The Shifting Image of Hegemonic Masculinity in Contemporary U.S. Television Series

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As programming that focused on men and how they related to their families through their violent adventures in the world saw a surge in recent decades, several examples from this period witnessed a shifting image of this brand of masculinity toward the inclusion of fatherhood and paternal nurturance. These series display a performance of masculinity that centers on caring and nurturing family while simultaneously displaying traits of hegemonic masculinity such as use of violence, stoicism, and action orientation. These shows—*Prison Break*, *The Mandalorian*, *The Witcher*—we argue, offer a new performance of masculinity. Although these shows also strongly associate hegemonic masculinity with violence, the male characters' relationships with family take a central role as a driving force for the plot. We find this shift in display of masculinity to be significant in that it centers family relationships for protagonists in the traditionally hypermasculine genres of the prison drama and the western.

Keywords: television, masculinity, gender, feminism, prison drama, western, The Mandalorian, The Witcher, Prison Break

Constructions of masculinity on prime-time programming as well as on streaming platforms such as YouTube, Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu have received much scholarly attention as creators find themselves in a "more fluid and complex digital environment" (Boyle, 2019, p. 919). Recently, the television landscape in the United States has become more diversified and more complex in terms of content, and shifts in representations of gender are among the important new programming elements. This article examines such changes in representations of hegemonic masculinity in three recent cable and streaming television series in the United States—*Prison Break* (Adelstein et al., 2005–2017), *The Mandalorian* (Favreau et al., 2019), and *The Witcher* (Gaub, Baginski, Brown, Daniel, & Emanuel, 2019)—showing how the traditionally hypermasculine genres of westerns and prison dramas have evolved to include fatherhood and nurturing paternal behaviors in their constructions of hegemonic masculinity. Our analysis shows that fatherhood and caregiving have become key elements in portrayals of masculinity in these traditionally limited genres.

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As Scharrer and Blackburn (2018) note, the repeated messages an audience sees on television about hegemonic masculinity influence how people expect and understand behavior in real life. They reference, for example, "evidence that viewing of police and detective programs predicts views of toughness, physical aggression, and restrictive emotionality as endorsed elements of traditional masculinity" (p. 172). Because televisual representations of masculinity can influence viewers' beliefs about appropriate masculine behavior, it is vital to analyze shows that tap into traditionally hypermasculine genres to see whether and how they challenge gender performances in their respective genres. An important dimension of our understanding of hegemonic masculinity on television has been the incorporation of feminine elements over time (Hatfield, 2010). MacKinnon (2003) noted that the anxiety of focusing on men and masculinities would somehow "divert attention from the feminist work that still needed to be done on women" (p. 8), which meant that masculinity was not studied and not well understood. This, in turn, contributed to the reign of hegemonic masculinity (Feasey, 2008). However, scholars did establish that hegemonic masculinity as reflected on prime-time television was characterized by shifts that reflected the social context of the times, albeit somewhat belatedly (see Craig, 1992).

Our work in this article extends and further specifies the direction of change in televisual representations of hegemonic masculinity in hypermasculine genres starting in the late 2000s and extending into the present. The shows we analyze display how these norms of masculinity have changed along similar lines, but in specific new ways in western narratives and prison dramas. Focusing on exemplars from these genres, we argue that a significant shift in dominant forms of masculinity they depict involves an emphasis on nurturing, caregiving, and fathering. These shifts, incorporating traditionally feminine elements into dominant constructions of masculinity, are examples of a typical process of change in concepts of hegemonic masculinity over time. They are particularly significant in that these genres have been among the most hypermasculine and rigid in terms of their gender performance. Thus, the feminine elements related to parenting and nurturing behaviors create a more dramatic contrast in characterization, as these new versions of masculinity entail traditionally hypermasculine elements such as frequent use of weapons and violence, stoicism, and adherence to a masculine honor code alongside the new emphasis on fatherhood, paternal love, and nurturing.

Several important recent works examine representations of hegemonic masculinity in a range of TV offerings, although examinations of masculinity in relation to fatherhood in contemporary television are rare. In her 2014 book, titled *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinity in the 21st Century*, focusing on "male-centered serials," Amanda Lotz (2014) observes that "these series depict the characters' feelings and relationships in stories that probe the trials and complexities of contemporary manhood in a manner previously uncommon" (p. 5). Lotz examines characters struggling with male identity in contemporary contexts, with focus mainly on male–male friendships, but also observes male protagonists trying "to participate in the lives of their children in ways their fathers never considered" (p. 74). She documents, for instance, the ways in which these shifts in representations of fatherhood take place across genres that combine elements of soap opera with those of prime-time fiction genres. In this article, we take up the subject of televisual representation of fatherhood specifically as an evolving element of constructions of hegemonic masculinity. While Lotz examined cable television generally, this article focuses on more narrowly defined genres of hypermasculine representation. The genres of the shows we analyze depend on portrayals of masculinity that have featured absent fathers or at most a fatherhood defined by tyranny or abuse. This

article charts the inclusion of fatherhood and care for children as central features of masculine representation in three recent series within these genres. This development is not only new in the traditionally hypermasculine genres of prison dramas and western narratives, but is also quite significant for the evolution of televisual masculinity.

The changes we highlight are concurrent with several cultural cross-currents related to hegemonic masculinity, including the rise of fourth wave feminism during 2010s, the increasing association of hypermasculinity with the rising tide of White supremacy, and the #MeToo movement in 2017. In the context of these important cultural events, we see televisual hypermasculinity softening: A narrowly defined stoic, emotionless, and violent masculine ideal is becoming more and more difficult to find in contemporary television. As we demonstrate, starting with *Prison Break* as a precursor in the late 2000s and extending into *The Witcher* and *The Mandalorian*, not only do protagonist males take on feminine qualities but the core understanding of masculinity also shifts to include parenting, attitudes that value parenting, and behaviors including nurturing and caretaking seldom previously seen in these hypermasculine genres on television.

Literature Review

Much scholarship on representations of masculinity in U.S. television has focused on the ways in which television programming conveys elements of dominant ideology to its audiences, thus demonstrating a tendency to shift patterns of representation over time as the larger society also experiences social change and ideological adjustment. Among the ideological elements that have been considered most central to scholarship on gender and television representation is the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Scharrer and Blackburn (2018) summarize basic characteristics related to this concept:

> Modern conceptions of masculinity recognize it as socially constructed, multidimensional, and variable (Levant & Richmond, 2007), recast as it intersects with race, class, sexuality, and other components of identity (Kimmel, 1987). Although cultural ideals of masculinity shift to suit a given historical moment (Connell, 2005), there remain a number of core beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors associated with traditional masculine roles (Levant & Richmond, 2007). Drawing from Antonio Gramsci and taken up in feminist and critical theory, hegemonic masculinity identifies commonsense understandings and dominant ideologies that reify gender hierarchies (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Gramsci, 1971; Hanke, 1992). (pp. 152–153)

Scholars of ideological dimensions of fictional television programming have established clear relationships between dominant concepts of hegemonic masculinity and role portrayals in these programs, establishing key traits that have been considered central. As Scharrer and Blackburn (2018) summarize the work of Levant and Richmond (2007), these traits of televisual hegemonic masculinity have included "avoidance of femininity, dominance, importance of sex, restrictive emotionality (suppressing the expression of emotions), negativity toward sexual minorities, and self-reliance" (pp. 152–153), such that "the bulk of evidence . . . points to rather narrow roles for male characters" (p. 154).

Numerous scholars have examined shifts in hegemonic masculinity toward a softer version that centered less on violence, stoicism, and muscular performance. Hatfield (2010) notes that this "soft" masculinity included domestic roles and "egalitarian relationships" with women, construed as "unnatural" due to its inclusion of feminine qualities (p. 529). Faludi (1999) summarizes media lamentations as to how contemporary culture by the late 20th century had "left men with little territory on which to prove themselves besides vanity" (p. 35). As the culture itself shifted its expectations of male roles, media depictions also became less focused on competition and effectivity, and more likely to emphasize compassion, cooperation, and community. These newer versions of hegemonic masculinity have been labeled as the "new man," or "beta masculinity" (Gillam & Wooden, 2008. These trends have been observed in numerous genres of media including Disney Pixar films, situation comedies, and police–detective series. However, while paternal roles have been a part of some genres more than others, these roles have been studied primarily in connection with situation comedies. Hatfield's (2010) examination of contrasting versions of masculinity in *Two and a Half Men* shows how the program combines effeminate masculinity with fatherhood and nurturing. Moorti and Cuklanz (2017) note that male protagonists on *Law and Order: SVU* are "flawed but good fathers" (p. 62) who offer a contrast to criminal fatherhood in that series. However, fatherhood per se has not been a focus of scholarship on televisual genres characterized by hypermasculinity.

In addition to their focus on shifts in dominant conceptions of masculinity, scholars have likewise noted that televisual masculinity adapts to counter socioeconomic conditions that produce anxiety about masculinity (Albrecht, 2015; Kelly, 2018; King, 2009, 2010; Modleski, 2010; Rademacher & Kelly, 2016; Redding, 2014). Constructions of hegemonic masculinity in television as well as other cultural forms have shown a tendency not only to shift over time but simultaneously to be inflected with dominant ideas about race, class, and sexuality, among other sociocultural dimensions. For example, Johnson (2017) theorizes the success of AMC's *Breaking Bad* by situating its antihero and narrative trajectory as elements of an incoherent masculinity that defines white masculinity as "fraught, imperiled, and perpetually marginalized" (p. 15). Johnson notes that "celebrations of white masculinity" function by "offering moral alibis for the exceptional violence of America while simultaneously figuring white men as marginalized in their own right" (p. 15). The construction of White masculinity as victimized is a familiar trope in other popular television series both before and after the 2016 presidential election. In periods such as the post-Vietnam era, for instance, "cultural texts figure victimized, white men as the proper representatives of American identity" (p. 15). Not only do representations of hegemonic masculinity shift over time, but they do so in ways that reflect events and trends in the cultural environment.

As changes in masculinity in TV shows aim to remedy the emasculation caused by socioeconomic conditions (Albrecht, 2015), they have recently challenged archetypes such as the breadwinner. Albrecht (2015) notes that while masculinities have become more fragmented, traditional forms and elements remain in newer televisual constructions. Use of violence in some instances "remasculinized" (p. 67) these characters. However, the way we read the characters in the shows we analyze offers a variation on this theme. Rather than revert to violence or aggression to reclaim their masculinity, the series we examine retain these elements and combine them with nurturing behaviors and paternal roles. In the context of scholarship pointing to representations of hegemonic masculinity as endeavoring to remasculinize heroic figures within textual narratives, the inclusion of parenting and nurturing as defining features of masculinity points toward a textual strategy that relies less and less on the erasure of the feminine and instead defines

hypermasculinity in these genres in a significantly new way. Rather than portraying an unnatural masculinity, the series we analyze combine the traits of traditional hegemonic masculinity with those of caretaking and fatherhood.

Prison Break: The Importance of Fatherhood

The prison genre has been a staple of Hollywood production, responsible for more than 300 feature-length films by the early 2000s (Mason, 2005). Only recently, in part due to the less restrictive production environment of cable, has the prison genre expanded onto television with several popular series. Thus, any analysis of this genre in the U.S. market must start with a discussion of its history in Hollywood film. Mason (2005) examines the Hollywood genre in Foucauldian terms, as a "dominant regime of representation" (p. 194) that is effectively a discursive construction highlighting dominance and control of the prisoner by the environment, and emphasizing dehumanization of the prisoner through incarceration. Mason asserts that "the TV prison drama offered the nostalgic recreation of an 'authentic' virile and primal masculine community" in which "real men have not been domesticated" (p. 165). Thus, the prison genre has been one that offers a hypermasculine world into which femininity does not intrude. Hollywood representations of prison society focused on men's humanity and value, but seldom on their specific relationship to patriarchy or paternity, and seldom to women or children. The more recently developed television series also reflect a traditionally masculine society in which men interact mainly with other men.

The first of these series, *Oz*, offered a bleak vision of male prison as a place in which violence, gangs, drugs, and hatred prevailed. Its popular six-season run ended just two years before the pilot of *Prison Break* and offered the only notable television precursor in the prison genre. Jarvis (2004) argues that the series *Oz* focuses on dominance through violence, and therefore treats the male body as one in which the dichotomy of subject and object are played out through scenarios of incursion and violation. Nonetheless, it begins with "extreme violence constructed as validating the hegemonic masculinity of the prison and central to the inmate hierarchy" (Mason, 2005, p. 10). Schneeweis (2018) echoes these central observations of masculinity in *Oz*, noting that "the construction of masculinity in *Oz* shifts the idealized definition of Western hegemonic masculinity, or simplifies it, to entail authority, dominance, and control" (p. 144). The performance of these roles by gay and bisexual characters was responsible for much of the series' critical acclaim. At the same time, she argues that the series failed in its treatment of Black male masculinity, because "it repeats discursive practices in which violence and bodily pain are glorified, whereas bonding and the feminine are 'deadly problematic'" (p. 144).

Thus, whereas *Oz* offered an innovative approach to masculinity by combining the elements such as physical objectification that have usually been mapped onto female bodies and considered as part of mainstream constructions of femininity, its reconsideration of masculinity did not venture far into the realm of parenting roles, or even of feminizing the personalities of its characters. Notably, some inmates in *Oz* were fathers. However, for the most part fathers played a more familiar role with respect to their children in crime genres: The criminal and abusive behavior of fathers produced criminal, violent, and dysfunctional sons. Father–son relationships in this series remained primarily a terrain on which the usual scenarios of revenge and violence could be played out.

Prison Break, the earliest of the three series we analyze in this article, was created by Paul Scheuring and aired on Fox during 2005–2009, and was revived for one additional season in 2017. This series framed fatherhood/paternity as core elements of the masculinity of its protagonists, thus effecting a shift in hegemonic masculinity within the prison genre. In this section, we document this shift and outline its parameters. The series offers a precursor to the deeper and more dramatic shift seen in the two contemporary series analyzed in the next section: Although fatherhood is mentioned and is depicted as important to the protagonists and other characters, the series did not venture further into specific representations of nurturing behavior on the part of paternal figures.

The first season of *Prison Break* "consistently attracted an average of 10 million viewers per week and led the debuts" in its first season ("*Prison Break's* Big Debut," 2006). According to Parrot Analytics (2017), the series reached sixth in overall U.S. audience demand on May 6, 2017. The series plot centers on two brothers, Lincoln Burrows and Michael Scofield, who are repeatedly imprisoned together and separately, and who create and participate in elaborate schemes for escape. After Lincoln, the older brother, is framed and wrongfully convicted, Michael demonstrates the highest level of filial devotion by deliberately robbing a bank to join his brother in prison and eventually help him break out. Although the brothers do escape, the following seasons entail a series of captures necessitating further escapes. *Prison Break* is chronologically the first of the three series we analyze in this article, and we argue that it represents an initial shift toward the inclusion of questions of paternity and family relationships into the prison drama, a genre otherwise marked by violent hypermasculinity and homosocial relationships in the absence of women, romantic relationships, or families.

Compared with the earlier prison series *Oz* (1997–2003), paternal status and especially father–son relationships are featured more prominently, and sons are much more likely to be young children or teenagers compared with the mostly adult (and imprisoned) sons in *Oz*. *Prison Break* establishes that fatherhood is an important element of masculinity, from which even the most hardened criminals can derive pride and a sense of human connection, but it does not venture into the details of relationship development. Here, paternity has not yet developed into nurturing behavior, although it does include emotive elements such as responsibility, devotion, and pride. In *Prison Break*, whereas paternity status is revealed for many central characters, relationships between fathers and their sons prove elusive and are granted very little screen time. Because of its popularity and its place within the TV prison genre as a show that features fatherhood for numerous central characters, analyzing this show is significant to capture the ways in which these characterizations confirm or challenge existing televisual gender roles.

Questions of paternity crop up repeatedly in *Prison Break* and constitute significant plot elements at some points. Most centrally, starting with the pilot episode of Season 1, Lincoln's son LJ is introduced as a character whose feelings about his father take up a good deal of attention in the episode's narrative (Scheuring, 2005). As the series begins, Lincoln is already in prison. LJ's first appearance in the pilot episode is in court, where he witnesses his uncle Michael plead guilty to armed bank robbery. Later, in a confrontational conversation with his mother (Lisa), LJ denounces his stepfather and declares, "I don't have a father" (Scheuring, 2005, 23:28). His feelings of abandonment due to Lincoln's conviction and imprisonment are on display and are implicitly blamed for his poor decision making and illegal activity. Lisa takes LJ to visit Lincoln in prison to obtain "some fatherly advice" (33:39) and Lincoln tries to explain that

LJ's behavior shows that he doesn't love himself. Although LJ might be trying to punish Lincoln for abandoning him, Lincoln takes the more adult position and tries to convince LJ that he needs to take responsibility for his actions and do what is best for himself. While LJ initially proves unable to see beyond his anger, announcing in response that Lincoln is "already dead to me" (Scheuring, 2005, 35:17). In a later episode, as Lincoln faces almost certain death by execution, LJ declares his love for Lincoln and expresses hope that they will see each other again.

As is characteristic of father–son relationships in *Prison Break*, there is very little direct dialogue between Lincoln and LJ. However, the strength of the bond between them is repeatedly emphasized and is an important plot device. LJ is repeatedly used as a lure by Lincoln's enemies, in the hopes that they can capture or kill Lincoln when he meets or rescues his son. Meanwhile, LJ never gives up seeking out his father, and jeopardizes his safety by exposing him to enemy plots. Although a stable situation from which he can parent LJ continually seems to elude Lincoln, he is repeatedly depicted as searching for a way to be a better father. Thus, Lincoln's attitude toward parenting, his desire to parent, and the value he places on his son's future are depicted as characteristics of a positive masculinity, alongside Lincoln's more traditional masculine characteristics of stoicism, inability to articulate his feelings, and willingness to use violence to achieve his goals.

Lincoln's version of hegemonic masculinity is not only physical, but also focused on a desire to parent and to be united with his child. The same is true for the series' other protagonist, Lincoln's brother Michael, who also faces parenting challenges. In Season 5, Michael's own son Mike Jr. also confronts feelings of abandonment and loyalty, as his stepfather is revealed to be Poseidon, Michael's archenemy. Michael has never met his son, who instead lives with his mother Sarah and stepfather. Here, the father–son relationship is again characterized by little face-to-face contact and even less direct dialogue, yet a strong sense of connection drives the plot and places Michael Senior at risk. Notably, in Episode 7 ("Wine Dark Sea"), a severely wounded Michael's sole request from Sarah on regaining consciousness is for her to show him a picture of his son (Scheuring & Wilmott, 2017, 17:36). In Episode 9, father and son meet, and Michael is able to save Mike Jr. from harm (Scheuring, 2017). Meanwhile, as stepfather, Poseidon is truly evil, saying (falsely) that the boy's mother is dead and trying to brainwash Mike. When Mike becomes totally confused, yells at Michael, and calls Poseidon his dad, Bagwell concludes that a man who would manipulate a child against his own father "deserves to die" (Scheuring, 2017, 16:46). The father–child bond is underscored as central to a man's identity.

Although the relationships are not well developed given that the prison settings preclude normal father–son interactions or activities, paternity is so ever present in *Prison Break* that it becomes an important defining characteristic of masculinity. Throughout all five seasons, fatherhood is represented in a range of modes through many characters. Season 5, ending in 2017, concludes with the surprise discovery that Bagwell, a deranged fellow inmate who commits some of the most gruesome acts of violence in the series, is himself father to David Martin (aka "Whip"), a close friend of the Burrows brothers from prison. Bagwell declares that discovering his son is "a glorious thing indeed" (Scheuring, 2017, 10:50). The discovery of their relationship is important to both, and David declares to Bagwell, moments before dying, that he is truly grateful for having him as his family (Scheuring, 2017, 32:29). Even secondary characters including

Sucre and C-note have young children, although they are seldom able to spend time with them due to an array of plot twists and turns.

In this series, real men not only are fathers, but their paternal status is meaningful to them and they care about their children. Different from *Oz*, where criminal fathers raise criminal sons and manipulate them in criminal plots, in *Prison Break,* good men try to work against their criminal inmate status to give something meaningful to their children. Furthermore, the masculine suffering that has defined the prison genre is expanded beyond the physical to include emotional suffering caused by separation from children. The struggle to be a good parent is depicted here as central to hegemonic masculinity. More recent developments of paternal narratives and relationships in contemporary western-derived TV series illustrate television's increased ability to elaborate not only on attitudes but also on the behaviors of nurturing paternal figures toward their children within the frame of a traditionally hypermasculine genre.

The Mandalorian and *The Witcher*: The Centrality of Caring

The Mandalorian and *The Witcher* are streaming shows that appeared in November 2019 on Disney+ and in December 2019 on Netflix streaming services, respectively. After its release, *The Mandalorian* quickly gained popularity. According to Parrot Analytics, a content analysis company, *The Mandalorian* became the most streamed show in the United States across all streaming platforms after its release in 2019 until mid-January 2020 (Parrot Analytics, 2019). Merely a month after the release of *The Mandalorian*, however, *The Witcher* overtook the title and became "the most in-demand TV series globally across all platforms over the last 30 days (January 14 to February 12). It has held that top spot since it dethroned Disney Plus' '*The Mandalorian*'" (Parrot Analytics, 2020, para. 2). The popularity of both shows as number one in the world after their release is a mark of their wide reach—and it is one of the many reasons why it is crucial to analyze them for content, representation, and imagery. As Scharrer and Blackburn (2018) note, with regard to gender, the "implications of television viewing in totality are still relevant in today's media environment" (p. 152). Consequently, analyzing the two most streamed shows is essential to assess the ways in which gender is represented in contemporary television.

Analyzing *The Mandalorian* and *The Witcher* poses some methodological challenges. First, their respective streaming services released these shows at the end of 2019, and at the time of this writing, there is only one season of each show, with subsequent seasons under development. Although character performances analyzed here may be different in the future seasons of both shows, it is clear that the performances in the first seasons have had wide-reaching impact. Contrasting the performances of these protagonists against the backdrop of other tropes of hyperviolence, stoicism, and loner masculinity in the western genre, we explicate the ways in which the two title characters challenge these common archetypes by foregrounding caring and nurturing behaviors of the title character. This development is similar to the ways in which *Prison Break* effected a shift in the framing of hegemonic masculinity in the prison genre by including fatherhood and paternal relationships as significant elements. In the more recent examples of *The Mandalorian* and *The Witcher*, however, specific acts of nurturance and care are depicted as central to their respective hero personas.

The Star Wars universe is a fantasy world where the characters can travel through vast distances of space at the speed of light and can shoot lasers. First conceived by George Lucas in the late 1970s, it became one of the most well-known fictional worlds as new movies, shows, books, and games were released under its banner over the decades. *The Mandalorian* is one such show. *The Witcher* universe, on the other hand, is a medieval fantasy world where magic and sorcery are common across imagined kingdoms. The setting and the characters were first brought to life in the stories of Andrzej Sapkowski in the 1980s, and then the franchise gained popularity in 2010s through the release of award-winning games and comic books. Although the two series take place in different settings, both fit into the mold of the western genre. In the following analysis, we consider their contribution to, and divergence from, that genre. According to Mitry (1963), the western is a genre "whose action, situated in the American West, is consistent with the atmosphere, the values, and the conditions of existence in the Far West between 1840 and 1900" (p. 276, as cited in Altman, 1987, p. 95). Cawelti (1970) suggests that the western genre depends on a dichotomous relationship between the hero and the villain as mutually exclusive—establishing the relationship as competitive and incompatible. In its origin, the western storyline depends on pushing civilized American capitalism to the uncivilized frontiers of the Far West. Clashes between the uncivilized and the civilized aspects of the storyline characterize this "push," which constructs the representatives of the either side through hyperviolent masculinity (Kollin, 2001, p. 562).

As such, the western is "propelled by masculinity and a particular conception of American national identity that revolves around individualism and aggression" (Roberts, 1997, p. 45). Because a sense of conflict and the resolution of that conflict through violence are essential parts of the western genre, this assemblage is tied to masculinity and the performance of aggression and individualism as defining characteristics of that masculinity. Although there have been isolated examples of representations of fatherhood in classic Hollywood westerns such as *Shane* (Stevens, 1953) as well as revisionist westerns such as *True Grit* (Hathaway, 1969), this trope was never well developed and did not follow into televisual examples until quite recently. *The Witcher* and *The Mandalorian* effect a generic shift toward the inclusion of nurturance by protagonists toward children in their care as a positive direction for hegemonic masculinity.

Both shows include all of the elements of the traditional western genre, but they alter the mise-en-scène. In a classical western, the mise-en-scène of the American West pits *civilized* cowboys and *uncivilized* Native Americans against each other in bouts of conflict. Both contemporary shows mirror this contrasting structure. *The Mandalorian* has the recently defeated Galactic Empire as the uncivilized side in the overarching storyline. This symbolism is enforced by the dirty and old armor of empire troopers, their inaccurate weapons, and how the similarity of their armor erases individuality and highlights the sense of a generalized other. In contrast, the Mandalorian and his clan present themselves with high-technology armor and weapons that are effective and accurate, customized for each individual, shiny, and well maintained. Instead of U.S. nationalism, there is an adherence to and glorification of the Mandalorian creed, summarized by the phrase "this is the way."

The Witcher also builds on these tropes in its own universe. Witchers, while portrayed as solitary fighters, are in constant conflict not only against monsters but also against humans. The show portrays both monsters and humans as uncivilized in their own ways. Monsters are uncivilized because some are not even sentient, and they are dehumanized in appearance as well as in performance. The monsters that are sentient

only care for their own selfish interests and do not adhere to the rules of the society in which they live in. The show portrays humans as uncivilized because most are inferior to witchers not only in their weapons and fighting skills but also in their disdain and prejudgment against Geralt of Rivia, with whom we as the audience sympathizes. Thus, the beliefs of humans against Geralt of Rivia come across as overtly discriminatory.

The Mandalorian takes place in a futuristic setting that includes space travel and lasers. The show follows the adventures of a character known only as the Mandalorian (sometimes referred to as Mando by his peers), a bounty hunter in the Star Wars fantasy universe. Bounty hunters, as professionals, are highly trained and specialized fighters who hunt monsters, fugitives, competitors, or political opponents for various interest groups in the Star Wars universe. While there is a *guild* that connects the bounty hunters, they tend to work by themselves, mostly due to a lack of trust in others, but also to preclude having to share the bounty with other hunters. The Witcher's world-making consists of knights, kings, queens, and monsters, following Geralt of Rivia and documenting his adventures. Geralt is a witcher by profession, which means that he hunts monsters for money. The monsters in the witcher universe reflect a synthesis of different mythologies; however, their common trait is that they are too difficult for a regular human being to handle. Witchers, on the other hand, go through rigorous training as well as rituals that *mutate* their bodies, senses, reflexes, and abilities that help them hunt monsters. Consequently, common folk consider witchers to be more monster than human and frequently treat them with disdain. In this sense, witchers are highly specialized bounty hunters. Geralt specifically, and witchers in general, fit into the "lone ranger" archetype.

Because of their place in the timeline, one might expect these shows' content to have a stark contrast. However, both have all the hallmarks of a classical western. Both of these shows challenge the conventions of masculinity by playing on the tropes of the western genre, which emerged as a reactionary movement against the centralization of women in literature in the 19th century (Chirica, 2018). Westerns portrayed a caricatured version of masculinity that strongly depended on violence, tyranny, and irresponsible relationships with others and with alcohol (Wedding, 2000). However, this portrayal of masculinity took root in the United States and became an embodiment of the sense of freedom men desired, especially from domesticity as represented by women and children (Chirica, 2018). Although these shows tap into these traditional genre narratives, they rework established tropes of masculinity. Although conflict resolution through violence is still the main driving force of the plot in both shows, challenges to the performances of hyperviolent masculinity mainly come in the form of the relationship between the protagonist and a child in his care. In The Mandalorian, the child is called simply "the Child"—the enigmatic character popularized as "baby Yoda," due to its resemblance to the well-known Star Wars character, Yoda. In The Witcher, the child is Cirilla, often referred as Ciri for short, a girl with magical abilities inherited from her mother.

The relationship between the protagonist and the child in their care is not the result of heteronormative familial ties in The Mandalorian or The Witcher. Rather, it is the result of saving a life and taking responsibility for that life. Such a way of relating to family replaces the common classical western trope of the tyrannical father figure (Saunders, 2001). Such a figure, consumed with the anxiety of losing control of his family—which he narcissistically sees as an extension of himself—imposes his will on the familial relationships through the erasure of the feminine (Colman, 2000). This erasure encompasses not only persons who represent femininity but also aspects of femininity within the protagonist. Consequently,

the tyrannical patriarch does not engage in acts of responsibility or nurturing or any other way of relating that can be perceived as feminine. Both shows replace this kind of father figure with a one that is caring, nurturing, and responsible for the life and well-being of the child in his care. These changes in the paternal role, we argue, constitute a significant genre shift in masculine representation.

The audience first witnesses the relationship between the Child and the Mandalorian in the end of the first episode (Favreau et al., 2019), when he teams up with another bounty hunter to get to the target, which is revealed as the Child. While the other bounty hunter, a droid named IG-11, tries to kill the Child, as was the mission, the Mandalorian destroys the droid to save the child. A budding relationship is marked as the Mandalorian reaches out with his finger to the Child's crib, and the Child responds in kind. This is the first instance of an uncharacteristic performance of masculinity by the Mandalorian.

In *The Witcher*, Ciri and Geralt meet very briefly in person in season one (Gaub et al., 2019). However, not only do we witness how the relationship begins but we also see that Geralt is primarily motivated by his wish to find and save Ciri. Geralt's purpose is to protect her from an impending doom— that is, the invasion of the Nilfgaardian Empire to pursue Ciri for her powers. In the fourth episode, the audience sees Geralt attend a wedding between Princess Pavetta, daughter of Queen Calanthe of Cintra, and a prince in an attempt at strategic matchmaking between two powerful kingdoms (Schmidt, Sapkowski, De Barra, & Lopez, 2019). However, a seemingly unknown knight by the name of Dunny, who looks like a monster, disrupts the wedding and invokes the Law of Surprise to assert his right to marry Pavetta. A fight ensues, triggering Pavetta's magical powers, which in turn threaten the life of everyone in the wedding hall. After Geralt stops Pavetta and saves everyone's life, Pavetta's yet to be born daughter, Ciri, is bonded to Geralt.[1] When the Nilfgaardian Imperial Army starts to advance in search of Ciri for her powers, both Geralt and Ciri seek out each other—which ends up defining Geralt's actions, and consequently his performance of masculinity.

This diversion from the performance of stereotypical hyperviolent masculinity takes root in the other episodes, as the relationship between the protagonist and the child in his care deepens. Both protagonists depart from the stoic and uncaring masculinity that their environment, profession, or various other relationships demand from them. Instead, they go to great lengths, such as risking their lives or turning on their allies, to live up to their responsibilities to the child. This associates the stereotypical rescue narrative with a nurturing paternal narrative and expands the circumference of masculinity beyond hyperviolence and the absent father figure. In the seventh episode of *The Witcher*, Geralt risks his life to approach Cintra to invoke the Law of Surprise and to take Ciri under his care (Schmidt, Sapkowski, Ostrowski, Jobst, & Sakharov, 2019, 5:32). Speaking with the court advisor in a secret meeting, Geralt says

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[1] The invocation of this particular law ends up being a pivotal moment for Geralt and Ciri. The Law of Surprise claims that a deed as grand as saving a life requires a repayment as grand in return. However, the repayment needs to be something the person who is doing the repayment does not yet know he or she has. Dunny claims that he had saved the life of Queen Calanthe's late husband and by invoking the Law of Surprise, he has the right to marry Pavetta. Geralt, sarcastically, invokes the law of surprise as a repayment for saving everyone's life at the wedding, and that is the reason why Ciri's and Geralt's destiny are intertwined by the law of surprise.

that he saw the Nilfgaardian Army preparing to attack Cintra in search of Ciri, and while the kingdom does not stand a chance, he wants to take Ciri away before the worst happens. In the same meeting, he barely escapes assassins sent by Queen Calanthe to keep Geralt away from Ciri. Despite knowing that, Geralt returns to Cintra, confronting the queen in an effort to take Ciri into his protection despite open threats from her guards.

In these scenes, Geralt challenges hyperviolent masculinity in two ways. First, his emphasis on Ciri's safety and security in the midst of impending threats against his life leads the audience to understand that he cares deeply about Ciri—even at the cost of his alliances and potentially of his life. The audience has another glimpse of this at the end of the seventh episode, where Geralt fights his way into Cintra under the invasion of the Nilfgaardian Army to save Ciri. Second, Geralt challenges the tyrannical father figure trope found in classical westerns in his conversation with Queen Calanthe. In the conversation, we learn that Ciri's mother, Pavetta, long ago passed away, and Queen Calanthe does not want to give Ciri to Geralt's care because she is the only thing that is left to her from Pavetta's memory. Geralt says that the only way to ensure Pavetta's memory lives on is to make sure Ciri is safe from Nilfgaard (Schmidt et al., 2019). The important point here is that Geralt's performance does not depend on entitlement or imposing his will on Queen Calanthe. Rather, at every turn of the conversation, he accepts the queen's premises and adapts his rationale to what she says. This kind of persuasion is significantly different from the performances of masculinity in the western genre where the tyrannical father figure establishes his narcissistic authority especially through the erasure of the feminine. In this sense, Geralt's role as the father figure is not that of a parent who raises a child. Rather, he takes responsibility for the child when he needs to, in a way that does not rely on erasing the feminine or imposing his authority through violence and coercion.

The relationship between the Mandalorian and the Child develops in the same vein. At the end of the second episode, the Child saves the Mandalorian from certain death by using "The Force," an innate ability to control the world with the mind (Favreau, Lucas, & Famuyiwa, 2019, 19:50). After saving the Mandalorian, the Child falls tired and goes into a deep sleep. This is the first instance where we see a profound concern the Mandalorian has for the Child, as he rocks his crib and gently checks on him several times. Through the emphasis on this relationship, the Mandalorian does not see this mission as just another bounty. In the third episode, the relationship deepens. After the Mandalorian delivers the Child to the client, who was a warlord, the Mandalorian repeatedly asks what they will do with the Child, and the warlord repeatedly reminds him that such a question goes against the reputation of the Mandalorian. His persistence provides evidence of the depth of his concern.

After the Mandalorian returns to his ship, the absence of the Child affects him. He shuts down the ship and storms the warlord's safe house to rescue the Child. He finds the Child strapped to what looks like an experiment table, and asks the scientist in the room if the Child was harmed. The Mandalorian spares the scientist, grabs the Child and leaves. Later in the episode, the Mandalorian faces the planet's entire guild for betraying the guild by rescuing the Child. After fighting ensues between the guild members and the Mandalorian, the audience witnesses a touching scene. His weapons are out of ammunition and he is cornered in a small vessel with the guild members approaching. The Mandalorian hunkers down over the Child and stares at him. It is not clear now if he accepts death and wants to die looking at the Child, or if he anticipates something else. It is important, however, that all he does is to look at the Child, who returns

his gaze. The serenity and tranquility and the depth of their mutual gaze is in stark contrast to the lasers and chaos in the background and the implied approach of death. When other Mandalorians rescue them, the audience knows the relationship between the Child and the Mandalorian will last throughout the show (Favreau, Lucas, & Famuyiwa, 2019).

The Mandalorian's character arc is intertwined with that of the Child, who influences the Mandalorian through their relationship. The relationship is interactive, caring, and nurturing. The Mandalorian does not dispense violence in a hyperviolent masculine performance; rather, his primary concern is the well-being of the Child and the maintenance of their relationship. The Mandalorian also goes against individualism, which is a part of the hyperviolent masculine gender performance. He frequently teams up with others to save the Child, but also puts the Child's interests and needs before his own. His relationship with Cara Dune, his consideration of the Child's safety before his own, and his relationship with Kuiil and IG-11 are all ways in which the Mandalorian emphasizes a sense of community and care to overcome challenges.

In both shows, the world around the protagonist reacts negatively to the aforementioned challenges to their gender roles. Other characters, including their peers, launch attempts on their lives because the protagonists did not rely on tropes of hegemonic masculinity. For instance, the Mandalorian was not supposed to rescue the Child after he turned him over as a bounty. He was supposed to see it merely as another job. Similarly, Geralt was not supposed to go back to Cintra to rescue Ciri; Queen Calanthe had banned him from the city. Moreover, these rescues differ significantly from the *rescue* trope common on television, such as the one common in the melodramatic genre, where the rescue focuses on the hero and highlights his actions (Hardy, 2008). Instead of highlighting the masculine traits of the protagonist, these rescues reinforce the relationships among the title character, the child, and those around them. The rescue ceases to be a trope and ends up a springboard for future development of a substantial relationship that subverts tropes of masculinity associated with traditional rescue.

These shows present a departure from how the western genre has so far displayed masculinity. Breaking their alliance with hegemonic masculinity reliant on hypermasculine violence and erasure of the feminine, these characters develop profound relationships with the child in their care and others around them. Surviving because of established relationships based on empathy and care in the face of threat and erasure only strengthens the bond between protagonist and child. In direct contrast to tyranny and erasure of the feminine, the characters embrace gender performances of qualities socially designated as feminine—nurturing, caring, and engaging dialogue and cooperation.

Conclusion

In this analysis, we have shown how three recent television shows have challenged generic tropes of masculinity including stoicism, the use of violence, erasure of the feminine, and dysfunctional relationships with tyrannical father figures. Although such relationships have been the fixture of portrayals of masculinity in the western and prison genres in television and film, these series were able to challenge those tropes of masculinity by constructing relationships based on care, nurturing, and acknowledgement rather than on tyranny, coercion, and erasure. The shows approach the issue in different ways: Although *Prison Break* emphasizes fatherhood per se, *The Mandalorian* and *The Witcher* highlight paternal relationship

through protection and care. Despite this difference, these relationships challenge the tropes of hegemonic masculinity for the characters in all three shows.

These findings are significant for several reasons. First, the adoption of feminine gender performances into traditionally masculine roles, especially in roles defined by hyperviolence, stoicism, emotional distance, and erasure of the feminine, confirms that hegemonic masculinity is not only flexible but also actively adapts to the current sociocultural context. Although this flexibility has been observed in prior research, the focus on paternity and paternal caring has received relatively little attention in television programming or in related scholarship. This article establishes the centrality of a bond between male protagonists and children as an emerging characteristic of even the most hypermasculine genres on television. Here, in these three examples, among the aspects of femininity that have encroached on representations of hegemonic masculinity is the status of the male hero as parent, or at least as a nurturer whose care can provide emotional support for a child. Men's parental status is defined as important to their masculine identity, or to state it in different terms, the hero's ability to be a father or to nurture is definitive of his status as hero. These points further show that fictional media is a vital space of analysis to understand these social dynamics in flux.

This specific shift toward centrality in parenting roles within hypermasculine genres is a recent development in television. Our analysis demonstrates that representations challenging the current conception of hegemonic masculinity by incorporating caring and connections are circulating and are becoming more widespread. It remains to be seen whether these genres can further expand paternal roles by enhancing the relationship and parenting beyond a frustrated hope, a few words of fatherly advice, or a desperate rescue of the child. Each series makes strides in the direction of emphasizing male protagonists' relationships to children as core defining elements of hegemonic masculinity.

Future research can explore how these shifts continue to develop as feminism becomes increasingly visible in popular culture. Based on our analyses, fatherhood and paternal nurturing will continue to extend into the hypermasculine genres in which these elements have previously played very little part. Our examples emphasize either paternity/fatherhood or demonstrations of nurturing behavior. Further extensions of this trope of masculine caring for children might combine the role of actual father with the depiction of specific acts of nurturing. If we are to continue to see fatherhood depicted as something definitive to masculine identity, similar to the way in which motherhood has been understood as central to women's roles in many realms including the political, future research must continue to pose questions about the implications of these status changes, as well as the relationships among the concepts of value, effectivity, and gender. It will be important to identify remaining discursive locations in which hegemonic masculinity continues to be defined in exclusion of parental status or performance, as the developments examined here seem on track to marginalize such conceptions over the coming decades.

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