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TONIC MASCULINITY IN THE POST-GENDER ERA

Miles Groth



ABSTRACT

The myth of male power has been associated almost exclusively with sexuality understood in the context of the quite-recent notion of gender. Following a period of much-needed interest in the lives of women, there is a resurgence of interest in male experience and masculinity. Tonic masculinity is an emerging new honesty about male experience at this time. The word tonic has two senses that I want to apply to masculinity. One, found in music, refers to the home key of a composition. The other denotes an invigorating substance or influence. I believe that masculinity is re-emerging of necessity to provide both a sense of harmony as well as much needed positive energy to help heal an ailing social body.

Keywords: boys, males, masculinity, men, tonic masculinity

PREAMBLE

You are probably reading this indoors, in your house or apartment. You are likely reading it on a laptop screen.

At a time when much employment and quite a lot of leisure involves such a device, it is worth recalling that men designed it, its architecture and software. Having launched the communications satellites and built the transmission towers that relay their signals, men made the device viable, receiving and transmitting data. Men also installed the vast cable systems overhead and underground that connect us for business and social purposes via the internet. They ran the coaxial cable to your house.

Whether at home or your office, the physical environment in which you find yourself was built by men. Men hauled and hoisted the beams of the building you are sitting in, laid the brick, built the walls, installed the mechanicals, built the stairways, put down the tiles or carpet, and moved the furniture into place, including the bed you will have sex on later. As you read this, men are putting up dry wall and installing windows and air-conditioning ductwork and their machinery, painting and plastering walls, sanding floors, installing and repairing plumbing, and resolving computer glitches. If you are in a high-rise building, recall that men installed the elevator that lifted you hundreds of feet off the ground to where you are sitting as well as the array of stairways that are there to protect you in the event of an emergency.

As you move from work to home, recall that men dug the tunnels and laid the track for underground and surface mass transit. Men poured the concrete for highways and sidewalks and laid the asphalt for the streets you drive, bicycle, or walk on. They keep the subways and buses operating and repair your automobiles, which they designed. They keep freight and passenger trains moving. Most long-distance and local truck drivers are men. Men built the first seagoing ships and then airships and the airports where thousands of flights now take off and land each day throughout the world. Most pilots are still men.

They built the systems that make the comforts of modern life possible, from reservoirs to the massive conduits that deliver their water to us. They built the underground drainage passages that prevent flooding and sewerage systems that receive our waste. They remove snow and damaged vehicles from roads, and set railroad cars back on track. In most cities, men drive

the buses and taxis.

As you read this, men are lifting and handling millions of heavy parcels and boxes they have unloaded from trucks, boats and trains and have delivered to storage areas. They stack the shelves of supermarkets and other retail outlets. They deliver groceries in big cities such as New York. They haul and lift the bags of garbage from your streets in every imaginable climate.

Men lift and move the dead weight of heavy patients in hospitals and nursing homes. Male orthopedic surgeons reduce fractures of large bones and screw together hip bones, procedures that require large hands and upper body strength.

Men carry people out of burning buildings and bring those who are intoxicated under control in emergency rooms. They are sent out to control rowdy crowds and mediate in civil disputes. Fewer men are being killed in wars these days, but throughout history millions of mostly young men have been sent out to fight and die on front lines for a handful of raging dictators, who mistakenly have served historians as the model for most men. They are the guards and bodyguards of public buildings and powerful and wealthy women and men, whose properties they landscape. Men operate the heavy equipment on farms. They manage and slaughter cattle, mine metals, log trees for lumber, and serve as crews on cargo ships. In factories they often labor only yards away from fiery furnaces. They invented glass and, on Murano, a few still hand-blow masterpieces of transparent, sparkling beauty.

These are males from about age 20 to 60. In bygone days they were as young as ten years old and worked next to their brothers, fathers, uncles and grandfathers in mines and factories and on farms. While technology is making much hands-on work less backbreaking, as long as it required it will be carried out by male bodies for the simple reason that given the number of striated muscle fibers and more numerous nuclei in the muscles of their upper and lower limbs, such bodies are on the whole much stronger than female bodies, regardless of stature. Large hands and feet, wider upper body breadth, and a higher center of gravity optimize the strength. And yet...to be male and to have such a body, we hear, is to exert a poisonous influence in society. The male body is the emblem of so-called toxic masculinity. How did this happen?

THE MALE BODY IN THE POST-GENDER ERA

Destined to do the dirty work, the American male body has usually been covered by the monochrome gray or blue of the worker's uniform or overalls. The body's outlines are hidden. Below the beltline of loose-fitting trousers, two square columns reach toward the ground and rest on heavy shoes. Inside, conducting business, the male body has always been wrapped in equally drab attire, usually a blue, black or brown suit.

After high school, as the boy's body gives way to the grown-up man's body, it has been systematically covered. The junior wrestler's singlet, the basketball player's sleeveless t-shirt and shorts, and the swimmer's or diver's trunks are doffed, replaced by usually baggy, knee-length shorts. Apart from at the beach, a so-called real man still does not display his naked body except in front of the bathroom mirror after showering or in his bedroom. Beginning with the signs of puberty, of course, the adolescent male has been carefully studying the shape of his changing body's shape, but this is a solitary and secret activity performed only for his own interest and benefit.

After World War Two, when families began to decrease in size, only in families where a boy had brothers or a father was he sure how a fully grown body might look. In the contemporary middle-class home, father and son are not expected to shower together, even though a young boy might sneak into the bathroom to watch the procedure of his father shaving. The only exception for the pubescent boy was his high school physical education class where he had an opportunity to observe other developing male bodies. After high school, this might have happened in the military, but in a country without mandatory military service such as ours here in the States, experiences of homosocial living, exploration, observation and familiarization are missing for most men. Only boys who participate in sports really get to know the bodies of non-family males. Common in Europe and Asia, public saunas and bath houses for men are nearly nonexistent except in a few large cities in the States.

Beginning in the mid-to-late 1950s, however, some remarkable changes occurred which have had important consequences for the topic of this contribution. The unclothed male body, which had been seen only in a few Tarzan features from as early as the 1930s, was in view. Coinciding with the appearance of the notion of gender, films for the first time more openly displayed the male body. The items of clothing that changed it all were the jeans and t-shirt of

the cowboy and inner-city tough. Surfer films set on West Coast beaches even revealed the shirtless young male. For the most part they represented the underclass. Their models included the Marlon Brando of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951). The new middle class was embodied by the James Dean of *Rebel without a Cause* (1955). Beginning with Elvis Presley, that body also began to move sexually, even sensually. The suits of early rockers, including the Beatles, were shed and through the Sixties and the Seventies, some all-male rock bands performed shirtless. Think Mick Jagger or Jim Morrison.

The lower body of the rocker, however, remained covered, although tight-fitting, low-rise jeans hinted at the secrets of the sexed male body. While brief frontal nudity had occasionally been allowed in European movies, to the best of my knowledge this has not occurred in mainstream American-made films. When the male genitals were visible in outline, they were flaccid, compressed and harmless. Oddly, the idioms moved from talk of “the family jewels” to “the package” and “the junk.” Not a very flattering linguistic sequence.

There is one notable exception to all this, which requires us to pause for moment: professional wrestling entertainment. In a gladiatorial setting under stage lighting, two or more men enact a free-for-all of pretend fighting. The scenarios are far more brutal even than urban gang violence and hand-to-hand combat in war.

Popular especially beginning with televised matches in the late 1950s, grappling or *lucha libre* is a spectacle that even the esteemed French philosopher of modernity, Roland Barthes, commented on in a surprising essay published in his *Mythologies* in the early 1971.¹ In a boxing ring or cage, or the more expensive octagon of mixed martial arts, the fully exposed male body is on display in a way not seen anywhere else in public. Men in the States do not even appear at beaches undressed to this extent. Men and women flock to these events live and many more watch them on television. More people annually view events of this genre than they do professional football or baseball games.

¹ Professional wrestling live and televised events have more viewers each year than any of the other professional sports, including American football and baseball—about 4,000,000 viewers annually. See <https://www.fightful.com> for data.

A uniquely American phenomenon in origin, such entertainment is now mimicked around the world and by ever-younger males in what is called backyard wrestling or trampoline wrestling.

Performing *kayfabe* when fighting, these men, I contend, are enacting the experience of the male body of everyday heavy work taken to its limits in so many of the settings already mentioned. The wrestlers who feign inflicting and suffering pain are those of the bodies of the same men whose rough labor was described above. The message is only in part about narcissism, however, especially since many are grossly overweight. Others are bodybuilders or former football players, heirs to the myth of the Charles Atlas male who first appeared in tabloids in the 1920s. The scenarios, which are few in number, are predictable and repetitive. The theme is the capacity of the male body not to give in to exhaustion and pain. A cherished champion's belt is coveted as the symbol of having outlasted one's opponent in some way. In choreographed moves, the men portray the male body as gradually weakened and eventually broken by physical effort. But all of this is not what it appears to be. The contests are not similar to boxing, mixed martial arts and the like where blood is shed. Above all, it is not about the minority of males whose sadistic tendencies are cited as emblematic of the myth of male aggressive power associated with so-called toxic masculinity. What, then, is really going on?

A closer look reveals that there is a second, more important message in this *commedia* than aggression. The performance is above all ironic. The show is, in fact, about men protecting each other from real harm while pretending to damage each other. In order to maximally simulate aggression, the grapplers must look out for each other's bodies with the greatest skill. Endlessly rehearsed sequences of a very few basic moves (tumbling, throws, faked punches and kicks) allow for only a bit of improvisation, which would put the performers at real risk of injury. These are dramas that require the display of the limits of the male body in order to remind us that male aggressiveness has always been chiefly directed by men and boys against other men and boys. The themes are endurance and what Wilfred Owen called "the pity of war" (Andrews, 2014). What is revealed is more than just flesh. Among spectators, the verisimilitude is acknowledged but most are expected to take for real the display of male bodies worked over and taken to their limit—but not just in the theatre of the spectacle. It all reminds us of what the male body endures every day when it labors in dangerous and difficult situations, from mining to

heavy lifting. The professional wrestling entertainer especially displays what is going on under the uniform of the blue-collar worker especially. Behind the gimmicks (the roles) and basic themes such as competition, betrayal and injustice is a more important narrative. The spectacle is a surprising revelation of how men in fact feel about the roles they have been forced to play, from the laborer at work in the most undesirable situations but also as *homo furens* on the battlefield. Obscured by the mayhem and theatricality it is an example of what I take to be an emerging new honesty about male experience and what I term tonic masculinity.

The myth of male power has been associated almost exclusively with sexuality understood in the context of the quite-recent notion of gender, but this has obscured the point much as the male uniforms have. The notion of toxic masculinity has focused on displays of aggression against women in social and sexual settings, but I would contend that it misses a meaning that is more fundamental which society has been reluctant to admit. And that is the story of aggression and most men, who are in contention mostly with other men.

Some understanding may come from considering a few other changes in how the male body is presented and may not be presented. They include very recent interest on the part of many males from adolescence on through late-middle-age who cultivate habits of physical training—working out—and a greater willingness to reveal their bodies, albeit more modestly than girls and women do. What is the source of the changes I have been describing and, in some cases, only hinting at? The answer, it seems to me, is the notion of gender and its disappearance as an explanatory concept.

The term *gender* was not in use except in grammar books until about 1945, when among psychologists it was described as “the socialized obverse of sex” (Bentley, 1945).² Gender was said to point to what sets human beings apart from domestic animals. Gender dimorphism referred to physiognomic features that traditional societies have always exaggerated, beginning with

² Professor Bentley notes that along with language, skill and play, gender (“gendering”) makes the period of age 2-3 to 6-7 “momentous” for the rest of the life course. In matters of “grouping, playing, exercising, reciting and the like,” the “qualifying terms” ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, which are associated simplistically by the preschool child with the physically observable differences of sexual dimorphism (male and female) are psychosocial or sociocultural. Here the comparison is made between human beings and domesticated animals.

primary and secondary sexual characteristics and extending to dress. Exaggerating visible sex differences has always been important in human beings since sexual attraction is mediated for the most part visually and not by olfactory cues, as in other mammals. The danger of confusing one sex with another is avoided by highlighting body parts, hair styling, and make-up (usually only in females). What came to be known as gender identity was important in the context of increased public interest in same-sex attraction, a central topic of 19th-century sexologists. Androgyny became chic. Ironically, however, the confounding of sex with gender led to seeing human beings solely in anatomical and biological terms, since when gender becomes entirely fluid, as we are told it is, the concept becomes superfluous. That has led us into our post-gender era.

The most egregious example of conflating sex and gender is the so-called sex change. Drastic surgical procedures are performed as a medical cure for gender dysphoria, itself a psychiatric term defined as a feeling of confusion about the self-perception of one's body as male or female. Masculinity and femininity are presentations of one's sex. For the most part, they are based entirely on anatomy. The popularity of the rhetoric of so-called bisexuality has added to the mixture of self-perception with social expectation about what is normal for a given sex.

One of the necessary conditions of the gender era was greater openness about sexuality, while at the same time the body increasingly had to become an object of suspicion. If gender was somehow performed and independent of one's sex, the genitalia became problematic. But only they reveal the reality of one's sex. Soon came the idea that one could change one's sex. Of course, that is impossible, since sex is genetic. No matter. Grade school children are now routinely told that there are no differences between males and females, boys and girls, men and women, even before sex differences have been perceived and the maturing body has produced the male- or female-sexed body following *semenarche* and *menarche*

TONIC MASCULINITY

My theme may now be presented against this brief outline of the history of the experience of most males and the appearance and disappearance of the notion of gender. It is my view that, at this time, following a period of much needed interest in the lives of women, there is a resurgence of interest in male experience and masculinity, and that it is poised to act as a much-needed *pharmakon* during a time of often baffling rhetoric based on category errors

regarding biology (sex) and current psychosocial and sociocultural actualities (gender) described above. This is not the place to propose how best conceptual clarity might be restored in the context of powerful ideological and political battles. I leave that to much further discussion. I want to argue briefly only for what a dose of tonic masculinity might provide by way of a cure—a course of treatment—for a great deal of mystification and often ironic ambiguity about sex and gender in developed Western cultures.

But first a word about so-called toxic masculinity. The notion is the stepchild of hegemonic masculinity, an expression that has been in use chiefly in academic circles since about 1980. It was popularized by Robert W. Connell in his book, *Masculinities* (1995), the notion of hegemony having been adapted from the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). In his theory of gender, Connell (who transitioned to the feminine gender in his 60s) claimed that, like capitalism in Gramsci's analysis, masculinity as embodied in males had led to the demoralization of society, chiefly by oppressing women via a sociocultural institution termed *the patriarchy*. This is the work of a social scientist, and it is important to realize that, as such, it is a hypothesis. That the sun moves around the earth was also a hypothesis. I have suggested that so-called toxic masculinity does not answer to the experience of most men and that this is related in great part to the way the male body has been used and hidden from view. With changes in these habits of viewing and treating the male body, something new is on the horizon.

The word *tonic* has two senses that I want to apply to masculinity. One is found in music and refers to the home key of a composition. The other denotes an invigorating or bracing substance or influence. I believe that masculinity is re-emerging of necessity to provide both a sense of harmony as well as much needed positive energy to help heal an ailing social body as well as to energize the everyday lives of women and men in troubling times.

If we look at young men today, we can see a certain brightness in them that dimmed down in their fathers and grandfathers. I am convinced that something very positive and nurturing is embodied in a small but vital core group of young men with wide-ranging interests and talents. We will soon see a great deal more of them and hear a great more from them that will vitalize their male peers and perhaps have a leavening effect on their fathers' generation. Tonic masculinity will also have a salubrious effect on the lives of girls and women especially in the context of sexuality, parenting and the family.

What forms does tonic masculinity take *in males*? The italicized qualifying clause may seem odd, but I contrast male masculinity with what Judith Halberstam, the well-known feminist, has termed *female masculinity*. The latter is found in only a minority of middle-age and young women who enact *faux* masculinity. Ironically, when this occurs it is in itself evidence for the resurgence of masculinity in the population. Masculinity in males (essential masculinity) is qualitatively different, however, since its principal features derive from anatomy and physiognomy, and only secondarily, by the way, to sexual orientation, the term *male masculinity* is redundant.

Who are these males? Much emphasis has been placed on *homo faber* (man the maker of things) and *homo furens* (man the conquistador and warrior) in discussions of masculinity. The former is reflected in my preamble. I have alluded to the second briefly in talking about ironic performances of aggression in the preceding section. I suggest, however, that we look at the lives of the boys and young men who are part of this renaissance of masculinity as an expression of *homo ludens* (playful man). In *homo ludens* we find both harmonizing and invigorating effects, the two senses of tonic I have already mentioned. We will see that both are not new in human history.

I begin with the latter first. Centering and invigorating, we see in tonic masculinity the dogged intensity of pursuing a task to its conclusion but also a certain impatience with delay in the gratification that comes with a project's having been completed. Tonic masculinity may be seen in creative risk-taking, that is, trying out something that has not been attempted before even though there might be danger involved. In this connection, it is worth noting that nothing is more deadening to this in boys than efforts to get them to settle down in contemporary schooling settings, from preschool through the end of high school. For most males, learning from experience is preferred to acting on information as given and accepted as true. Boys turn to that, of course, but they do so several years later than girls do. Like phenomenologists, boys and adolescent males distrust what is known (what they have been told) in favor of paying attention to what they see whether it be visual, auditory or via any other sensory organ.

I do not have in mind here the sort of challenging that is to be found in competition. Instead, I think of Copernicus, for example, who contested the Ptolemaic idea of the structure of the universe. Had he not, we might still be worried about dropping off the edge of the world

when reaching the horizon. Or had Einstein not challenged the Euclidean order of spatiality and temporality, we would likely still be thinking in terms of horsepower alone. The challenging quality of tonic masculinity can be better seen in the lust for adventure that questions norms and conserves standards, carries out rituals, and formulates the rules and laws that life in large communities requires. Tonic masculinity has been known since ethics was first formulated by the classic Greek philosophers.

Several examples may serve to make this clear. We see it in the dedicated seriousness of the pastor or priest who serves his congregants as much as in the athlete who disciplines his own body to achieve a hard-won performance approaching some ideal of perfection. Those who argue for the toxicity of masculinity have singled out a few team sports such as Canadian ice hockey and American football as exemplary of masculinity. They overlook the international example of *futbol* (soccer) or basketball where power and grace are combined. Little attention is paid to the gymnast or the track and field athlete or the classic wrestler or practitioner of a martial art such as *jiu-jitsu*.

Tonic masculinity in the first sense is seen in the deep male bonds of pairings such as boyhood chums and aging male friends who have known each other for a half century or more having pursued careers and usually marriage. It is also there to be seen in so-called gay males. Even though they are only a very small number of this population, homosexual men no longer present by affecting a feminine persona. Its core is intimacy and friendship, mainstays of classic masculinity. Above all, the harmonizing effect of tonic masculinity is finding a place again in deeply intimate friendships between young men. They have never disappeared from boyhood.

If there is what we may term power in tonic masculinity, it is of the sort expressed by Herman Melville's Ahab. Here we see the drivenness of tonic masculinity in the face of the mysteries of nature, a deep urge not to control nature (another feature commonly alleged as an example of hegemonic masculinity) but to face its absolute power and in doing so realize the limits of human power.

Tonic masculinity is seen in men who pursue careers in public service such as first responders and—alas, as long as there are those few men and women who through history have desired to control extensive land and the lives of vast numbers of men, women and children—

men who serve in the military. It is well known that most men have little interest in harming other men when conscripted to engage in combat with their enemy *du jour*. Like rapists, mercenaries and conquistadors are a tiny fraction of the male population. And we never forget that most of those who have been sent into battle and caused to be harmed were (and are) young, poor and not well educated. Many of them in the West flee fatherless homes.

If we can clear away some of the dense smoke of what a very small fire has produced, I believe we will see clearly the image of tonic masculinity as briefly described here coming into focus. Meanwhile, successful women, some of whom display traits of female masculinity, currently ride high—as well they should, since the responsibilities that come with work in business and the professions, which was for a very long time solely men’s work, is now increasingly in women’s hands. In addition to bearing children, they are now charged with seeing to the outcome of the near future in politics, our major economic institutions, and the professions. They are becoming the majority of doctors and dentists, and given the trends of college attendance, women will dominate nearly all fields in the near future, with the exception of some of the natural sciences. This has relieved men of authority and power, but as I have tried to show, these features are not after all of the essence of male masculinity. The surplus of energy available to males—especially young males—made available by the shift in workforce populations in all areas is the one source of the tonic I claim males are prepared to provide. I anticipate that we will see an increase of creativity among men, especially in the arts. Their role as literally the second sex (all human zygotes are undifferentiated and therefore female—the reason men have nipples, a surprising fact not given much attention) will again bring them into prominence, but no longer as the arbiters of wars and aggressive conquests. Women will be their agents. As the male body becomes more visible it will perhaps come to have the attention paid to it in ancient Greece and Rome and again in the Renaissance. Most men enjoy being objectified, so there should not be any problem with being appreciated for purely aesthetic reasons. My guess is that physical culture and athletics will become more attractive to more men. There was a hint of this in the Sixties when male masculinity made a brief appearance. It went underground again for a little more than forty years—but it is reappearing.

This brings me, finally, to a value of tonic masculinity as I see it emerging that may be surprising. That is the work to be done of restoring harmony between the sexes, to return relations in the nuclear family and local community to a degree of genuine caring for the other and democratic responsibility in the sociopolitical sphere. The much-advertised dissonance of relations between men and women, I believe, will be resolved by tonic masculinity. The result of the longing to do something as remarkable and mysterious as creating another human life can be seen in essential, tonic masculinity as it has pursued its goals in the past in philosophy and science. Men will literally have more time for creative work. We have evidence of this already in the world of social media and the whole world of virtuality in which young men were the pioneers. Perhaps they are already evidence for how tonic masculinity will express itself.

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AUTHOR PROFILE



Miles Groth PhD, is professor in the Department of Psychology at Wagner College, in New York. He is founding editor of *New Male Studies*. He also edited the *International Journal of Men's Health* and *Thymos: Journal of Boyhood Studies*, which he co-founded. Dr. Groth studied at Franklin and Marshall College, Duquesne University and Fordham University, where he completed his PhD. He trained as a psychoanalyst in New York and has been in private practice since 1977. He has written invited papers for presentation in Australia, Canada, England, Hungary, Italy and Germany, as well as at many colleges and universities in the United States. He is the author of five books, the most recent of which is *Resituating Humanistic Psychology* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), and many articles in peer-reviewed journals. He resides in New York.

Contact details: mgroth@wagner.edu

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