film of the MCU, the monomyth is ever at work to convey Tony Stark’s assumption of his Iron Man persona. Tony, the young, playboy, philanthropist CEO of the arms company, Stark Industries, *separates* from his cushy Los Angeles estate to Afghanistan for a demonstration of a newly developed missile being purchased by the U.S. army during the War on Terror. He is even further separated when he’s abducted by a terrorist group coercing him to build weapons for them. He is *initiated* into the rites of the hero when, instead of building the weapons the terrorists request, he actually fashions a full-body suit of armor with weapons capabilities which he uses to defeat the terrorists and escape captivity. He *returns* to LA with the enlightenment to cease weapons manufacturing at
his company, the vision of enhancing his prototype-suit, the ability to defeat his old mentor who is actually revealed to be the one to have assisted the terrorists in capturing him. He gains the power to protect the world from the threats of terror foreign, domestic, and intergalactic. The same pattern has been repeated in most of the MCU films to follow, even the ones one might expect to subvert traditional superhero norms.

Ryan Coogler’s 2018 film, Black Panther, was critically acclaimed as the first major U.S. superhero film not only to star a Black superhero in a solo feature but also to star a majority Black/African-American cast. The film orients itself in both African mythology (taking place in the fictional country of Wakanda) and U.S. Black perspectives of Oakland, California in the early 1990’s. The titular hero, however, the Black Panther (AKA King T’Challa) experiences his heroic journey through the same identifiable tropes of the monomyth, though in a more nuanced fashion. His hero’s journey is located more in his identification with his super-persona than a geographical cycle. T’Challa’s authority as King of Wakanda is challenged, and he finds himself in ritual combat against the challenger wishing to replace him. Under the terms of the ritual, he must surrender his Black Panther powers, bestowed by a magical Wakandan herb, and defeat his challenger. T’Challa is separated from his identity as the Black Panther and even further separated from his people and country when he is initially struck down and nearly killed. He is initiated into his heroic rites when he confronts his deceased father in the ethereal Ancestral Plane of a purgatorial afterlife. He returns when his body is resuscitated, he is renewed with the powers of the Black Panther, and he overcomes his challenger and reclaims the throne of Wakanda. Though certainly less traditional than the example I discussed earlier and the examples Campbell discusses in
his theory, T’Challa’s story is that of another hero confined by the script of the monomathy.

I go to such lengths to depict the ways in which the monomyth functions and the ways in which it seems to be ever-present in heroic narratives, both ancient and modern, so as to identify this common link among hero-stories throughout time as one that is inherently problematic, particularly in its gendered implications. This pattern of separation-initiation-return emphasizes a static rigidity of masculine development. Campbell exposes and perpetuates the idea that for a hero to prove their worth and ability and win glory and praise, which I have previously established to be grounded in the realm of masculinity as something only “real man” can do, they must do it alone. While there may be mystical helpers or new comrades along the way, the hero must ultimately be isolated from their home, their family, and their support system. The monomyth exalts a sense of isolation from society in which a man is able to grow and develop emotionally and intellectually, so much so that he returns to his old life with some new power, wisdom, or technology that sets him apart from and above the other men and women around him. As such, it implies that such development is meant to be private, reinforcing a masculine repression of emotion in the public sphere and an individualistic approach to self-help that shuts out the people most important to the man undergoing the heroic transformation. Masculinity sociologist Paul Kivel summarizes:

From a very early age, boys are told to ‘Act Like a Man.’ Even though they have all the normal human feelings of love, excitement, sadness, confusion, anger, curiosity, pain, frustration, humiliation, shame, grief, resentment, loneliness, low self-worth, and self-doubt, they are taught to hide the feelings and appear to be tough and in control. They are told to be aggressive, not to back down, not to
This set of expectations that Kivel calls the “Act-Like-a-Man” box, leads to the success of the monomyth. The monomyth reinforces these masculine expectations and engorges them in larger-than-life depictions upon the silver screen. It keeps our heroes in boxes dictating the type of man they must be in order to be a good hero. Throughout this thesis, I will be alluding to the ways in which the monomyth and the “Act-Like-a-Man” box are constantly at work in superhero films to dictate the bounds of acceptable heroic-masculine behavior.

![Figure 2. Paul Kivel’s Act-Like-A-Man-Box Diagram.](image)

**Performative Gender, Heroics, and Identity**

As I have now laid out the interconnectivity between heroism and masculinity as well as the way in which the traditional narrative structure of hero-stories reinforces this
bond, I turn to the theories and philosophies of gender, masculinity, and heroism on which I will heavily rely as I analyze performances of heroism and masculinity throughout this thesis.

The main lens through which I will consider gender, and more specifically masculinity, is Judith Butler’s theory of performativity. In her breakthrough work, *Gender Trouble*, Butler theorizes that gender is not some intrinsic quality that one has or an identity that one is. According to Butler:

> words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance [gender], but produce this on the surface of the body...such acts, gesture, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (*Gender Trouble* 185)

From this perspective, gender is not something someone has or is, but rather something that one constantly and unthinkingly does. With this in mind, when I discuss the gender/masculinity of the heroes throughout this thesis, I will be discussing the words, actions, gestures, and desires that the characters perform throughout the texts. I will similarly approach the construct of heroism from a perspective of performativity. I argue that one is not inherently a hero in the same way Butler argues one is not inherently a gender. I approach heroism in this thesis as a network of words, actions, gestures, and desires that one constantly performs. While one surely exhibits certain qualities that predispose them to heroic acts (bravery, selflessness, strength, for example) these qualities alone do not imbue heroic identity to an individual. It is, rather, the constantly performed acts that garner one’s recognition by society as a hero—an identity that can only be assumed when society declares it so and one enters into that
cyclical contract with that society as laid out by Homer all those years ago. In this sense, I cannot refer to just a hero’s masculinity or heroism; the two are always constantly being defined and redefined in relationship to the other as facets of an illusory identity constructed, repeated, and maintained through the thoughts and actions of the subject.  

When I discuss masculinity in particular, I utilize R.W. Connell’s theorizing of plural masculinities from a relational approach. Not all of the men in the superhero films I will discuss will be performing their masculinity in the same way, but it is often the case, as I will identify throughout, that hegemonic displays of masculinity rise to the surface and are enacted by the leading hero of a narrative. “Hegemonic masculinity,” Connell emphasizes, “is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations” (76). For Connell, multiple masculinities are required for us to even identify the dominating, hegemonic narrative of masculinity construction. Further elaborating, Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees…the dominant position of men” (77). Hegemonic masculinities, then, are the ones that affirm the preferential status of men over women as clearly laid out by the 24:2 ratio of male-led solo/ensemble films to female-led solo films in the MCU as of the end of 2021. Esther DeDauw and Daniel Connell rely on R. Connell’s definitions of masculinities and hegemony in their 2020 book *Toxic Masculinity: Mapping the Monstrous in Our Heroes* which sets out an objective “to

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5 Having established that identity is not an essential, internal core of a subject’s being but rather a fabrication produced by the performances of the subject, when I refer to “identity” at any point throughout this thesis, it is through this lens of performativity that I do so.
understand to what extent it is possible to provide any alternatives to the hegemonic order, whose appropriative nature purges the radical from any resistance by enfolding its palatable and marketable elements into its contradictory mass” (5). From their stance, there is indeed very little room to provide such alternatives as those alternatives are subsumed by the hegemonic—a stance with which my thesis will agree as I show how hegemonic masculinities always win out, even when heroes are enticed with more subordinate expressions of masculinity.⁶

As I will be comparing performances of heroic masculinity in contemporary superhero films with similar examples from Homer’s epics, it is important to explore the construct of gender from an ancient perspective. In classical Athenian society, a man “was both responsible and useful in his roles of head of family, friend, and citizen. He was courageous in battle and politics, zealous of his honor, rational, and able to control his appetites” (Roisman 502). Though this society of Greeks thrived three to four centuries after the composition of Homer’s epics, the philosophers and politicians ordering the rules of the society relied heavily on the Homeric myths for the structuring of their social norms, and so this image of a responsible and courageous head of the family is one we see frequently in the Homeric texts (Odysseus, for example, representing his family’s honor at Troy and maintaining his household’s wellbeing as the primary motivation for returning to Ithaca). Women, in contrast, were “expected to bear [their] husband[s] children, be obedient and faithful to [them], and run the household” (Roisman 508). These static gender performances were the only ones

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⁶ Subordinate masculinities refer to expressions of masculinity that do not replicate hegemonic, oppressive norms. They are made subordinate to hegemonic masculinities through a process “marked by a rich vocabulary of abuse...[in which] the symbolic blurring with femininity is obvious” (R. Connell 79).
available to men and women, maintaining that for a household, and therefore the whole society, to be functional, “it has to consist of a male and female, with one the ruler and the other the ruled” (Roisman 508). Greek society was one that severely regulated gender, and in this regard, there really was not much room for varying or plural masculinities. As such, references to masculinity as represented by the ideals of the Homeric epics are meant to be static and highly binary-oriented as that is the way the Greeks understood gender in their society. This baseline understanding of acceptable gender performance in Greek society should further emphasize the problematic reliance on these ancient tropes for modern narratives.

Through these understandings of gender and masculinity, both ancient and modern, in relation to heroism, I approach the filmic text with the following objectives: 1) to convey the ways in which social pressure and expectations contribute to the construction of a hypermasculine, heroic identity that constantly straddles the boundary between savior and monster, 2) to analyze the way in which heroes understand their masculine, heroic identity through the apparatus of their superhero suit, and 3) to examine the influence of male mentors on a hero’s understanding of the relationship between their masculinity and their heroism. I come to these objectives after considering the various layers of socialization through which gender is constructed: through societal expectations, individual interpretations, and social interactions that reinforce or dispel hegemonic notions. These three objectives and layers of socialization will constitute the three chapters of my thesis, which will focus on the MCU films *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, and *Spider-Man: Far From Home* respectively. The superheroes Iron Man and Spider-Man will figure as prominent
modern paradigms for analysis as Iron Man is often regarded as the “leader” of the Avengers in the MCU, and Spider-Man is the youngest hero in the MCU, serving as a convenient example of one first learning their masculinity and heroism. I focus this thesis on films from the Marvel comic universe as opposed to the DC comic universe as “DC superheroes are what we may term ‘premodern’ or ‘sacred.’...they promote themselves as divine figures of retribution” whereas “Marvel heroes do not map as easily onto these archetypes” (Bainbridge 67). Marvel superheroes are, in this regard, more human, complex, and relatable to the viewer receiving them and learning from them.

For ancient comparison, I rely primarily on the figure of Achilles in Homer’s Iliad as he is frequently regarded as the aristos achaion—the best of the Greeks—and the paradigm of ancient heroism, but I will also discuss Patroclus, Achilles’ companion, and Telemachus, the son of Odysseus as ancient heroic models.

In his 2016 book The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics, Ramzi Fawaz utilizes queer theory to relate comic book fantasy to radical politics in the modern United States. In justifying his objective, Fawaz claims: “Following Foucault, I see the interpretive possibilities of texts...as emerging within a field of dynamic interactions and antagonisms between competing actors who exercise power in different ways that ultimately shape and proliferate multiple meanings and interpretive possibilities” (23). I locate my method of analysis in this same mesh of a multiplicity of meanings. Films, as inherently didactic apparatuses, allow the viewer to interpret them in numerous ways and walk away with new understandings of the world and themselves, whether or not those understandings were intended by producers at all. Gender and masculinity, specifically, are some of those ideas about which viewers
implicitly take away new meanings and understandings of performing identity. By exposing the nature of masculinity enacted by modern superheroes as reiterations of the static gender performances and stale narrative structures of ancient Homeric heroes, I call for a total disavowal of the ways in which film producers today reinscribe problematic gender performances. In their place, I call for new heroes with new narrative structures that allow our heroes to be people who love, hurt, and feel just as we do, and cope with these human conditions in ways that we can productively learn from without causing further harm.
CHAPTER I
SAVIORS OR MONSTERS? PRESSURE AND REPRESSION IN CONSTRUCTING HEROIC MASCULINITY

While the figure of the hero has historically been one that is revered and valued—awarded choice meats and rolling vineyards in ancient times—the introduction of the comic book superhero in the mid-twentieth century has complicated the relationship between hero and society. The first generation of U.S. superheroes appeared in the late 1930’s and early 40’s, and they represented idealized figures for U.S. citizens for the public to embrace and model. But in the post-war renaissance of superhero comic books in the early 60’s, a new type of superhero was born. These superheroes “emerged as the monstrous progeny of the age of atomic and genetic science, no longer legitimate citizens of the state or identifiable members of the human race” (Fawaz 8). The monstrous nature superheroes began to embody made them susceptible to the Cold War fear that communist propaganda was lurking under any facade that was not obviously and irrefutably U.S. American. While the whole medium of the comic book was held on trial in congressional hearings “which threatened comic book publishers with regulatory action if they refused to develop content standards for their publications,” the superheroes in the narratives themselves began to struggle with the suspicions of the societies they served (Fawaz 9). This is most explicitly visible in the X-Men comics where the heroes are dubbed “mutants” and lawmakers constantly attempt to legislate
mutants into submission and even erasure. This suspicion turns inward as we began to see heroes struggle to come to terms with their new superhuman abilities.

When the superhero team the Fantastic Four is born, their newfound monstrosity is identified immediately not from external forces but from within the team itself. Johnny Storm/The Human Torch exclaims: “You’ve turned into monsters...both of you!! It’s those rays! Those terrible cosmic rays!...They’ve affected me, too! When I get excited I can feel my body begin to blaze!” (Lee and Kirby). Johnny plays the part of the common bystander, identifying in his teammates the monstrosity that society would be quick to identify for itself, but then he also confesses that he has been affected in the same way. He realizes that same suspicion of monstrosity applies to himself. Immediately after this proclamation of monstrosity, just a few panels over, Reed Richards/Mister Fantastic announces, “Together we have more power than any humans have ever possessed!” to which Ben Grimm/The Thing replies: “We understand! We’ve gotta use that power to help mankind, right?” (Lee and Kirby). The identification of monstrosity immediately shifts to a sense of obligation to serve humanity—the “great power, great responsibility” trope—almost as though such service is the only way to assuage humanity’s fear of them as monsters. In this sense, Marvel repeatedly demonstrates that if one is identified as a monster, in order to maintain their humanity, they must immediately and constantly submit themselves to the pressures from their society to be supremely good and moral and, in so doing, repress any urge that risks casting them back into the monster category.
Figure 3. Comic panel from Fantastic Four #1 (1961).

The monster category is both a difficult and exciting category to fall in, though, and makes room for analysis of the social politics within the comic worlds and commentary of the social politics within our real world experiences. I consider the monstrous condition of superheroes one that is less about the quality or type of mutation that conveys monstrosity than about the fear that mutation evokes in the social interpretation of the superhero’s mutation. As Halberstam argues, the monster
becomes monstrous not through the visibility of some static and intrinsic traits but “when it is able to condense as many fear-producing traits as possible into one body,” (21). It is the otherness produced by the monstrous traits that make the monster readable as monster in comparison to a “normal” citizenry that, in turn, sees the potential to be threatened and/or harmed by the monster. The superhero, then, becomes a monster when their body is depicted as “a vulnerable porous surface always on the verge of radical transformation and consequently threatening the very definition of citizenship” (Fawaz 12). The possession of some genetically mutated or scientifically imbued abilities give them the power to resist the hegemonic norms of society in ways that represent all modes of otherness, thus making the general public suspicious of their intentions and potential for immorality. And so to alleviate the potential fear of their power and avoid the opportunity for society to cast them as monstrous, superheroes must perform their heroism in ways that repress their abilities and desires, which, if acted upon, could potentially expose them to categorization as monsters. They must then channel their monstrosity into saviorism that leaves little to no room for society to question their loyalties or intentions.

Throughout this chapter, I will argue that these societal pressures for heroes to repress their monstrosity and assume the mantle of savior compound with society’s hegemonic expectations of masculinity to establish the problematic and static nature of male heroes’ performances of heroic masculinity. I will begin with the Greek hero Achilles in Homer’s Iliad to show how these concepts of pressure and repression were at work even in the ancient context. I will then discuss Marvel’s Avengers: Age of Ultron to depict these pressures primarily through the figures of Tony Stark/Iron Man, whose
privilege burdens him with the heaviest pressures, and Bruce Banner/The Hulk whose Jekyll-and-Hyde relationship with his power requires constant repression and only carefully controlled release. In the comparison of Age of Ultron with Homer’s Iliad, I hope to show both how our contemporary superheroes’ conceptualizations of masculinity have evolved from ancient models, and how the societal pressures working against men in modern times are ever multiplying and continue to perpetuate toxic ideals of masculinity.

**The Savagery of the Grieving Achilles**

From the very beginning of the epic, Homer’s Iliad situates us within the realm of masculine emotion. The very first word of the epic, *mēnin*, tells us that the following narrative will not be about a particular character or event. The muse is asked to sing about something more specific: “*mēnin...Pēlēiadeo Achilēos,*” the rage of Peleus’s son, Achilles (Il. 1.1). We know from the first line and the first word that the story that is about to unfold will culminate in the explication of Achilles’ rage that was so intense and so destructive that it “hurled in their multitudes to the house of Hades strong souls / of heroes, but gave their bodies to be the delicate feasting / of dogs, of all birds” (Il. 1.3-5). As the epic progress further into the first book, we learn more about this wrath and how it started.

Achilles becomes so enraged, at least at first, because a woman who had previously been given to him as a war prize (and essentially sex slave), Briseis, was now being taken from him by his commanding officer, Agamemnon, who needed to

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1 See Gaca “Ancient Warfare and the Ravaging Martial Rape of Girls and Women” pp. 284-92 for insight on the rape and seizure of women as prizes in ancient Greek warfare.
relinquish his own war prize/sex slave in order to appease the god, Apollo. Achillész, having been awarded Briseis in the first place as a token of his valor and honor, is so outraged that Agamemnon would dishonor him in such a humiliating and public way, and that the other Greeks have sided with Agamemnon, removes himself from battle and leaves the Greeks to fend for themselves without him, indirectly causing the deaths of countless Greeks at the hands of the Trojans. His fellow Greek chieftains siding with Agamemnon is important because it is through them that the expectation is established for Achilles to repress his anger, jealousy, embarrassment, betrayal. He is expected to deal with the blow, continue to fight, and wait for another even better woman to be awarded to him. Unable to cope with the rage privately or to continue to argue his case, he removes himself and runs away from the camp, repressing his rage and reasoning that his life is better spent in leisure with his companion Patroclus than waiting to die in battle with the Greeks. But eventually Patroclus, pitying the Greeks’ inability to advance against the Trojans without Achilles, pleads that Achilles allow him to don Achilles’ armor and charge into battle, just to boost the Greeks’ morale at the sight of whom they suspect to be Achilles. Achilles approves, but the Trojan prince Hector kills Patroclus, thinking he is Achilles. The dormant, repressed wrath that Achilles warded off by running away from the battle is renewed and multiplied upon the murder of his companion, and the fault line between Achilles’ saviorism and monstrosity begins to quake.

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2 Agamemnon’s sex slave, Chryseis, is the daughter of a Trojan priest of Apollo, and Agamemnon has gravely insulted the god by taking the priest’s daughter. Apollo has joined the battle on the Trojans’ behalf and is obliterating the Greek forces. Agamemnon must return Chryseis to stop the slaughter.

3 Widely regarded as the best of the Greeks at the war, Achilles absence puts the Greeks at an extreme disadvantage.
While Achilles’ is already inherently a monstrous sort of being as a demigod (the offspring of a goddess and a mortal man), the most explicit symbol of this struggle to maintain his heroic, savior's guise are the analogies of Achilles to a lion. Although modern notions of a lionhearted soldier or warrior tend to symbolize strength and courage, “it is fundamental that the lion seizes on the raw flesh of its victims, and is thus potentially an image of barbarity” (Clarke 280). The language used to describe Achilles as a lion indicates the poets’ perspective that it is indeed monstrous barbarity Achilles embodies rather than courage and valor. In the fury of his vengeance on the battlefield, Achilles encounters the Trojan hero Aeneas, and the poet tells how Achilles “rose like a lion against him, / the baleful beast” (Il. 20.164-5). The poet, entering an extended simile, elaborates on Achilles’ lion-like frenzy, describing a lion in battle with men:

...jaws open, over his teeth foam
breaks out, and in the depth of his chest the powerful heart groans;
he lashes his own ribs with his tail and the flanks on both sides
as he rouses himself to fury for the fight, eyes glaring,
and hurls himself straight onward on the chance of killing some one
of the men, or else be killed himself in the first onrush.
So the proud heart and fighting fury stirred on Achilleus (Il. 20.168-74)

Noting the hope to kill or be killed, the poet identifies Achilles’ lack of care and strategy in the way he throws himself forward. There is an excessive aggression or arrogance alluded to by the proud heart that drives him on. Achilles embodies a lion as he relies entirely on his superhuman, semi-divine strength, forgoing the common rules and customs of mortal men—he allows his monstrosity to overshadow his heroism.

We see this as he continues his frenzy across the battlefield, not just in the brute force and savagery he enacts against the Trojans he encounters, but also in the language he casts at them. When an opponent begs for mercy, Achilles refuses, and the opponent
cries out in despair. Achilles responds, “Why all this clamor about it? / Patroclus also is
dead, who was better by far than you are” (Il. 21.106-7). While there are other instances,
though few, of Greek heroes refusing their opponents mercy, it cannot be denied that
the mocking Achilles hurls at the Trojan whom he has already decided to kill is
unnecessary and therefore excessive, unrestrained, and barbaric. Even more indicative
of this willing embrace of the monstrous, Achilles tells Hector, Patroclus’s murderer, “on
you the dogs and vultures / shall feed and foully rip you,” and shortly thereafter, “I wish
only that my spirit and fury would drive me / to hack your meat away and eat it raw, for
the things that / you have done to me” (Il. 22.335-6, 346-8). Achilles refuses Hector
proper burial and in doing so defies the natural law and goes against the proper conduct
set out by the gods. He recognizes that this is already a monstrous act but wishes he
could bring himself to do something even more monstrous and eat Hector’s raw flesh so
as to truly and utterly defile the Trojan’s body. He, of course, does not enact this wish,
but the naming of it aloud indicates Achilles’ desire to fully unleash his repressed rage to
the point that he is no longer human and instead fully savage, fully monster. But how
are we to make sense of this savagery? How does the Best of the Greeks turn to bestial
savagery with such ease? Modern masculinity scholars offer some understanding of how
this undoing of Achilles unfolds.
As established already, the epic is about Achilles’ *mēnis*—his wrath, fury, rage. And yet the *mēnis* that culminates in Hector’s destruction is not born of some free-floating unidentifiable anger; it is born from Achilles’ grief and compounded by the injustice done to him at the beginning of the epic. The hero was able to run from his anger and disgrace and repress the accompanying rage at the beginning of the narrative, but when he grieves his dearest companion, he cannot run from it. Yet at the same time, he is unable to express that grief just as grief, instead he channels it into something else, something manlier. Modern masculinity scholars discussing formation of U.S. masculinities remind us that “even though [boys] have all normal human feelings of love, excitement, sadness...grief, resentment, loneliness...they are taught to hide their feelings and appear to be tough and in control” (Kivel 83). In other words, boys and men are taught to repress their emotions that risk exposing them as anything less than manly. So while Achilles, upon first learning of Patroclus’s death, rolls on the ground and pulls at his hair in a typical display of grief in ancient Greece, he restrains that grief and then channels it into wrath, lest he be accused of grieving excessively and being deemed womanly (*Il.* 18.22-34). He depicts how, due to their stunted and discouraged
emotional growth, “boys and men learn to selectively use violence...[and] redirect a range of emotions into rage, which sometimes takes the form of self-directed violence...or self-destructive behavior” (Kaufman 1). The pressures of masculinity, to act like a man at all times and show no feminine weakness, are compounded in cases of the heroic where men are expected to act as exemplars for other men; the repression of emotion and the following release of rage, then, are accordingly amplified as well, blurring the thin line the hero treads between monster and savior. No other modern example is more indicative of this phenomenon than the Hulk.

**Code Green**

The MCU’s Bruce Banner/Hulk is a perfect example the masculine tendency to repress all emotion and channel it through anger and violence, fully embracing monstrosity as a form of heroism in itself rather than separating the two. First introduced in *The Incredible Hulk* in 2008, we learn of Bruce Banner’s split psyche after the transformation has already taken place and Bruce is on the run from the U.S. government, which is looking to weaponize the Hulk for war. We see Bruce constantly attempting to regulate his heart rate, which fluctuates with varying emotions, for if his pulse reaches a certain threshold, he will transform into the raging Hulk, over whom he has no control—a physical personification of rage running rampant and wreaking havoc. *The Incredible Hulk* informs the audience, in a rather comical sexual encounter that never achieves full fruition, that even sexual arousal risks releasing the Hulk as it leads to increased heartrate. This is most interesting for my purposes in this thesis as it points to the ways in which men, taught to repress all healthy emotion, sometimes suffer an inability to express emotion in any way that is not anger or violence. Further
contemplation of the idea that the sex act can evoke the Hulk offers a darker commentary on the potential for men’s arousal eliciting an inability to control themselves and unleash rage and violence when that arousal is rejected. For the purposes of my thesis, I will focus on Bruce Banner/the Hulk as he is depicted in 2015’s Avengers: Age of Ultron to show how heroes’ inner monstrosity is repressed, coped with, and managed when it gets out of control.

Age of Ultron is the first MCU film that delves into the complicated nuances of Banner’s relationship with the Hulk, particularly as it pertains to containing the Hulk once he emerges. The film begins in the middle of a raid of a Hydra base by the Avengers with the Hulk rampaging against the agents attempting to prevent the Avengers from breaking in.4 When the battle comes to an end and the Avengers have cleared the field, Nat/Black Widow is called to get to the Hulk for a lullaby. Nat approaches the Hulk as he carelessly thrashes around debris from a destroyed vehicle, calling out to him: “Hey, big guy. Sun’s getting’ real low.” The Hulk responds in grunts and growls, but seems to recognize Nat as a friend, allowing her to hold her hand to his and engage in a series of hand gestures that seems to calm the raging beast as he storms off and begins to transform back into Bruce away from Nat’s line of sight (Age of Ultron 7:59-9:06).5 The scene is the first in the MCU in which the Hulk is able to be subdued by another in a peaceful, non-violent way, and it is telling that Nat, the only woman on the team, is the only one who can perform the deed. There are a number of gendered implications here,

4 Hydra is an elusive terrorist organization that secretly infiltrated and operated within SHIELD, the Avengers parent organization. After discovering their operations, at the beginning of Age of Ultron, the Avengers are hunting down and disbanding remaining Hydra cells.

5 Further Age of Ultron citations will be abbreviated AoU.
primarily that a feminine outlet is required to affirm and contain masculine rage, and following from that, women are deployed to do the emotional labor of quelling men’s anger, inserting themselves into dangerous potentially lethal scenarios. Even further, and most problematic, I would argue, there is the implication that masculine rage, channeled at the proper moment and pointed in the right direction can be a tool to be utilized as a benefit despite the toll on the man from whom the rage is coaxed.

Figure 5. Black Widow containing the Hulk in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015).

The whole concept of the Hulk, as perfectly depicted throughout *Age of Ultron*, relies on the notion that male rage is powerful and can be utilized for benefit even though there is great psychological cost to the agent enacting the rage. In the aftermath of the opening battle, the Avengers head back home to Manhattan on their jet, and Bruce is sitting in isolation, wrapped in a blanket, eyes to the floor and fingers anxiously tracing his lips, listening to opera music through headphones (in what must be an attempt to calm his nerves). He is clearly distraught, and when Nat comes to comfort him, reminding him that Clint/Hawkeye, their fellow Avenger, would have died if the
Hulk had not come out, Bruce is reluctant to rejoice. Nat asks him: “How long before you trust me?” To which Bruce responds, “It’s not you I don’t trust” (*AoU* 12:45-13:19). Nat then asks Thor for a report on the Hulk when Thor triumphantly and ecstatically asserts: “The gates of Hel are filled with the screams of his victims,” prompting Bruce to sigh deeply and bury his head in his hands (*AoU* 13:20-6). Bruce is clearly ashamed of the destruction the Hulk enacts when Bruce is no longer in control. His shame and concern point to the recognition that rage and violence are not healthy ways to channel emotion or express anger and an inability to cope with his emotions otherwise. While, of course, his case is extreme, it depicts the mental-emotional impact of performing a form of masculinity “that hinges on the internalization of a range of emotions and their redirection into anger” (*Kaufman* 3). While the result is obviously detrimental to Bruce’s wellbeing, the Avengers’ eagerness to use the Hulk’s rage teaches viewers that rage can be beneficial and therefore allows for the dominance and perpetuation of a masculinity that relies on rage to achieve its desired ends.

The Avengers repeatedly make light of Bruce’s inner monstrosity, despite his own grief over the matter, and intentionally draw out the Hulk, validating rage as a proper outlet for men’s emotional distress. Alluded to in the aftermath of the opening battle, we learn that Bruce’s transformation into the Hulk has been designated as a “code green.” Later in the film, when the Avengers seek out a criminal whom they suspect to be aiding the movie’s villain, Bruce remains on the jet while the others seek out their targets. When he does not hear from them after being away for some time, Bruce radios them

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6 Note that “Hel” is not misspelled here. Thor, as a Norse god, invokes the Norse mythological realm of the underworld presided over by the goddess of the same name.
asking: “Guys? Is this a code green?” with the camera panning to follow his line of sight as he is visibly anxious at the prospect of unleashing the Hulk again (AoU 48:10-22). While the codification of the necessity for the Hulk implies a recognition that Bruce would prefer not to transform, it also implies that the others get to decide when Bruce’s preference and wellbeing no longer matters and the Hulk must be called. It turns rage into a tactical maneuver, a life-saving protocol like a code blue in a hospital, and if Bruce is to maintain his heroic status, he must sacrifice his own preference and wellbeing for the benefit of the others. Even more indicative of the team’s reliance on the Hulk, and therefore on Bruce’s emotional turmoil and utilitarian rage, is when Nat literally forces Bruce to transform without a code green and without his consent.

Near the climax of the film, Bruce has rescued Nat after she was captured by Ultron and refuses to engage in battle, wary of the Hulk hurting the civilians (AoU 1:39:00-17). When things become more dire, Nat again asks him if he plans to turn green to which he responds by implying that he does not want to unleash the Hulk because he is afraid of hurting Nat; she pulls him into a kiss and pushes him off a cliff saying: “I adore you...but I need the other guy” (AoU 1:43:22-48). In one of the only instances that Bruce expresses an emotion other than anger, despair, or anxiety, when he expresses his care and love for Nat, she pushes him down and forcibly unleashes the Hulk.7 Not only does this reaffirm that rage and violence are useful and beneficial but that there is no room for men to have other emotions. Bruce is afraid of hurting the civilians in the city and afraid of hurting Nat. But Nat pushing him and drawing out the

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7 In The Avengers, Bruce reveals he cannot be killed saying: “I know, I’ve tried...I put a bullet in my mouth and [the Hulk] spit it out” (The Avengers 1:11:32-45). Nat knows the Hulk will be forced to come out by pushing him.
Hulk is the reinforcing voice of the patriarchy scolding Bruce to act like a man and get over his fear. It is a reminder “that a range of natural emotions have been ruled off limits and invalid [for men]” (Kaufman 3). The fact that Nat is the one to force it out of him, when prior to this she was the only one who could contain the Hulk, teaches a masculinity that idealizes violence not just in the eyes of other men, but also in the eyes of women. It affirms men’s performances of rage and violence as coping mechanisms that are acceptable and encouraged by women, despite the fact that women who endure abuse more often than not experience it at the hands of emotionally stunted, wrathful men who feed into this same toxic narrative.

Bruce Banner’s heroism is entirely dependent upon his reluctance or his willingness to unleash the monster inside him. I would argue that most of the heroes in the MCU embody monstrosity to some extent, but Bruce’s is the most explicit. His heroism via the Hulk is not always through the destruction and havoc he wreaks on the Avengers’ enemies as at the beginning of *Age of Ultron*, but also through his repression of the emotions that unleash the monster in the wrong settings. His heroism is entirely dependent upon repression of emotion and controlled release of that emotion at the proper time and in the proper place. In short, his heroism is based entirely on how well he can act like a man and contain or release the monster, treading “the boundaries between male and female, invulnerability and vulnerability, human and inhuman. At every level these were figures in flux” (Fawaz 12). But what about when the monster is not a real monster like Bruce’s Hulk? What about when the monster is the manifestation of the hero’s fears and insecurities? In the following section, I will discuss how societal
pressure and narrative structure contribute to the monstrosity that heroes battle in themselves through the figure of Tony Stark as Iron Man.

**A Suit of Armor around the World**

While I hesitate to definitively classify Tony Stark/Iron Man as a monstrous hero (though an argument could be made for an association with cyborgs), in *Age of Ultron*, Tony succumbs to the pressures of toxic masculinity and in doing so unleashes a new monstrosity into the world—the titular villain, Ultron. In an attempt to provide the Earth its ultimate hero and savior, Tony accidentally creates Ultron, an artificial intelligence bot with all the capabilities of the Iron Man suit and the ability to hack nearly any technological interface in the world. Tasking the bot with keeping peace, Tony accidentally gives Ultron his motive for wiping out humanity, for Ultron deduces that humans are the root of war, chaos, and destruction. Tony’s creation in many ways evokes imagery of a Miltonian relationship between God and Lucifer, but also of Shelly’s Dr. Frankenstein and his creation, and even a malevolent Pinocchio freed of his puppet-master’s strings. Tony assumes the weight of the masculine expectations of his heroism, and in an attempt to break free of those pressures, accidentally creates a monster who threatens to destroy humanity. While the monstrosity does not coincide directly with Tony’s own identity, I argue that the pressures of masculinity at a heroic scale produce such an overwhelming fear of failure, that when failure does strike, it strikes in the form of catastrophe and monstrosity.

I return to Joseph Campbell’s monomyth and Homer’s heroic code to understand the compounded pressures of masculinity and heroism as exemplified by Tony in *Age of Ultron*. As I establish in the introduction to this thesis, the monomyth requires that the
hero’s journey follow some variation of three essential stages—separation, initiation, and return. This inherently isolating narrative structure that most hero stories follow reinforces the idea that male heroes, if they are to act like real men, must isolate themselves from their peers as they go forth and perform their heroism. It is that same expectation of isolation that we see in Homer’s heroic code from the Iliad, in which men must set themselves apart from the masses of soldiers and engage in hand-to-hand combat at the front lines to prove their worth and gain the status of hero. Tony sees himself caught up in these narrative tropes of heroic masculinity and feels the weight of expectations from a society that has glorified him and his heroism following the extraterrestrial conflict of the first Avengers film. He tries to recruit Bruce Banner to help him create Ultron (he needs Bruce’s bio-organics expertise) and asks, “What if the world was safe? What if next time aliens roll up to the club, and they will, they couldn’t get past the bouncer?...I don’t want to hear the ‘man was not meant to meddle’ medley. I see a suit of armor around the world” (AoU 19:30-20:02). Recalling when it was up to him alone to save the world from an alien invasion, Tony’s pitch for creating a robot who could fill that role relies on the premise that it would no longer be the Avengers’ responsibility. They, and therefore he, would no longer bear the burden of responsibility of saving humankind from extraterrestrial threats. He would break through a loophole in the heroic contract set out by Homer’s Iliad—he would no longer be bound by duty to the people to protect the people who praise him for protecting them if he could create another hero who could perform that heroism, an AI robot who would excel in its heroism since it would not risk faltering under the pressure society holds it to. Ultron would be the perfect hero, unable to fail humanity in the way humans are able to fail and
in the way men are told they cannot fail. He would no longer bear the pressures and the fear of failing at a cataclysmic level.

Figure 6. Tony’s vision of failure in Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015).

Failure is the specter that looms over the hero’s efforts as the outcome that is always possible but never an option for men, and as such, fear of it drives Tony to invent a new hero that would allow him to relieve himself of the pressures working against him. Failure looms so largely over Tony in Age of Ultron particularly because Wanda/The Scarlett Witch manipulated his mind early in the film and showed him a vision of all the Avengers dead, except for Tony, in a pile of rubble beneath the alien monsters that attacked New York in The Avengers. In the vision, a zombie-like Steve Rodgers/Captain America tells Tony: “You could have saved us. Why didn’t you do more?” (AoU 11:08-25). We as the audience see Tony’s deepest fear brought to life, and that fear is that he alone fails his teammates and in turn fails the planet. Using this fear to defend his
actions after Ultron reveals himself to the team, Tony explains that he believed aliens to be their biggest threat and saw the need for a savior who could protect them from that:

TONY. How were you guys planning on beating [alien invasions]?

STEVE. Together.

TONY. We'll lose.

STEVE. Then we'll do that together, too. (AoU 35:39-54)

Tony, trapped in the cycle of the monomyth and heroic masculinity, cannot fathom that teamwork and cooperation can be the key to performing a heroism that succeeds in saving the people it sets out to protect. In his eyes, the only way for a hero to emerge is for a single entity, either himself or Ultron, to push to the front of the masses and prove himself in hand to hand combat like Achilles or Hector. The only way for a hero to emerge is for a single entity to carry a nuke through a wormhole or be able to surveil all corners of the planet at all times for extraterrestrial threats. Tony cannot directly express his fear of failure, as fear is one of the emotions that men are required to repress and channel into violence, even if that violence is via proxy, enacted by an AI robot. Wanda recognized this inability in Tony as she admits: “I saw Stark’s fear. I knew it would control him, make him self-destruct” (AoU 37:06-11). Even when masculinity is the thing to be feared, the failure to be faced, our hypermasculine heroes cannot face it, and their repressed fears and internalized pressures lead to the unleashing of the monsters that wreak havoc on the world.

Had Age of Ultron progressed toward a resolution that affirmed that teamwork and cooperation are, in fact, the answer to otherworldly threats, it may not have made the cut as a film to be discussed in this thesis; as it is, Tony’s theoretical framework of
heroism (the monomyth) is reaffirmed, and his confidence and arrogance are channeled into yet another monstrous creation to win out against Ultron. The message is not to rely on a team, it is to channel normal human emotion into arrogance, even when there is nothing to affirm such arrogance, and project an image of masculine confidence that will save the day. When Wanda, having unearthed Ultron’s plans to wipe out humanity, learns that the Avengers have recovered the machine that would create for Ultron an even more powerful body, she expresses her concern that Tony will now have access to the same machine: “He will do anything to make things right...Ultron can’t tell the difference between saving the world and destroying it. Where do you think he gets that?” (AoU 1:36:44-37:06). The scene immediately cuts to Tony convincing Bruce that they can try again, that they can create a more perfect version of Ultron with the machine Ultron had been planning to use, just as Wanda suspected. Bruce recognizes the faults in Tony’s vision, but as a final appeal Tony says: “We’re mad scientists. We’re monsters, buddy. We’ve gotta own it, make a stand” (AoU 1:28:53-29:01, emphasis mine). Tony’s eagerness to recreate the experiment that created Ultron speaks to his inability to live with his failure. He believes he found the key to succeeding this time; he believes he found the key to undoing the mistakes he made with Ultron, and his best defense (one that is particularly manipulative as he speaks it to the character whose subconscious houses the Hulk) is that he is a monster. Tony recognizes that his dreams and ambitions make him a monster—a monster that creates other monsters, a monster whose inability to express his emotion and rely on his teammates perpetuates the ideals of toxic masculinity, of a heroism that is inherently monstrous, but can be used for the greater good. This argument is good enough for Bruce, and so the Vision is born, a
humanoid AI creation with a synthetic body and moral compass capable of overcoming Ultron. Tony’s fears win out as the Vision defeats Ultron, and the monomyth lives on.

Monstrosity, whether immediately identifiable as it is in the Hulk or deducible only through a series of actions as in Tony Stark, is an almost inherently heroic thing. As far back as ancient Greece, Achilles was a monstrous being both as a god-mortal hybrid and as a man enacting a lion-like rage and savagery. As far as heroic men have been explored in the contemporary superhero genre, there seems always to be a latent, lingering, repressed monstrosity that risks destroying humanity. Perhaps this is what Avengers: Age of Ultron alludes to when the Vision is born and discloses to the Avengers: “Maybe I am a monster, I don’t think I’d know if I were one. I’m not what you are and not what you intended” (AoU 1:36:04-14). Our heroes do not always know if they are monsters, but whether or not they are always comes second to their ability to save the world from the cataclysm that awaits if we do not entrust to them the faith and confidence to do so. And whether or not our heroes are monsters is not as pressing as the question of what makes them monsters if they are. Is it a force beyond our control like the gamma radiation that implanted the Hulk within Bruce Banner? Or is it the weight on Tony Stark’s psyche under the pressures of masculine expectation which we have the power to dispel in our modern society? What is it that imbues them with the otherness we fear and exploit?

Throughout this chapter, I hope to have established the ways in which heroic masculinity is depicted as monstrosity under the larger societal expectations of masculinity—expectations that men repress their emotion, channel it into violence, and single-handedly endure the pressure that comes with presenting the cool, detached
persona of a man who knows what he is doing and could never fail those who depend on him. In the following chapter, I will explore more deeply how these pressures and repressions of heroes' inherent monstrosity is internalized in the individual formation of a heroic-masculine identity.
CHAPTER II

ARMOR, SUITS, AND SKINS: WEARING HEROIC MASCULINITY

Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, which I invoke in the introduction to this thesis, states that “words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance [such as gender], but produce this on the surface of the body” (Gender Trouble 185). But notice the particularity of their language. Butler is not saying that there is an internal core that gender reflects, but rather that the performative nature of gender produces the effect of an internal core. They go on to explain that the effects of internal cores or natural essences produced through performative words, acts, gestures, and desires are really just “fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (Butler, Gender Trouble 185). For Butler, gender, and identity as a whole, occurs on the surface where a person becomes intelligible and recognizable. That is not to say that gender is only ever skin-deep, a shallow act or show put on to produce a desired effect in a particular moment in time; it is to say, though, that the repetitious words, acts, and gestures that give a body intelligibility and produce the effect of a stable identity all happens at the surface of the body, at the skin. The skin becomes a canvas and by examining what one does with their skin, we can gain an understanding of the way in which they interpret the gender expression they have learned and attempt to replicate. Superheroes, then, at least the ones that conform to
superheroic models of donning a special suit in which to perform their heroic deeds, exhibit an intriguing phenomenon. Their super-suit becomes a second skin, an additional surface upon which their gender expression is produced. In this chapter, I argue that the donning of a super-suit, similarly to the donning of ancient battle armor in the Iliad, functions as a mechanism through which the male hero is able to perform an exaggerated expression of masculinity, which conveys the internalization of a glorified and unrealistic hypermasculine paradigm.

I rely on Halberstam’s Skin Shows for my analysis of the relationship between skin and identity. In an exploration of the film The Silence of the Lambs, Halberstam maintains that “skin, in this movie, creeps and crawls, it is the most fragile of covers and also the most sticky. Skin becomes a metaphor for surface, for the external; it is the place of pleasure and the site of pain; it is the thin sheet that masks bloody horror” (165). The antagonist of the film, Buffalo Bill, is a serial killer who murders women so he can take their skins and create a new suit of skin to wear over his own and, in his view, become woman. Suffering with a form of gender dysphoria, we find that “Buffalo Bill hates identity, he is simply at odds with any identity whatsoever; no body, no gender will do and so he has to sit at home with his skins and fashion a completely new one” (Halberstam, Skin Shows 164). Skin and identity, to Buffalo Bill, are one and the same; a woman is a woman because the skin on her body signifies that she is, and so he can be woman simply by donning women’s skins. Buffalo Bill clearly was not acquainted with Butler’s framework. Both the film and Halberstam refute the idea that gender is merely a particular skin draped over a body, but Halberstam claims that “Buffalo Bill is prey to the most virulent conditioning heterosexist culture has to offer—he believes that
anatomy is destiny” (Skin Shows 167). This flat perspective that Buffalo Bill assumes for himself is the same that heroes throughout time have adopted, though in a far less gruesome manner.

In the following chapter, I will explore the ways in which ancient armor and modern super-suits function as second-skins through which the gender expression of the wearer changes and becomes hypermasculine. I begin with Patroclus and Achilles in Homer’s Iliad and conclude with Tom Holland’s portrayal of Spider-Man in Spider-Man: Homecoming. In both cases, we see how the heroes’ outer-skins (whether metallic armor or elastic spandex), enable the hero underneath to access a new, exaggerated performance of masculinity that ultimately affirms and encourages the perpetuation of hypermasculine norms for men in society.

A Homeric Case of Mistaken Identity

The Iliad comes careening toward its conclusion as Patroclus, sporting Achilles’ armor, rides into battle and rallies the Greeks to turn the tide of the war and overcome the Trojans. Upon seeing Achilles’ armor, unable to see the wearer underneath, the Greeks believe that Achilles himself has returned to fight and their hope is renewed, but Patroclus, in his episode of overwhelming valor, grows overconfident and comes too close to the Trojan walls. The Trojan prince, Hector, strikes down Patroclus, believing him to be Achilles, and upon stripping the divine armor for himself, discovers it was never Achilles at all. The armor, here, is vital to understanding the ways in which a hero’s uniform is inextricably intertwined with their heroic, masculine identity.

For much of the Iliad, Patroclus is a minor character known primarily for being Achilles’ companion rather than being known in his own right as a skilled warrior or
mighty hero. He remains silent when he is mentioned, given orders by Achilles to prepare sacrifices for the gods and serve the guests at their camp while Achilles boycotts the fighting. He speaks very little, if at all, in the whole epic until the sixteenth book when he approaches Achilles with his plan of going out to battle in Achilles’ place to scare of the Trojans and motivate the Greeks. But before making his request, the poet notes that Patroclus “wept warm tears, like a spring dark-running / that down the face of a rock impassable drips its dim water” (*Iliad* 16.3-4). And upon seeing him in this state, Achilles asks:

...Why then
are you crying like some poor little girl, Patroklos,
who runs after her mother and begs to be picked up and carried,
and clings to her dress and holds her back when she tries to hurry,
and gazes tearfully into her face, until she is picked up?  
(*Iliad* 16.6-10)

The poet gives us five lines to describe the nature of Patroclus’s emotion as compared to a little girl. The extensive simile, a feature of epic often reserved for descriptions of battle or other life and death situations, functions to convey to the audience Patroclus’s nature as one that is much softer than the other warriors we encounter in the epic. He is not the lion-like Achilles who will come to avenge the young man’s death, neither is he the well-speaking Odysseus whose wit and tact surpass all the others; instead, he is a crying little girl. He is also described as “great-hearted,” “gentle, and [understanding] how to be kindly toward all men” (*Iliad* 16.257, 17.671). And yet he is the one who turns the tide of the war.

Patroclus, after donning Achilles’ armor, charges into battle, leading fifty of Achilles’ men, and all notions of the girlish, gentle, submissive Patroclus we have seen up to this point in the epic are wiped away. He rallies the army of his men so well that he
“stirred the spirit and strength in each man” (Il. 16.275). He is the first of the Myrmidons to attack the Trojans (Il. 16.284-5). He is now described as being “powerful,” “strong,” and having a “savage heart” (Il. 16.278, 307, 554). The Patroclus who before was sobbing like a little girl is now charging across the battlefield killing Trojan after Trojan, including even Sarpedon, son of Zeus regarded as one of the mightiest of the Trojans, and the only notable change that has occurred in our hero is his new armor. By putting on Achilles’ armor, Patroclus is able to put on an entirely new persona; he is able to do away with the image of a weeping little girl and embody the epitome of masculine power—Achilles, himself. But in his aristeia, his episode of glory on the battlefield, he becomes hypermasculine. He becomes overly confident and hubristic, and he rides too close to Troy’s walls, against Achilles’ commandment, and he meets his death at the hands of the god Apollo and Trojan Prince Hector. In the truest of Greek fashion, he dies for not knowing his limits, for going too far, for trying to be too masculine, for isolating himself so far from his comrades in his effort to gain glory that he loses himself in the process. And in striving for such unattainable reaches of masculinity, the same ones he saw modeled for him in his Greek hero companions, he is then emasculated when Hector strips him of Achilles’ armor and claims it for himself.

It is common practice in Greek warfare for the victor of a one-on-one duel to strip the loser of their armor and claim it for himself as a token of his timē, his honor. Much as heroes are rewarded for their valor in gifts from the people they protect, they are also allotted the right to claim those rewards themselves on the battlefield, since “toiling and risking their lives in the front ranks earns them the right to despoil their foes” (Ready

\[1\] Recall Homer’s heroic code I discuss in the introduction to this thesis from Il. 12.360-7.
18). In this process, the victor, already having his own armor, “does not need another set of armor. His action highlights his triumph over his enemy and the corresponding degradation of the corpse, now naked and subject to mutilation” (Ready 13). The token of the fallen hero’s masculinity is taken from him in death as if to say, “this man was never a hero, he was never more than a man.” The mutual exclusivity of heroism and hypermasculinity is reinforced here as that physical token of heroism, which imbued him with such excessive masculine power, is stripped from him and he is left as nothing more than mortal, a dead man in the dirt, exposed to the elements. The act of despoiling the fallen hero is one so degrading to the fallen hero that this is what Achilles seeks to avenge, more so than the murder of Patroclus itself. He swears to kill Hector so that “he pay the price for stripping Patroklos” (Il. 18.93).2 And in the process, Achilles would earn the right to strip Hector of the same armor Hector stripped from Patroclus. Patroclus’s heroism and masculinity would be redeemed. But in order to do this, of course, Achilles must have his own set of armor since his is now in possession of the Trojan prince.

The importance of a hero’s armor is emphasized yet again as Achilles’ goddess-mother, Thetis, urges her son to wait for her to return to him with new armor from the blacksmith god, Hephaestus, before avenging Patroclus. While there are, of course, practical reasons for not going to battle without a suit of armor, Achilles could simply have found a new set among his men. The fact that his armor must be fashioned by a god directly and specifically for Achilles emphasizes the relationship between a hero and

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2 While there is a degree of degradation that occurs in each instance of despoiling fallen warriors, there is debate that Hector’s stripping of Patroclus is particularly degrading to the point of being unjust; see Allan’s “Arms and the Man” for an interesting explication of this theory.
his uniform. Hephaestus forges a shield for Achilles with “the earth upon it, and the sky, and the sea’s water, / and the tireless sun, and the moon waxing into her fullness, / and on it all the constellations that festoon the heavens” (II. 18.483-5). This new shield that Achilles will hoist as he wages war against the Trojans for the first time in the entire epic, is one that bears the image of the entire cosmos. He will quite literally carry the world on his arm, and as he does, he enacts the most explicit, most aggressive hypermasculinity we have seen in the *Iliad*. He becomes lion-like and savage to the point that he becomes something non-human. He is ruthless in his efforts for vengeance, but the vengeance he exacts is excessive. As Hector stripped Patroclus of Achilles’ armor and left Patroclus naked in the dirt, Achilles does the same to Hector. But Achilles goes further and ties Hector’s dead body to the back of his chariot, dragging it around the walls of Troy to further defile and further emasculate the fallen prince, and then holds the body hostage from Hector’s family preventing them from having a proper burial.

![Vase painting, Thetis presenting Achilles with his new armor. © 1993 RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / René-Gabriel Ojéda](image)

These grotesque acts done by Achilles clad in his new, god-given armor almost imply a divine approval of such atrocities, or at the very least an exemption from blame.
His return to battle is ordained by the gods with the bestowal of his new divine armor, and in turn, his newly amplified masculinity. So while Patroclus is struck down for being excessively masculine in his companion’s armor, Achilles is exalted and hypermasculinity is cemented as a prerequisite for heroism. Patroclus, until the donning of Achilles’ armor never performed that hypermasculinity. It was not a repetitious, performative act for him that conveyed an essential essence of hypermasculinity but rather an attempt to abruptly alter the way his masculinity was recognized by others. By having Patroclus struck down and Achilles glorified for their respective hypermasculine rampages, we start to see the ways in which certain men, particularly those whose masculinity falls subordinate to hegemonic forms, are restricted from performing and embracing hegemonic ideals that were never meant for them. Hypermasculinity, it seems, is a hegemonic gender performance that must be proven and earned and cannot simply be copied and taken up at will. In the following section I will show how this is still the case in modern superheroes like Spider-Man.

**Spidey Skins and Doubled Identity**

In contemporary superhero films, battle armor has taken a new form in the shape of the super-suit. These suits often do not provide quite the same protective function as ancient Greek armor, but they do serve the same purpose of setting the hero apart, much like Achilles’ cosmic shield, and establishing a secondary surface of masculine identification. Jon Watt’s *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, with an overt emphasis on Spider-Man’s relationship to his suits, artfully depicts the exaggerated masculinity of contemporary superheroes in the garb of their super-suits. This identification of masculinity with their super-suit is particularly poignant in this film due in large part to
the age of our hero. Peter Parker, played by Tom Holland in this most recent iteration of Spider-Man narratives, is a fifteen-year-old boy who, on top of learning what it means just to grow up and be a person, is also learning what it means to be a superhero.

Sparing audiences a third cinematic representation of Peter’s Spider-Man origin story,³ Homecoming begins with Peter already having endured his spider bite mutation that bestowed him with super strength and enhanced senses. Instead of this classic superhero story trope, we see Peter coming into a new chapter of his Spider-Man persona as his mentor, Tony Stark (AKA Iron Man), has just gifted him with a new, high tech super-suit to replace his prior assemblage of red and blue sweats, sweaters, facemask, and goggles. The replacement of his homemade super-suit bears with it a new authority for Spider-Man, an indication that he is a real hero and not just some ragtag street vigilante. But aside from the fancy technology embedded within the new suit, the most noticeable difference is in the fit of the suit on Peter’s body. While his old suit was loose and baggy, a patchwork of various sweat suits one could easily put together after a venture to their nearest thrift store, the new one is one continuous piece of skin tight spandex that quite literally vacuum seals to his body, emphasizing the contours of Peter’s/Holland’s musculature underneath, which, of course, we know is there thanks to the shot of Holland stripping down to his underwear before donning the suit, sculpted abs and chest on full display (Homecoming 15:40-16:40).⁴ The implication on Stark’s part that Peter should look like a real superhero further implies that a real superhero is one whose muscles are on full display, even when completely concealed.

³ Both Sam Raimi’s 2002 Spider-Man and Marc Webb’s 2012 The Amazing Spider-Man depict Peter Parker’s initial transformation into Spider-Man.

⁴ Further Homecoming citations will be abbreviated HC.
Feeling psychically empowered by his new and improved super-suit, muscles bulging and masculinity on full display, Peter begins to experiment with different expressions of exaggerated masculinities as Spider-Man. Early in the film, we watch Peter put on his Spidey suit and patrol the streets of Queens, eagerly awaiting a crime to stop so he can prove his value to Tony. Coming across a robbery of an ATM bank, Spider-Man sneaks up on the robbers unnoticed, and rather than using the element of surprise to his advantage, we see him hesitate, assess his position behind the robbers, and casually lean himself against a door frame before clearing his throat and saying: “What’s up guys? You forget your PIN number?” (HC 19:15-30). The robbers turn and quickly best Spider-Man before much of a fight even breaks out and accidentally blow up a bodega across the street in the process. Later in the film, Spider-Man seeks out a known criminal in an effort to get information about the arms dealers he has been hunting down. Utilizing his suit’s “enhanced interrogation protocol,” he runs up on the criminal, his voice dramatically deepened through a voice changing function of his suit, and asserts: “I need information and you’re going to give it to me now...Who is selling these weapons? I need to know. Give me names, or else!” (HC 1:09:45-1:10:30). The criminal sees through the show Spider-Man is putting on and calls him out for never having done something like that before, at which point Spider-Man deactivates his interrogation protocol and we hear Peter’s pubescent, teenage voice plead with the criminal to help him. In both instances, Spider-Man fails to fully embody the masculinity he puts on in each particular moment. He fails to pass as a credible, hypermasculine superhero. Where he attempts to be cool and casual, he ends up being overtaken and unable to prevent destruction in his neighborhood; where he attempts to
forceful and assertive, he ends up being challenged and has his empty bluffs called. Like Patroclus with Achilles’ armor, Peter attempts to use his super-suit to put on different masks of masculinity that do not align with his real relationship to masculinity outside of the suit. And like Patroclus, Peter ultimately fails and has his suit stripped from him, though (unlike Patroclus) he is allowed to live.

As Spider-Man: Homecoming approaches its climax, Peter’s failed ventures finally catch up to him and he must face the consequences of having attempted to embody a masculinity that he was restricted from performing outside of his super-suit. Another heroic intervention turns to catastrophe when Spider-Man comes face-to-face with the arms dealer he had been hunting, known as the Vulture, in the middle of a deal on the Staten Island Ferry. Spider-Man’s attempt to save the day, against Stark’s orders, results in the ferry almost sinking and Iron Man swooping in to save the passengers before scolding Peter for disobeying him and demanding that Peter surrender the suit back to him.

PETER. (voice breaking) I just wanted to be like you.

TONY. And I wanted you to be better...Okay, it’s not working out. I’m gonna need the suit back.

PETER. For how long?

TONY. Forever.

PETER. Please, please, please. You don’t understand. This is all I have. I’m nothing without this suit.

TONY. If you’re nothing without this suit, then you shouldn’t have it, okay?
This stripping of the super-suit functions much in apposition to the stripping of armor in Homer’s *Iliad*, but with death absent, it names what the ancient epics do not—dishonor. Dying in combat on the battlefield means an ancient Greek dies with honor. Though his body is dishonored when his armor is stripped by his victor, the fallen warrior took a stand for his cause, and so the stripping of his armor is often not considered a dishonor. One could assume, though, based on ancient Greek attitudes toward war, honor, and duty, that should a warrior return from battle stripped of his armor but alive, he would endure the greatest dishonor. In Peter’s case, he lives to see the punishment Patroclus could not. Peter disobeys Tony just as Patroclus disobeys Achilles, and the punishment for such disobedience is the stripping of the suit, and in turn, the stripping of masculinity—the hypermasculinity of Tony Stark and Achilles—that the man under the mask was never worthy of putting on in the first place. But because Peter lives, unlike Patroclus, he has a chance at redemption.

For several sequences following the stripping of his Spider-Man suit, Peter attempts to cope with the boring, mundane life of the average teenager; but he soon discovers that the father of his date to the homecoming dance is none other than his arch-nemesis—the Vulture. Though he is without his high-tech super-suit, he feels a moral responsibility to stop the Vulture from executing his diabolical plan, so he dons his original, homemade, baggy Spider-Man sweat suit and sets out to do just that. In a momentary setback, he finds himself trapped under several tons of debris when the Vulture brings the roof of a warehouse caving-in on him, and in this moment, Spider-

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5 In a record of sayings by Spartan women, a woman hands her son his shield as she sends him off to war and says: “ἵ τόν ἔπι τάς”—meaning come back “with this shield or dead upon it”—implying that returning without the shield would be a great dishonor (Plut. *Lacae*. 241f).
Man finds redemption. Alone under the rubble without even his high-tech suit’s artificial intelligence operating system to support him, he screams out for help, agonizing under the weight of the rubble. He hangs his head down, hopeless, but finds his homemade Spider-Man mask staring back at him in a puddle of water. Through some delicate computer generated imaging, the camera shows the audience Peter’s own reflection in that puddle—half of his face Peter Parker and the other half Spider-Man. Only then, through a series of snarls and growls as he screams “Come on, Spider-Man. Come on, Spider-Man!” is he able to lift the column pinning him down and free himself from the rubble (HC 1:43:30-1:44:30). Peter himself possesses all the power and strength that Spider-Man does; the suit itself is not the source of his power as it is for Iron Man. Yet he is only able to free himself after channeling the exaggerated masculinity his identity as Spider-Man allows him to exert. And, in accordance with the monomyth, this happens when he is most isolated. While Patroclus was killed for embodying a masculinity he was previously excluded from, Peter is initiated into his hypermasculinity as he proves himself worthy in full isolation from any form of support.

Figure 8. Peter’s reflection split with his mask in *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017).

Having unleashed this new hypermasculinity and adopted it as the new norm for his gender expression, Peter is able to complete the monomyth, defeat the Vulture, and
return to his life with his new worth and wisdom. And his reward for his valor and hypermasculinity is...another Spider-Man suit. At the end of the film, Tony apologizes to Peter, though taking some credit for Peter's success: “Sorry I took your suit. I mean, you had it coming. Actually, it turns out it was the perfect sort of tough-love moment that you needed, right?” (HC 1:58:50-55). While Tony is able to concede that he was wrong about Peter, the sentiment makes Tony the gatekeeper of what types of men get to be heroes. It is not that he was wrong about Peter's strength or powers or even about his passion to help others; he was wrong about Peter's ability to embody the hypermasculinity Tony deems necessary for being a real superhero. Peter's pursuit of the Vulture even after Tony took his suit was still in disobedience of Tony's commandment to stay away from the case, but this time, Peter succeeds, and that changes everything. That makes him a real man and a real superhero, and to reward him for his newfound expressions of authentic hypermasculinity, like a shield bestowed to him by the blacksmith god himself, Peter is offered a new Spider-Man suit, one that is hardened and metallic, much like Tony's Iron Man suit. But Peter surprises Tony again as he turns down the suit and the offer to join the Avengers, instead preferring to keep being a “friendly neighborhood Spider-Man.” For a moment, there is hope that Peter is perhaps rejecting Tony's ideals of masculinity and heroism, that he might stick with his baggy, mismatched sweat suit for his crime fighting for he has learned that being a hero does not depend on the suit he wears or the masculinity he expresses. But when he returns home, the high-tech suit Tony took from him is waiting for him on his bed, and he dons it triumphantly. The hypermasculine status quo lives to fight another day.
**The Skins Under Suits**

*Spider-Man: Homecoming* is bursting at the seams with the pressures and repression of conforming to masculine ideals both in the film’s protagonist and in its Campbellian narrative structure. Peter Parker, only fifteen years old, assumes the pressure of being the savior of New York City. And although his mentor repeatedly orders him to stand down, he persists, because he learned by watching Tony Stark as Iron Man that a superhero does not take orders and instead does whatever must be done, no matter the cost, to save the day. He recognizes that his great power comes with great responsibility and so he assumes the pressure of proving himself capable of taking on those responsibilities. And in the process, he represses any urge to perform his heroism, and in turn, his masculinity, in such a way that undermines his credibility as a hypermasculine and therefore competent hero (as noted earlier in the bank robbery and interrogation scenes). Relying on that pressure and repression, Peter’s heroic status is redeemed only once he is truly isolated from anyone who cares about him or could help him, just as the monomyth demands.

None of these aspects are uncommon for what we expect of a contemporary superhero film. It follows all the usual conventions I have previously laid out both in narrative structure and literary trope, but it also provides valuable insight to the ways in which superheroes’ bodies are sculpted into vessels of these elements. In presenting a hero’s transformation from an amateur, homemade hero into an Avengers-cadet with the means of Tony Stark’s limitless funds, the film emphasizes that there is an image that superheroes must ascribe to in order to be effective and credible. Rather than an assortment of thrift-store sweat suits, a superhero ought to wear a suit that portrays an
image of maturity, authority, and, of course, masculinity. And to live up to that image, these heroes’ actual bodies, the skins underneath the super-suits, must fit into that mold. But masculinity, muscularity, and heroism have become so intertwined in contemporary U.S. comic cinema that this obsession with male heroes’ bodies and muscles is operating simultaneously along adjacent tracks of fiction and reality.

The Hollywood artists who bring these movies to life have at least a notable preoccupation with the appearance of the superhero’s bare body (with a focus on chest, arms, and abs, in particular), as there appears to be some unspoken rule that at least one shirtless scene be featured somewhere in the film. These scenes can be found even when it does not make sense for that particular superhero. Consider Robert Downey Jr.’s portrayal of Iron Man: “When a man who requires a suit to fight for him...how can it possibly make sense that he is in such fantastic shape?” (D. Connell 32). Or Paul Rudd’s Ant-Man whose technological belt allows him to shrink down to microscopic size. Or Benedict Cumberbatch’s Doctor Strange who is a neurosurgeon-turned-wizard who rarely ever engages in physical hand-to-hand combat. Yet in each of these heroes’ solo films, the audience is invited to gaze upon their bare bodies in all their muscular glory. There is no sense to it when you try to reason with the hypermasculine logic of the fictional world, but film theorist Laura Mulvey provides some useful insight on the inclusion of these scenes for the audience in the real world.
Figure 9. Doctor Strange shirtless and freshly shaved in *Doctor Strange* (2016).

Mulvey’s exploration of visual pleasure in cinema, while focused on understanding female bodies as the receiving object of the audience’s gaze, helps us understand why the Marvel filmmakers include these heroic shirtless scenes at all. Mulvey reminds us, “the magic of the Hollywood styles at its best...arose, not exclusively, but in one important aspect, from its skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure” (805). How skillfully these shirtless scenes are crafted remains to be argued, but one can certainly see the satisfying manipulation. Sure, Doctor Strange is a wizard, but he is still a man with facial hair that grows, and unless we want our Marvel wizard to look like Gandalf, surely he must shave. And so we receive a shirtless scene as the good doctor-wizard mundanely shaves his beard. The manipulation of what is tedious and mundane into something that is visually satisfying in the film’s “hermetically sealed world...indifferent to the presence of the audience, [produces] for them a sense of separation and [plays] on their voyeuristic phantasy” (Mulvey 806). But how are we to believe that a film is fulfilling a voyeuristic fantasy with an audience that has consistently been men between the ages of 18 and 35, some of whom are sure to
detest and refute any assumption of a queer fascination with the topless man on the screen (D. Connell 23)? Mulvey and Daniel Connell together help us understand the subconscious implications of this voyeurism on the audience.

While there are sure to be men in the audience who derive sexual pleasure and satisfaction from the sight of the shirtless superhero on screen, the ones who refuse such an accusation instead may see the possibilities for themselves to attain the same unrealistic and, in many cases, unattainable hypermasculine appearance. The audience recognizes themselves in those moments and the “curiosity and the wish to look intermingle with a fascination with likeness and recognition: the human face, the human body...the visible presence of the person in the world” (Mulvey 807). In the context of comic cinema, D. Connell elaborates that while dealing with comic books, “a person cannot become the physical iteration of the superhero,” but “when the medium shift to that of film...the buffer is removed, and the audience can see (or perhaps might see the physical potential of) themselves within the source material” (20). This dangerously gives the audience, particularly the men who see themselves in the unrealistically buff heroes, the chance to desire that appearance, that embodiment of idealized hypermasculinity, for themselves. But this muscular masculinity is not realistic for the everyman watching the film:

What these scenes intend is to say that the impossible is not only real but that it is also actualized in physical form. The summation of six months or more of intense physical work and dietary restriction, all for a matter of seconds on screen, ferments the idea that all men can be this, or in fact, are this...not only is this hypermasculinity absent in daily life or the everyman's reality, it also masks the profundity itself. (D. Connell 28).

This tired trope of the effortlessly ripped superhero serves as only a detriment to the men watching who come to internalize ideals of what a man is. The hypermasculinity on
display through our heroes’ journeys already condone and perpetuate problematic stereotypes of masculine pressure, repression, and isolation, but these stereotypes are wrapped in a beautiful skin of desire when their hero’s muscles bulge and ripple on the screen and entice the men in the audience into believing they can be that man and have that body and evoke the same gazing and desire when their shirt is off and their skin is bursting.

Whether high-tech super-suits or divinely made battle armor, the hero’s dress is a vital element to their performance and affirmation of hypermasculinity. They function as a means of highlighting the superiority of our heroes over others and entice audiences with the appeal of the skins underneath. Skin, in these instances, does not creep and crawl as it does for Halberstam in *The Silence of the Lambs*, instead it hardens and deceives. It leads us to believe that any man can perform the same hypermasculinity for himself, whether in its psychic manifestations through the suit or armor or in its physical manifestations of a muscularity only attainable after months of training, diet, and exercise requiring means, particular time and money, that the everyman does not have to invest. Heroes’ performances of their hypermasculinity in the drag of their super-suits or warrior’s armor are validated when that outer skin comes off and the audience sees just another man standing before them. If it was just another man performing those heroics and that masculinity all along, then it must also be available to those men in the audience. And if the high-tech, gene altering, mystically imbued superpowers are not available to those men, then at least the image of their masculinity is. But in reality, it usually is not for the average movie-goer receiving those images, and it only furthers justification for inappropriate masculine behavior. But Connell reminds
us: “it is not a solution to suggest these transformations need not occur” (32). Instead, we need entirely new performances of masculinity once the super-suit goes on, and entirely new physical manifestations of masculinity when the super suit comes off as we explore new ways of shedding hypermasculinity from heroism. In the next chapter, I will explore if it really is possible for our masculine superheroes to take up non-toxic, non-hegemonic forms of masculinity, or if they are doomed to replicate the same hypermasculinity I have been discussing so far.
CHAPTER III
ARE YOU MY FATHER?: THE INFLUENCE OF MALE MENTORSHIP ON HEROIC
MASCULINE PERFORMANCE

Up to this point, I have discussed ways in which societal gender structures
require male heroes to internalize pressure and repress emotion and how super-suits
and armor function as an outlet through which the male hero individuates himself as a
hypermasculine figure according to those societal structures. I will now turn to the ways
in which that individualized hypermasculinity, reinforced by narratives of pressure and
repression, show up in homosocial male-hero relations, particularly in paternal-like
relationships of mentorship.

Fathers, even if they are dead, often loom over heroic narratives as motivating
elements that progress heroes toward their triumph; and in heroic narratives in which
there is no mention of a biological father, a father figure emerges to serve that function.
These fathers and father figures “serve as inspiration and to encourage masculine
endeavors...[they] are to be looked up to, and their love must be earned through good
deeds and masculine individualism” (Kvaran 223). They provide models of masculinity
that the hero must either adopt or reject, depending on whether and how they guided
their son’s sense of masculinity. The prominence of paternal influence over maternal
influence in heroic narratives “reinforces the idea that only male characters are
inspirational or to be emulated...[and] strengthen the notion that masculinity is
constructed and based on the opinions of other men” (Kvaran 219). The ideologies that the hero observes and learns at the societal level and then embraces and practices at the individual level is then to be approved or rejected by the other men in their lives, particularly if those men serve as mentors or father figures.

In this context of heroism, invoking the classical tradition of oral histories and mythologies, psychoanalysis provides a valuable digression into the overbearing placement of fathers and father figures in the narrative development of our male heroes, both ancient and contemporary. While the Freudian Oedipus complex relies on the structure of the biological, nuclear family to discuss self-identification, Lacan’s approach posits that “the maternal and paternal Oedipal personas are psychical-subjective positions, namely, socio-cultural...roles that potentially can be played by any number of possible persons of various sexes/genders” (Johnston). This perspective allows that any number of mentors or father figures (even ones that are not male) could stand in as the paternal figure in the development of one’s identity. The paternal function of whatever person assumes the psychical-subjective position of the father “involves bringing to bear within the child’s familial sphere the disciplinary and prohibitory features of the family’s enveloping symbolic order” (Johnston). In this sense, the father figure functions as an image of masculine norms and regulations against which the child, or in the case of this thesis, the hero, is able to define and understand himself as “man,” and particularly as manly hero. Without the psychic presence of the paternal, the hero is left with only the maternal and risks being deemed effeminate and incompetent since “a man displays his true mettle...in struggles with other men for honor” (Halperin 266). The father figure
then becomes such a focus of heroic narratives to reinforce masculine norms and power and dispel any concern of effeminacy.

In this way, the function of the father figure in heroic narrative is doubly didactic—he teaches the hero within the plot of the narrative, and he teaches the audience receiving the narrative and seeing themselves in the place of the hero. These fictional father figures have the potential to play an important role in the lives of the boys and young men receiving them, but as I will argue in this chapter, those father figures fail to send the correct messages about masculinity. Sociological research has attempted to claim that “when fathers are rarely around, boys lack a clear sense of masculinity and construct their identities in opposition to feminine things by devaluing and criticizing women,” (Coltrane 433). While claims like this are steeped in a problematic, starkly binary way of thinking, we can clearly see how Hollywood has contributed to the success of this mythic narrative. If we are to believe this narrative, we are left to wonder where these young men learn this opposition to femininity, and we find a plethora of stand-in father figures in U.S. film and TV whose gender performances reject the notion “that the very normal emotions boys feel are acceptable,” and celebrate masculinities that “do not display any emotions at all, especially in the face of overwhelming loss” (Sugrue 150). These father figures function as validations of toxic ideals that encourage emotional repression and the internalization of overwhelming pressure. In the absence of true biological fathers, we often find our heroes in search of male mentors to serve this function and fill the gap, just as we do in Homer’s *Odyssey.*
While the primary focus of the *Odyssey* is Odysseus’s homecoming to Ithaca and reunion with his faithful wife, the epic pays noticeable attention to Odysseus’s son, Telemachus, and his journey to maturation. Telemachus, born just before his father’s departure for the Trojan War, has grown up without a proper father figure to teach him the ways of masculine conduct in the ancient Greek world. He is depicted as an angsty teen, sulking around the palace as his mother’s many suitors eat them out of house and home in defiance of respectable hospitality customs and clearly acting as inappropriate role models for the young Telemachus. We see Telemachus, at the behest of his father’s patron goddess, Athena, set out to speak with various noblemen of the Trojan War to learn more about his father, and in turn, how best to be like his father so as to be worthy of him when he finally returns home. His venture is not very different from a more recent iteration of the search for paternal guidance and approval that we find in Jon Watt’s *Spider-Man: Far From Home*.

In this chapter, I will examine *Spider-Man: Far From Home*, the 2019 sequel to *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, to compare the absence of a mentor and father figure in Peter’s life after Tony’s death with the absence of Odysseus in Telemachus’s life growing up. In comparing these narratives, I will demonstrate the ways in which paternal, mentoring relationships have functioned over time to instill toxic masculine norms in both characters and audiences and defend those norms against alternative, balanced performances of masculinity.
Wise Telemachus, Worthy Son

Homer’s *Odyssey* begins with an introduction to Odysseus’s son, Telemachus, who, in the absence of a father for the first twenty years of his life, does not know how to properly perform his masculinity. In council with the gods at the epic’s start, Athena pleads with her father Zeus, king of the gods, to clear the way for Odysseus to return home. With Zeus’s permission granted, she declares that she will head to Ithaca so she may “stir up [Odysseus’s] son a little, and put some confidence in him” and “convey him into Sparta and to sandy Pylos / to ask after his dear father’s homecoming, … / so that among people he may win a good reputation” (*Odyssey* 1.89, 93-5).¹ The turn from permitting Odysseus to return home to garnering good reputation for Telemachus before his father’s return implies the significance of masculine value in father-son relationships in the Greek world. Telemachus, without proper masculine influence his whole life, is not a fully matured man; he is not a proper son for a noble warrior and clever strategist like Odysseus. Athena, as the divine voice of reason, insists Telemachus must be prepared. In Campbellian fashion, he must be separated from him home, venture out to Sparta and Pylos where he can be initiated into the social customs of noble adult men, and return to Ithaca having learned his proper masculine role in his father’s home. When explaining to Telemachus that he must do these things to prepare for his father’s return, Athena, disguised as a man named Mentes, implores: “You

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¹ Telemachus is a different hero compared to the other ancient heroes I have discussed. He has no war to wage against the Trojans or a mystical labor to perform at a god’s behest. His heroism is one of a more moralistic nature and is inextricably tied to his status as a noble man’s son.

² Citations of *The Odyssey* refer to Richmond Lattimore’s translated version unless otherwise noted. Further *Odyssey* citations will be abbreviated *Od*. 
should not go on / clinging to your childhood. You are no longer of an age to do that” (Od. 1.296-7). In return, Telemachus praises her saying: “your words to me are very kind and considerate, / what any father would say to his son” (Od. 1.307-8). Telemachus recognizes the masculine guidance he has lacked his whole life and eagerly heeds the goddess’s advice.

Before leaving on his journey, Athena has ordered that Telemachus call an assembly of the men in Ithaca to give word that he will leave on this fact-finding mission about his father, establishing a baseline of maturity by which to measure Telemachus’s growth. Speaking first, Telemachus formally accuses the suitors of abusing his family’s hospitality and admits his inability to remove the suitors by force. He eloquently lays out the atrocities done to him and explains his call for the suitors to leave, but he undermines his authority when his speech ends and he “dashed to the ground the scepter / in a stormburst of tears” (Od. 2.80-1). The speech and following outburst demonstrate his lack of masculine maturity. He has some understanding of what it means to be a man, demonstrated by the nature of his speech, but he fails to fully embody that masculinity as he inappropriately breaks down into tears signifying his still childish nature. It is this excessive show of public emotion that must be unlearned for Telemachus to achieve what Athena has set out for him. Not only is this display especially emasculating, but also unworthy of the legacy of his father, renowned for his

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3 I would be remiss not to acknowledge that Athena is regarded as a female gendered deity. While this thesis does not engage in constructions of female masculinities and how or to what extent they differ from male masculinities, I would like to note that her mentorship relationship with Telemachus is almost exclusively conducted in her disguise as a mortal man. In this sense, she fulfills the psychic role of the paternal that Lacan discusses, but it seems as though she is restricted from assisting Telemachus in her female form, thus her masculine qualities are relegated to a male body, and her influence over Telemachus’s journey, from his perspective, still furthers the notion that masculinity is learned and constructed from other men for the approval of other men.
wit and cunning in public speech. Athena returns to him before his departure and confides: “You are to be no thoughtless man, no coward, / if truly the strong force of your father is instilled in you” (Od. 2.270-1). This is the task ahead of him—to journey out of Ithaca and discover for himself if he is capable of being the man that his father’s reputation requires him to be.

His journeys take him across the sea to Pylos and Sparta where Telemachus acquires a variety of new masculine mentors and exposure to the Greek world of masculine discourse. Setting out first for Pylos, Athena now disguised as Mentor (not the same Mentes as earlier) urges him to speak with the wise King Nestor to which Telemachus responds: “how shall I go up to him, how close with him? / I have no experience in close discourse. There is / embarrassment for a young man who must question his elders” (Od. 3.22-4). Having been so disconnected from the realm of adult male socialization, Telemachus explicitly asks about the minor logistical details of conversing with an elder like how to approach him and how close to stand to him. While it demonstrates a certain humility and self-awareness, it also demonstrates just how little he understands, as “he has not yet learned the delicate negotiation between respect for elders and participation in their world” (Heath 140). He still sees it as an embarrassing interaction as it would be if he were a young child who ought not to converse with elder men. But it is here that Telemachus receives a new masculine role model.

Athena leads him onward to Nestor who, noticing the strangers, send over his son, Peisistratus, to offer Athena a wine cup over which to pray to the gods. As if in response to Telemachus’s concern of younger men interacting with elders, Peisistratus
explains to Athena: “this one / is a younger man than you, and of the same age as I am. / This is why I am first giving you the golden goblet” (*Od.* 3.48-50). Telemachus seems to notice this model of interaction—that it is appropriate for the elder to go first—and he remains silent until they sit to feast and Nestor asks them who they are and why they have come. Telemachus responds that he is Odysseus’s son and asks if Nestor has information about Odysseus. In response, Nestor tells him:

...Wonder seizes me when I look on you.
For surely your words are like [Odysseus’s] words, nor would anyone ever have thought that a younger man could speak so like him.
For while I and the great Odysseus were there together, we never spoke against one another... (*Od.* 3.123-8)

Though Telemachus has said very little, Nestor indicates that Telemachus’s masculine education is off to a promising start, as he already resembles his father in speaking—an attribute Nestor could surely attest to as he relays how frequently he heard Odysseus speak in assembly at Troy. Telemachus has passed the first test, following the conduct Peisistratus modeled, and has won the favor of the wisest of the Greeks. And although Nestor himself has no news of Odysseus’s homecoming, he urges Telemachus onward to Sparta to meet with Menelaus, offering his sons to accompany him on the journey.

Though Telemachus fared well in his conversing with Nestor, it was due in large part to the courage Athena aroused in him with her divine influence, and he requires further coaching before being worthy of his father’s recognition by the end of the epic. Menelaus, then, “although traditionally a man of few words and unsubtle action, is also held up as a model for Telemachus,” for knowing when to be silent and direct is just as valuable in the conduct of masculine discourse as knowing when to speak out and be discreet (Heath 142). Telemachus struggles in Sparta without the divine courage of
Athena as, after hearing Menelaus speak of Odysseus, the poet discloses that Menelaus “stirred in [Telemachus] the longing to weep for his father, / and the tears fell from his eyes” (Od. 4.113-4). In the absence of Athena’s urging, Peisistratus speaks out, again modelling for Telemachus an example of proper conversation. He confirms Telemachus’s identity as the son of Odysseus saying:

This is in truth the son of [Odysseus], just as you are saying; but he is modest, and his spirit would be shocked at the thought of coming here and beginning a show of reckless language...
...He longed to see you so that you could advise him somewhat, for word or action (Od. 4.157-63)

Menelaus applauds Peisistratus’s wisdom, confirming that Telemachus should mimic this form of speech. Spending the remainder of the visit listening closely to the Menelaus’s news of Odysseus, Telemachus finally speaks in the end, more eloquently than he could before, and says: “Son of Atreus, do not keep me with you here for a long time, / since I could well be satisfied to sit here beside you / for a year’s time, without any longing for home or parents” (Od. 4.594-6). To this Menelaus responds: “You are of true blood, dear child, in the way you reason” (Od. 4.611). After observing various models of masculine speech—from Peisistratus, Nestor, and Menelaus—Telemachus is confirmed to be the true son of Odysseus for his demonstration of witty speech. He is worthy of his father’s blood line and has only now to prove it when his father returns.

Having set out from Ithaca and learned the norms and customs of male socialization from his stand-in father figures, Telemachus’s final test is to prove his newfound masculinity to his father. When Odysseus finally returns to Ithaca, Athena implores that he remain in disguise until the opportune moment, so he may cunningly exact revenge upon his wife’s suitors. Telemachus is allowed to partake in the secret, but
Odysseus swears his son to secrecy saying: “If truly you are my own son, and born of our own blood, / then let nobody hear that Odysseus is in the palace” (Od. 16.300-1).

Telemachus assures his father: “I think you will learn what my spirit is like, when the time comes, / for the mood that is in my mind shows no slackening” (Od. 16.309-310).

Telemachus demonstrates the knowledge and experience he has gained from the role models and temporary father figures he found in Peisistratus, Nestor, and Menelaus. He does not respond simply and directly as he first did in his interactions in Pylos. He has developed a more subtle way of speaking that is expected of the son of cunning Odysseus. He does not directly promise that he will keep his father’s secret, but indirectly affirms that Odysseus will come to see that Telemachus can indeed be trusted. Now that Telemachus has mastered the art of subtle speaking that makes him worthy to receive his father, he must master his father’s skill in deceit and power.

Telemachus’s final test is to mimic his father’s knack for telling lies and assuming false identities, a unique attribute of Odysseus’s masculinity that values wit and tact just as much as brute force. Telemachus must earn his father’s recognition as a man and worthy son by “acting in disguise like his father, masking his intentions, his abilities, his knowledge, his very maturation” (Heath 144). He lives up to the task and finally, definitively affirms his newly learned masculine performance when they set up the challenge of stringing Odysseus’s bow for the suitors to prove their worth of Odysseus’s wife.⁴ Telemachus explains the challenge to the suitors and offers a demonstration. After

⁴ The terms of the contest are that if any of the suitors are able to string Odysseus’s bow and shoot an arrow through the rings of 12 axes, then they would prove they are worthy of marrying Odysseus’s wife. Knowing that none of the suitors would be able to accomplish such a feat (apparently Odysseus’s bow is a monstrosity that only he could successfully tame), they ensure Odysseus’s superiority over the suitors. I should also point out that this exhibits one of the ways in which women’s bodies were commodified in ancient Greece.
unsuccessfully attempting to string Odysseus’s bow three times, “pulling the bow for the fourth time, he would have strung it, / but Odysseus stopped him, though he was eager, making a signal / with his head” (Od. 21.128-30). Following his father’s lead, Telemachus lies and says: “I must be then a coward and weakling, /…Come then, you who in your strength are greater than I am, / make your attempts on the bow” (Od. 21.131-5). The poet shows that Telemachus is able to, or at least would have been able to, accomplish the feat that no one but his father is able to accomplish. He proves his worth in wit and cunning by lying and acting as if he were unable to string the bow. He could have done it, won the contest himself, and banished the suitors from his home, but that was not the plan he and his father set, and that would not allow Odysseus to exact revenge on the suitors for the abuse they inflicted upon his household. Instead, Telemachus lies. He reads his father’s gesture and acts as if he is too weak to string the bow, impersonating the old Telemachus the suitors have always known and masking the new Telemachus we readers have seen evolve. His deceit allows his father to string the bow, reveal himself as Odysseus, and then slaughter the suitors for their crimes.5

By the end of the epic, Telemachus has transformed from a childish, uninitiated boy into a mature, cunning, and powerful man worthy of Odysseus’s love and recognition. In the absence of a father figure, he had no understanding of what it meant to be a man within the social realm of masculine interaction. He was overly emotional, unsubtle in his speaking, and unable to participate in masculine discourse without the urging of a goddess or another man. But he finds new father figures, new mentors to

5 I avoid discussing the infamous slaughter that occurs in Book 22 as there is much debate surrounding the ethical implications of Odysseus’s revenge; see Loney, especially chapters 5 and 6, for an insightful analysis of the nuances on the topic.
teach him how to be a man worthy of his father’s recognition, which is, of course, his entire purpose in the epic—to be worthy of his father. This clearly demonstrates how, even in the ancient world, a father’s absence could have detrimental impact on their child’s maturation; but it also feeds toxic notions of how a real, worthy man practices his masculinity. The attributes that make Telemachus childish and unmanly are his emotional nature and his curt way of speaking. To be a man, his growth shows us that he must learn how to suppress his emotions, learn to manipulate speech, and even become a skilled liar. His father’s masculinity is the hegemonic ideal he must learn to adopt, for any other gender performance would deem him unworthy of his father’s recognition.

2,500 years later, we see Peter Parker take a similar journey, one that ends in the same endorsement of toxic masculine norms and undermines any possibility of less rigid, less harmful masculine performance.

**Spider-Man’s Many Masculine Models**

In between *Spider-Man: Homecoming* and its sequel *Spider-Man: Far From Home*, Marvel released the long anticipated superhero ensemble films *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame*. The villain of these films, Thanos, uses the all-powerful Infinity Stones to wipe out half of all life across the universe, including Peter Parker and a slew of other superheroes. In *Avengers: Endgame*, Tony’s grief over Peter’s death inspires him to devise a plan that would allow the Avengers to undo Thanos’s genocide. They succeed in bringing back everyone Thanos wiped out, but Tony is forced to heroically sacrifice himself to ensure the Avengers’ success, and Peter is resurrected just in time to say goodbye to his mentor and faux-father. Tony’s death then looms over the plot of *Spider-Man: Far From Home* as Peter struggles to determine the
right thing to do without Tony’s guidance. In the vacuum of hegemonic, masculine influence, a variety of potential new mentors come to Peter’s aid, all with varying interpretations of heroic masculinity, some of which even resist toxic, hypermasculine norms. However, the resistant, non-hegemonic masculine mentor is revealed to be a manipulative villain who uses his seemingly balanced masculine performance to connect with Peter and take advantage of him. In offering Peter a mentor whose masculine performance resists notions of toxic, hypermasculinity and then making that mentor the villain, *Far From Home* vilifies balanced gender expression for men and ultimately upholds the value of conforming to hegemonic norms.

When *Far From Home* begins, we find Peter integrating back into his old life following his resurrection and the loss of Tony, and we see the immense pressure he has begun to internalize. While attending a charity fundraiser as Spider-Man, he is bombarded by questions from journalists looking to him to step up and fill Tony’s shoes. One reporter asks him: “Are you the head Avenger now?” (*Far From Home* 8:41-4).6 Another asks him: “If aliens come back, what are you going to do?” (*FFH* 8:46-9). Finally, another asks: “What is it like to take over from Tony Stark? Those are some big shoes to fill” (8:54-8). Spider-Man is unable to answer any of the questions. He stumbles over his words and just ignores answering altogether. A high pitch ringing drowns out the reporters’ voices and the camera flashes intensify in brightness before Spider-Man leaps over the huddle of reporters and runs away from the benefit, taking solitary refuge on the rooftop of a nearby building. He removes his mask and takes deep

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6 Further *Far From Home* citations will be abbreviated *FFH.*
breaths, and when he looks over his shoulder, he finds a mural of Iron Man, his old teacher and friend and the savior of the universe, staring down at him (FFH 9:07-34).

Peter is so overwhelmed by the pressure of society’s expectations of him that he has a physical reaction in what appears to be a sort of panic attack, but the masculinity his heroic identity requires of him does not allow him to cope with it properly. The weight of a reality in which his mentor is gone and he must step up and answer questions he never had to answer before is finally settling on his shoulders. Rather than facing that pressure and working through it, though, he runs from it and represses it. Tony only ever helped Peter when it came to the physical and critical thinking aspect of superheroics, never when it came to the emotional aspects. Recalling my first chapter of this thesis, Tony himself struggled deeply to cope with the pressure of saving the world, and rather than prepare Peter for this potential reality, with his mentorship grounded in idealized hypermasculinity, he only teaches tact and logic. Tony was never vulnerable enough to divulge his past mistakes to Peter, the way he himself suffered what appeared to an anxiety disorder throughout the duration of Iron Man 3 because he put so much pressure on himself. Instead, Tony only berated Peter for his mistakes in Homecoming and demanded that he be better. And just as Peter was rewarded for dealing with his failure and the loss of his Spider-Man suit alone in Homecoming, he believes now that all he can do is handle his grief and his pressure on his own, because that’s what Tony taught him.

Nick Fury enters the narrative as the first potential masculine mentor for Peter, but his abrasive performance of masculinity, founded on a desperate desire to maintain power and authority, makes him dismissive of Peter’s agency and even emotionally
abusive. Shortly after Peter’s class arrives in Venice, they are attacked by some kind of water-monster that is ultimately vanquished by a new superhero, Mysterio, as Peter did not have his Spider-Man suit on him and had to be more careful with his heroic contribution. Fury appears thereafter to recruit Peter to join him and Mysterio in preventing impending monster attacks. He corners Peter in his hotel room, shooting Peter’s friend with a tranquilizer to keep the conversation private, and he expresses his frustration at Peter avoiding his calls, but his real frustration is rooted in something deeper (FFH 27:50-28:05). He tells Peter: “I used to know everything. Then I come back five years later, and I know nothing. No intel, no team, and a high school kid is dodging my calls” (FFH 28:40-53). As a victim of Thanos’s genocide, Fury, when he was resurrected, he had lost connections, intelligence, and consequently, all the power he previously held. His ego is bruised, and being avoided by a sixteen year old pushes him to the brink, so much so that he corners two teenage boys in a hotel room, essentially drugging one of them, rather than just asking for a moment of Peter’s time. The farfetched, melodramatic performance cloaks the coercion and abuse in a thin veil of comedy, allowing the audience not to think too hard about a grown man confronting and drugging teenage boys in their hotel room. The hypermasculine nature of his tactics unravel further as we see the extent of his manipulation to get Peter to fight.

In his desperation to reclaim even a fraction of his power, Fury relies on manipulative tactics to get what he wants, performing a type of masculinity that Peter cannot accept, recognizing the harm it does to him and others. Fury reveals that he manipulated Peter’s class itinerary to get him to Venice, knowing this is where the monster would attack, so he could pressure Peter to join the fight against an impending
monster attack. He tells Peter: “We have one mission: kill it. And you’re coming with us” (FFH 33:05-10). He commands Peter rather than asking, despite the fact that he holds no real authority over Peter. Peter refuses as it would draw him away from his class trip, but Fury does not stop. So again, he hijacks Peter’s trip and has their itinerary changed from Paris to Prague (through some undisclosed spy-craft) where the next monster will attack, essentially forcing Peter to join the battle to protect the people he cares about who are now in danger because of Fury. And when Peter expresses his worry about Fury having put his friends in danger, Fury explodes, shouting at Peter: “It’s clear to me that you were not ready for this,” which Peter takes with downcast eyes and pursed lips, nodding slightly in guilt-stricken, silent acceptance (FFH 44:16-43). Manipulated, belittled, and verbally abused by Fury, Peter ultimately joins the fight and helps Mysterio defeat the monster, but even then, Fury continues to pressure Peter.

Peter and Mysterio defeat the monster, but in toxic masculine fashion, Fury makes little room for celebration and immediately challenges Peter to assume more responsibility. He finally acknowledges: “You got gifts, Parker, but you didn’t want to be here...You got to decide whether you’re going to step up or not. Stark chose you. He made you an Avenger. I need that. The world needs that. Maybe Stark was wrong” (FFH 56:15-43). This final appeal for Peter to take up a heroic masculinity rooted in duty and responsibility alludes directly back to Homecoming when Tony offered Peter a place on the Avengers team. Peter rejected the offer then, recognizing that the model of heroic masculinity he learned was one that rarely allowed for personal relationships and pleasure, and he was not yet ready to forgo those things to be a full-time superhero. Tony respected and admired Peter’s decision, implying the respectability of a
masculinity that balances heroic responsibility with personal relationships. But in *Far From Home*, Fury has been challenging that decision the whole time, in turn, challenging Peter’s notions of heroism and masculinity and presenting a dichotomous representation of heroism in which you are either a hero or you are not, and if you are, that is who you are full time; there is no room for friends and family.

This is a heroism plagued by notions of toxic masculinity in which man must be a strong protector that rejects emotional vulnerability and values duty and respect above all else. We saw Tony struggle with this throughout his heroic arc, even into *Avengers: Endgame* when he decides with his wife, Pepper, whether to pursue his plan to save the world. He offers to “put a pin it right now and stop...put it in a lockbox and drop it to the bottom of the lake and go to bed” to which his wife asks in reply, “But would you be able to rest?” (*Endgame* 42:43-43:15). He grapples with the desire to live a simple life with his wife and daughter against the responsibility to use his power to save everyone. In the soft, emotional dialogue veiled by an anxious fear of the unknown consequences, Pepper understands Tony could never stop, that his notion of heroism puts the common good above all else. And as a result of this, Tony loses his life and saves the world, but leaves behind his wife and daughter for good, maintaining the crisis of heroic masculinity—whether to protect the common good above all personal relationships, whether great power must also always come with great responsibility. Peter lived to see the result of Tony’s philosophies and is now questioning whether the heroic masculinity Fury pushes, the same one to which Tony ascribed, is the one to which wants to ascribe himself. And to complicate this tension, amidst Fury’s pressure, manipulation, and abuse, Mysterio
presents an alternative masculine model that acknowledges the need for personal relationships.

Mysterio seems to embody and advocate for a heroic-masculine performance that acknowledges the duty that comes with power, but also allows for personal pleasure and relationships. Peter is first introduced to Mysterio by Fury, and Mysterio reveals that he is from an alternate reality where the elemental monsters attacking Peter’s earth have already destroyed his own and killed his family in the process (FFH 31:30-33:02). Though his family was lost, he elicits new hope for Peter that perhaps Peter, too, could find a way to be both a superhero and a friend/lover/loved-one to the others in his life. Mysterio more explicitly challenges Fury’s presentation of masculinity after Fury rerouted Peter’s class trip to Prague. Peter is lost in thought, worrying about his friends safety when Fury accuses him of being bored at their strategy session to which Mysterio responds: “He’s not bored, he’s just thinking about how you kidnapped him” (FFH 43:23-28). He recognizes Fury’s treatment of Peter as manipulative and abusive and defends Peter’s concern. And after Fury shouts at Peter telling him he is not ready for the responsibility of being a hero, Mysterio goes to Peter to ask him how he’s feeling. Peter expresses his exhaustion at the responsibility of being a superhero and how he wanted to spend the summer with the girl he liked rather than saving the world. Mysterio consoles him saying:

You’re not a jerk for wanting a normal life, kid. It’s a hard path. You see things. You do things. You make choices. People look up to you, and even if you win a battle, sometimes they die. I like you Peter. You’re a good kid. There’s a part of me that wants me to tell you to just turn around, run away from all of this. Then there’s another part of me that know what we’re about to fight, what’s at stake, and I’m glad you’re here. (FFH 45:25-46:00)
Mysterio stands in as a mentor to Peter with the healthiest idealization of heroic masculinity that acknowledges both one’s responsibility and one’s desire to renounce that responsibility. He does not answer whether Peter truly must reject a personal life to be a hero, but he gives voice to and space for recognition of the struggle that has been eating at Peter in his solitude. He affirms Peter’s emotions and welcomes vulnerability, all while applauding his superheroic talent and skill. Peter in return recognizes Mysterio as an acceptable mentor, acknowledging: “It’s really nice to have somebody to talk to about superhero stuff” (*FFH* 46:18-24). Shortly thereafter, though, we learn that this masculine performance is not what it seems and will be disqualified as a viable performance of heroic masculinity.

![Figure 10. Mysterio consoling Peter in *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (2019).](image)

After they defeat the fire monster in Prague, Mysterio takes Peter to a pub and appeals to his desire for normality one final time, before it is revealed that he is the true villain of the movie. Peter concedes that Tony always wanted Peter to be better than Tony, and maybe Fury just wants him to live up to that. He starts to give in to Fury’s masculine gaslighting after seeing what he can accomplish when he gives his whole self
to his superhero life. He says, “Tony did a lot for me, so I owe it to him, to everybody,” which Mysterio challenges asking, “Do you?” (*FFH* 57:26-32). Mysterio pushes Peter to think about what he wants for himself as Peter Parker, not as Spider-Man, when Peter finally admits that he just wants to go back on his trip and profess his feelings to the girl he likes. But he admits that he feels he cannot do that because he has too much responsibility (*FFH* 57:43-58:15). Mysterio wants Peter to strive for what he desires and just be a kid while he can, and at this point, Mysterio’s true intentions begin to unravel.

Peter realizes that the augmented-reality, defense glasses Tony left him are on the floor. Having established so much trust and understanding with Peter, Mysterio urges him to try them on and tells him “they look really stupid [on you]” (*FFH* 58:35). By telling Peter this, he affirms Peter’s doubts about being able live up to Tony’s ideals. Peter in turn surrenders his attachment to Tony’s heroic masculinity, gives the glasses to Mysterio, and goes off to rejoin his friends and be a normal teenager. After Peter’s departure, Mysterio reveals that he was manipulating Peter the whole time in an effort to acquire the glasses, which he needed to fulfil his villainous intentions.

As the setting of the pub dissipates, it is revealed that Mysterio has been using holographic battle drones to forge the monster attacks, stage himself as the only superhero who could defeat them, and manipulate Peter into handing over Tony’s glasses, thereby disqualifying his performance of masculinity from the canon of acceptable performances of heroic masculine expression. Every instance of Mysterio affirming Peter’s doubt, emotion, and vulnerability was a manipulative endeavor to gain

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7 Tony Stark left these glasses to Peter in his will, and Fury gave them to Peter when they first met in Venice. The glasses are linked to a Stark Industries satellite in space that has the ability to dispatch drones to Earth at the wearer’s request. They are also able to hack and surveil the technology use of those in close proximity to the wearer.
his trust to achieve his own villainous ends. Peter’s trust in Mysterio to be a worthy mentor and confidant are thus revealed to have been a weakness of Peter’s heroic capacity. By not being isolated and detached, Peter let down his guard and betrayed the norms of heroic masculine performance. He is effeminized in the classical sense that “those men who refused to rise to the challenge, who abandoned the competitive society of men for the amorous society of women, who pursued a life of pleasure...incarnated the classical stereotype of effeminacy” (Halperin 266). By ascribing to Mysterio’s frivolous, amorous masculinity, Peter risks suspicion of the “realness” of his masculinity. Mysterio later feeds on these masculine insecurities, tormenting Peter with holographic illusions and saying: “If you were good enough, maybe Tony would still be alive” using his drones to project a zombified Iron Man emerging from Tony’s grave and lunging at Peter (FFH 1:20:16-33). Through this exploitation of Peter’s insecurities and his holographic manipulation of reality, Mysterio beats Peter, and fully dismisses the affirming masculinity he modeled earlier.

Realizing how badly he has failed, Peter calls in his last line of support who comes to uphold the same hegemonic masculine ideals he attempted to subvert all along. Happy Hogan, a close friend of Tony’s who served as Peter’s handler in Homecoming, has developed a fond friendship with Peter in Tony’s absence, and Peter calls him to the Netherlands to help him figure out what to do next. Happy stitches up a wound on Peter’s shoulder when Peter winces and snaps at Happy for not being gentle enough with the sutures. Happy tells Peter to relax when Peter finally snaps. He yells at Happy, expressing how ashamed his is, and goes on to explain the pressure he feels to live up to the world’s expectations that he fill Tony’s shoes. He says, “Everywhere I go, I see his
face. And the whole world is asking who’s going to be the next Iron Man,” and his voice breaks as he admits, “I don’t know if that’s me, Happy, I’m not Iron Man” (*FFH* 1:26:31-46). Happy warmly responds:

> You’re not Iron Man. You’re never going to be Iron Man. Nobody could live up to Tony, not even Tony. Tony was my best friend, and he was a mess. He second-guessed everything he did, and he was all over the place. The one thing he did that he didn’t second-guess was picking you. (*FFH* 1:26:48-27:11)

The heartfelt assurance of the normality of Peter’s feelings seems to break hegemonic masculine norms that prohibit vulnerable emotional interaction, but at its core, it actually works to uphold those norms. Tony himself never admitted any of this to Peter. Instead, it comes second-hand from Happy, whom Tony likely never confided in either, perceiving it all for himself. Rather than dissuading Peter’s insecurity and embarrassment, he normalizes it by revealing that even Tony felt the same way and dealt with it privately. And to further uphold the toxic norms, he sums up Peter’s dilemma and casually asks him what he’s going to do about it, to which Peter replies: “I’m going to kick [Mysterio’s] ass” as triumphant music starts to swell and Peter gets to work devising a plot to take down Mysterio on his own (*FFH* 1:27:22-36).

Hypermasculine norms prevail, and Peter defeats Mysterio and saves the day.

Peter, like Telemachus, was exposed to various models of masculine mentorship. While the three mentors Telemachus encountered all performed the same socially accepted masculinity for him to learn from, the three mentors Peter encounters all perform varying forms of masculinity that he must come to choose between for himself. Fury represents a rigid, extreme expression of hegemonic masculinity that leaves no room at all for any personal relationships. Mysterio represents a well-balanced gender expression that allows men to foment personal relationships and put themselves first
sometimes, despite their heroic responsibilities, but this masculinity is deemed unacceptable as it is revealed only to weaken those who perform it and prevent them from being successful heroes. Happy represents a middle ground between the two that strives toward the masculinity Fury practices while acknowledging the impossibility of achieving it and ultimately affirming that a man will feel ashamed when he cannot achieve it, normalizing this shame as something to be dealt with privately and channeled into violent acts of redemption. While Telemachus’s journey of masculine socialization may seem more eloquent and successful, we must remember that his journey happens within a context where there is very little room for gender variation. Peter’s, on the other hand, happens within a modern context of an array of varying gender. Peter set out in hopes of subverting the hegemonic norms of heroic masculinity and practicing a utopic masculinity that would allow him to be both a happy person and a successful hero, that would leave space for him to be trusting and rely on other men rather than suffer through his own his plights alone. His mentors, though, show him that he cannot succeed in this mission and must continue to suppress his personal desire, cope with emotional distress in isolation, and channel all his turmoil into an ass-kicking masculinity that will never fail to save the day.
CONCLUSION

THE NEW HEROES WE NEED

It has been nearly 15 years since the reign of the Marvel Cinematic Universe over global box offices began, and it shows no signs of slowing down as production companies come back full-force following the production pause brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since I began writing this thesis, three additional MCU films have been released, and seven more have begun production, five of which will be released by summer 2023. And this, of course, only considers films produced and created by Marvel Studios. Sony Pictures owns the rights to various Marvel characters and has been exploring its own parallel Spider-Man universe with its release of films centered on Venom, the traditional Spider-Man villain/anti-hero. They have an additional two films slated for release by 2023. And then there is the DC Extended Universe, which has been attempting to match the success of the MCU and has six of its own films set to be released by 2023. And all of these do not even begin to consider the superhero films that may be released by online streaming studios or other independent film studios. In short, the age of comic cinema is not going anywhere anytime soon, especially as the MCU has begun experimenting, with much success, with television series on Disney’s streaming platform Disney+. So now is the time to be challenging the presentations of the superheroes they give us. Now is the time to be critiquing that static, problematic representations of gender, race, sexuality, ability. Because even as they attempt to bait us into believing they are diversifying by including characters of marginalized identities in their stories, these characters are often confined to the background, and even when they are front and center, we see them acting out
the same, tired plots of the monomyth. We see them performing the same, tired masculinity that gives them the appearance of authority.

To begin understanding this masculinity and static hegemony depicted in superhero movies, I structured my thesis in a way that mirrors how we come to learn and perform gender. We observe and internalize societal expectations of our gender in the people around us and in media. We practice those expectations personally for ourselves. And then we perform those practices amongst others, seeking validation of our interpretation of our gender. I revisit Butler again who alludes to this process in the imitative nature of gender performativity, specifically demonstrated through drag:

> All gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation. If this is true, it seems, there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but *gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an *effect* and consequence of the imitation itself. (“Imitation and Gender Insubordination” 313)

I have relied heavily on this notion of imitation for my explorations of heroic-masculine identity performance. These heroes I discussed imitate a heroic ideal that has no original, and that, through the imitative iterations of those practicing heroism, have actually produced themselves. Peter Parker imitates Tony Stark who perhaps imitates a heroism enacted by the soldiers he visited in Afghanistan who perhaps imitate a heroism they learned from comic books or war movies or oral stories passed down by elders. Just as there is no original man or woman who performed their gender in a perfectly gendered and coherent way, there is no original hero who embodies everything it means to be heroic that can be copied repeatedly ad nauseam. To put it another way, heroism and gender are acts that have been imitated and rehearsed “much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to
be actualized and reproduced as reality once again” (Butler, “Performative Acts” 526).

So how can we even begin to leave our current scripts behind and write new ones?

To start, we must think more carefully about the elements of the classical world we appropriate for contemporary purposes. As a student of ancient literature, I in no way mean to say there is no value to be gained from the study of the ancient world. I fiercely believe that there is much to be learned about the world today through the studies of antiquity. When I began this thesis, I alluded to the fact that the ways in which I interact with gender in the Homeric epics has its limits as the language and ideologies we have of understanding gender today did not exist then. We can give this advisory and still definitively assert that certain elements of the culture were inherently and irrefutably wrong. As we attempt to recognize and critically engage with the atrocities of the ancient world—slavery, human trafficking, and sexual violence, to name a few—we can hold both truths that it was, indeed, a very different world that lacked certain ideological conceptions and that certain acts done in that world deprived individual subjects of their safety and agency. We must come to terms with the ways in which the narrative structures used to tell stories in the ancient world carry with them the remnants of the rigidity that governed their society and allowed for such atrocities to occur. We must stop saying that the hero’s journey, the monomyth, is inherently human and relatable, because as much as it may be for certain subjects, it may be just as alienating and foreign for certain others. This narrative structure is not a universal truth, and we cannot claim that it is just because it has “worked” since antiquity. It has only worked because it has remained familiar. But we need to start familiarizing audiences with new structures that can be more inclusive of varying identities.
And to recognize those varying identities, we can stop casting all our superheroes as hyper-muscular, cisgender, heterosexual white men who perform their masculinity to meet very Western notions of manhood. The MCU has started doing this, most notably in their *Black Panther*, released in 2018, which starred an almost entirely Black cast. They broke barriers again in 2019 with *Captain Marvel*, their first woman superhero solo film, and followed up with another woman superhero solo film in 2021, *Black Widow*. More recently, having been released in 2021 after the inception of this project, the MCU’s *Shang-Chi and the Ten Rings* features an almost entirely Asian cast. And while representation of various racial and gender identities in leading roles in pop culture are of utter importance, simply cutting and pasting these identities into the narratives usually performed by hypermasculine white men is not enough.

*Black Panther*, for example, with its titular superhero played by a Black man and imaging an Afrofuturistic society untouched by the atrocities of the slave trade, fails to move away from the hegemonic notions of white, masculine heroism. When the Black Panther, the king of the wealthy and thriving Wakanda, is challenged to open its borders and show the world what they are capable of, he murders his challenger, who is, no less, his cousin. The cousin, N’Jadaka, of course, was villainized for his radical ideologies of avenging Black people everywhere, oppressed by the crippling effects of systemic racism. His character is made to go too far in fighting for Black liberation, and his death is meant to symbolize his unwillingness to live within the oppressive systems he sought to dismantle. Just before he dies, T’Challa offers to save him and he refuses:

T’CHALLA. Maybe we can still heal you.
N’JADAKA. Why? So you can just lock me up? Nah. Just bury me in the ocean with my ancestors that jumped from the ships, ‘cause they knew death was better than bondage.  

(Black Panther 1:57:40-58:15)

T’Challa’s heroism, in Campbellian style, is affirmed when the battle is over, his cousin is dead, and he returns to society having been influenced by N’Jadaka’s mission for liberation. Under this influence, T’Challa opens a community center in Oakland for young Black kids. While the conflict of his hero story is at least mindful of racial oppression and inequality in U.S. society, it ends in a way that does not challenge the white Hollywood consumers to see race any differently. Little Black kids are still left to be pitied as charity cases, rather than empowered to rise up and dismantle racism in their society. Black Panther, while revolutionary in itself for its depiction of Blackness as something to be awed rather than feared, falls into the same narrative structures that perpetuate a masculinity rooted in superiority and uneven power systems.

Figure 11. T’Challa and N’Jadaka fighting in Black Panther (2018).

Shang-Chi and the Ten Rings takes a similar cut-and-paste approach that ultimately upholds a particular tendency toward hypermasculinity, but it does offer
hints at the possibilities for straying from these conventions. Shang-Chi, the title character, is being hunted down by his father’s terrorist organization to try to get him to return home to China after running away to San Francisco when he was a teenager. He attempts to adopt the familiar isolationist approach to his heroism as he gears up to find his sister and confront their father, but his best friend in San Francisco, Katy, refuses to let him go without her. So even while the hero ventures into his initiation phase of the monomyth, he does it accompanied by a loved-one, breaking from Campbellian tradition. And Katy does not just join along as a damsel for Shang-Chi to rescue along the way (though this does happen early on); she learns archery and assists in the world-saving climax of the film, where Shang-Chi and his sister, Xialing, fight together to overcome the chaos unleashed by their father (though, of course, it is Shang-Chi himself who delivers the final blow). Their mother, though dead in this film, functions similarly to the way Tony functions in *Spider-Man: Far From Home*. She is the lost mentor whose memory drives the characters onward, and whose mythical culture bestows upon our heroes the power and knowledge to save the day. Hypermasculinity itself, taught to a young Shang-Chi by his father and relayed to the audience through flashbacks, is villainized, to an extent, as a structure that left Shang-Chi traumatized and emotionally stunted. The gender nuances are abundant in this film, but it is ultimately about the masculine relationship between a father and son that is fraught and finally reconciled in the moments before the father’s death. The hypermasculine ideals Shang-Chi embodies, quite literally in his extensive shirtlessness and subtly in his attempts to isolate himself from love and emotion, are preserved in the film’s adherence to the monomyth, though explored with flexibility that leaves room to hope for its dismissal in future narratives.
The greatest resistance to the rigid hypermasculinity of the monomyth can be found in *Captain Marvel*. Carol Danvers has no memory of her past and lives as a soldier on another planet where she struggles to cope with her superhuman abilities that allow her to shoot photon blasts from her fists. Her power is evidently tied to her emotional state, and she is encouraged to control and repress her emotion so as to control her power. As she ventures back to Earth, where she is originally from, and begins regaining her memories, she questions this suppression that has always been pushed on her, and by the end of the film, she stops trying to control her emotion and becomes the most powerful Marvel superhero we have ever encountered on screen. In the final conflict between Carol and the film’s villain, who had been her mentor at the beginning, he attempts to rally her into fighting him without using her powers:

YON-ROGG. Can you keep your emotions in check long enough to take me on? ...Turn off the light show and prove to me you can beat me without—

[Carol shoots him back with a photon blast before he can finish speaking.]

CAROL. I have nothing to prove to you. (Captain Marvel 1:44:31-45:25)

Yon-Rogg attempts to confine Carol to the hypermasculine tropes of the monomyth in which a hero overcomes the villain honorably and justly through combat. He attempts to make her defining moment one about her womanly emotions rather than her supreme, superhuman ability. And by refusing to entertain this notion, she refuses the idea that she has to prove herself as a worthy hero. The whole film, in blurring the lines between separation and homecoming through Carol’s memory loss, working toward emotional freedom rather than repression, allowing Carol to accept help from her loved-ones, and having her refuse to entertain notions of worth tied explicitly to brute force, expressly undermines the trajectory and value of the monomyth. In a way that hypermasculine
heroes have never done for masculine identifying audiences, Captain Marvel depicts for feminine identifying audiences a gender performance that allows the subject to be secure in their power, capable of relying on a team, encouraged to work through and express emotion rather than repress it, and understand their worth for themselves aside from men’s static and violent notions of worth. This film models a balanced gender expression that masculine heroes can and should adopt for themselves, and shows the capability of a superhero to succeed outside of the usual structures of the monomyth.

Figure 12. Carol about to shoot Yon-Rogg in Captain Marvel (2019).

None of the superheroes I discussed in this thesis were able to perform their gender in ways that allowed for such balance, and overall, most superheroes depicted in the superhero movies being produced today do not and cannot perform their gender in this way, particularly the ones who are men. While this thesis has focused exclusively on superhero films produced within a US, Hollywood context, I want to emphasize that I have not attempted to speak for heroism as it may be depicted in the media of cultures outside the bubble within which Hollywood attempts to confine us. A decolonial approach to the analysis of the relationship between superheroes’ heroism and gender
performance could hold the key to unearthing a model of heroic-masculinity that resists and subverts the hegemonic, hypermasculine norms perpetuated in the monomyth. Perhaps transgressive and subversive superhero narratives exist in abundance outside a U.S. perspective, and Hollywood’s capitalist, colonialist hold over the film industry prevents those narratives from thriving or gaining global recognition. Hollywood has discovered a capitalist driven formula that works (for them, if not for their audiences), and they know they can rely on the U.S. Americans’ dependence on the familiar. But if we are to resist the hegemonic ideals perpetuated in our media, “If we are to believe that hegemony is a hierarchical system that is propagated not just by those who profit most, but also by those who buy into its stratification, then we must consider what is true change and what is only surface-level, ephemeral shifts”—we must demand heroes that not only look like us, but who also act like us (De Dauw and D. Connell 162). We must reinvent the heroic wheel, because the one we have, i.e. the monomyth, is driving us further and further along the harmful, destructive road of the gender binary.

This thesis has largely focused on the dominating influence of U.S. white masculinity and has rarely commented on racial difference. Similarly, it has focused largely on heterosexual masculinities and has rarely commented on queer differences. And most noticeably, it has focused almost exclusively on masculinity performed by men and has ignored ways in which masculinity may be differently performed by women. I recognize these as holes in my project, and I look forward to analyzing these intersections of identity in future scholarship. I have chosen to focus specifically on masculinities performed by straight, white, able-bodied, U.S. American men because they have represented the majority of the figures we have seen in U.S. comic cinema,
and I wanted to critique those figures and expose the detrimental impact of their prominence. This is the main reason I have focused so extensively on the MCU’s Spider-Man in my explorations of heroic masculinity.

Peter’s heroic initiation into the hypermasculine narratives of the monomyth has become more and more tragic as his story has evolved across his three MCU solo films. I have discussed *Homecoming* and *Far From Home* at depth, but have been unable to explore his third film, *No Way Home*, as it was released when I was well into the writing process and could no longer afford any rewrites. *No Way Home*, yet again, demonstrates the potential for Spider-Man to be the superhero who reforms heroic masculinity for good, but, even more adamantly than its prior two installations, it refuses to allow Peter to break from the heroic-masculine norms. In the aftermath of the outing of his secret identity, Peter struggles with the consequences of the world knowing that he is Spider-Man. As a teenager just trying to get into college, he is made both a celebrity and a menace. He goes to Doctor Strange, with whom he became acquainted in *Avengers: Infinity War*, and asks him to cast a spell to make the world forget he was Spider-Man. The spell goes awry, and Spider-Man villains from across the multiverse are transported to Peter’s dimension where they hunt him down. Under his Aunt May’s influence, rather than attempt to send these villains back to their respective universes where they will surely die, Peter attempts to help them cope with the afflictions that make them villains. Along the way, though, his Aunt May is killed and the interdimensional boundaries between the universes are coming undone, threatening Peter’s world with an infinite number of Spider-Man villains who would destroy the fabric of reality. The resolution, it is reasoned through illogical movie logic, is for Doctor
Strange to cast another spell that would make the entire world, including Peter’s closest friends, forget who Peter Parker is—not just make them forget that Peter is Spider-Man, but make them forget that Peter ever existed. And that is exactly what happens.

_Spider-Man: No Way Home_ offered hope for a plot line that would finally allow Peter to find balance and harmony between his identities and perform the non-toxic masculinity he has strived to perform and been restricted from performing. Aunt May figured more prominently in this film than any other, so much so that she is the one who delivers the lines of the heroic code this thesis began with: “With great power, there must also come great responsibility.” In the absence of an Uncle Ben, who simply never existed in the MCU’s Spider-Man narrative, Aunt May fills the role of being Peter’s guiding force for his heroism. And as befits the fates of the Uncle Ben’s who delivered that line in the Maguire and Garfield cinematic Spider-Man iterations, Aunt May is killed in _No Way Home_ shortly thereafter. Her murder is used to motivate Peter and tempt him with the choice between revenge and fulfilling her mission of saving the villains. Much in the way that Mysterio’s flexible masculinity was discredited by his manipulation, the flexible masculinity presented to Peter through Aunt May’s compassion and morality is discredited in her murder and in the undoing of reality in Doctor Strange’s memory wiping spell. While Peter fulfilled Aunt May’s mission and cured the villains of their respective afflictions, the fact that the film’s resolution comes in the form of Peter’s own suggestion that the world forget who he is ultimately dismisses Aunt May’s influence over his masculinity and aligns him more closely with Tony’s mentorship than ever before. Peter sacrifices everything but his life—his friends, his love, all of the relationships that mean anything to him—much in the way that Tony
did sacrifice his life in *Avengers: Endgame*. Peter’s fate is potentially worse, though, since he lives to see the world forget him.

The film ends with him in utter isolation, in a way that no previous superhero film has isolated their hero. We see him move into a studio apartment with nothing but a GED study book and a sewing machine with which he fashions a new Spider-Man suit. All of the relationships that gave Peter’s life meaning are gone, and he triumphantly swings out his apartment window to assume his Spider-Man identity more fully than he was ever able to before. The monomyth is left unfulfilled with Peter in this never-ending separation phase where he is able to be fully superhero and fully hypermasculine with no way to return home.

So where do we go from here? As the most recent MCU release, *Spider-Man: No Way Home* has cemented our superhero within the realm of toxic, hypermasculinity more so than in any other superhero film. Critique and analysis feel hopeless and ineffective. But we must be able to understand and talk about the failings of our popular culture if we ever hope to subvert their most hegemonic, oppressive messaging. For as affirmative as these films have been of hegemonic ideals of race, gender, sexuality, ability, colonialism, and capitalism, they demonstrate that these are the very problems that plague us. They blow them up to a larger-than-life scale and play them out for us on the screen. But popular culture need not always be this way, and in fact, it is not always this way. One of the most recent Disney animated films, *Encanto*, challenges dominant narrative structures by depicting notions of villainy and heroism as forces that function collectively as power relations rather than individually as character traits. Even as early as the mid-2000’s, the wildly successful animated kid’s show *Avatar: The Last
*Airbender*, airing on Nickelodeon from 2005 to 2008, dealt with unfathomable topics for a kid’s show like generational trauma, genocide, colonialism, sexism, and classism, and it artfully disentangled notions of heroism and masculinity. It is possible for popular culture to produce media that resists the hegemonic ideals our capitalistic U.S. film industries would have us believe are the only options for narrative explication. Like J. Halberstam, “I believe in low theory in popular places, in the small, the inconsequential, the antimonumental, the micro, the irrelevant; I believe in making a difference by thinking little thoughts and sharing them widely” (*The Queer Art of Failure*, 21). I believe in the power of superhero movies to learn from other pop culture, if we force them to listen and share widely enough our displeasures with their strict hegemonic dealings.

Marvel Studios, I believe, is at a difficult juncture. They recognize the call for representation and they even heed it to an extent. But are they willing to go far enough? In their Disney+ series *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, we watch the superhero the Falcon, AKA Sam Wilson, a Black man played by Anthony Mackie, assume the mantle of Captain America after Steve Rogers’s retirement. But we see his trepidation coming to that point. We hear the inner conflict he expresses, and other Black characters express, about a Black man becoming the superheroic embodiment of U.S. morals and values. Sam talks about feeling judged for being Black and assuming the mantle anyway, despite the hatred that will be cast at him. He says, “No super serum, no blond hair or blue eyes—the only power I have is that I believe we can do better” (*Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, Ep. 6 29:43-57). It is a powerful moment in the narrative of the episode, but also in the narrative of Marvel’s role as a pop culture conglomerate in U.S. society.
Marvel Studios hears the calls to be more diverse and representative of their audience, and they respond by giving us a Black Captain American that is fully aware of the social struggle to integrate Blackness with U.S. American values. They recognize they have the power to do better, but they fail to look deeper than what the public is crying out for explicitly. They listen when they are scolded, but they fail to do the self-reflection of why they are scolded in the first place. They fail to realize that it is through the old, reused, hypermasculine narrative structures that they constantly redeploy that they continue to let down their audiences. It is through these structures that they failed to realize a Black man could ever be Captain America until the public called for more diversity, that they failed to realize women could have solo superhero films before women called for more empowerment. It is through these structures they continuously fail to realize that they are perpetuating the gender binary that tells men to act like a
man—be tough, repress, pressurize—tells women to wait their turn for the world to understand their worth, and tells folks who refuse those categories that they do not exist. It is in the same Disney+ series that Marvel told us: “We need new heroes. Ones suited for the times we’re in” (Falcon and the Winter Soldier, Ep. 1 13:13-21). And they are right—we do need new heroes, ones that are suited to the ways in which we are coming to rethink race, gender, sexuality, and identity as social constructions that change over time and place. We need new heroes. But if we have any hopes of getting ones that are indeed more suited for the times we’re in, we need new ways of telling their stories. We need new ways of telling our stories.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA

Matthew Gallagher is from the southwest suburbs of Chicago. Before enrolling in the Women’s Studies and Gender Studies master’s program at Loyola University of Chicago (LUC), he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from LUC in Classical Civilizations and English, graduating summa cum laude in 2019. After graduating, Gallagher worked at LUC as a staff member in the Department of Residence Life and the School of Nursing while he completed his master’s coursework. He plans to pursue a PhD degree in Comparative Literature following completion of his Master of Arts degree.