

## **Rhetorical Constructions of Masculinity in *Maxim* Magazine**

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One of the top three questions in contemporary gender studies may well be: “what is masculinity?” Before moving on to my analysis of gender construction in the popular men’s lifestyle magazine *Maxim*, I will explore some of the answers that experts have postulated to this vexing question.

Prior to the emergence of gender studies, and its sub-discipline, masculinity studies, and its sub-sub discipline, “heteromascularity studies,” gender was the focus primarily of psychology and sociology. For background on psychological perspectives on masculinity, I turned to an article by Andrew P. Smiler from the journal *Sex Roles*, called “Thirty Years After the Discovery of Gender: Psychological Concepts and Measures of Masculinity”. This survey reveals much about the recent history of the intuitively seductive, yet slippery premise that there are fundamental differences, other than the obvious physical ones, between women and men. Smiler shares how, in its quest to empirically quantify features of human nature, the discipline of psychology has articulated aspects of gender identity and created inventories of these traits that have evolved over time. But these conceptions of masculinity are not bound to their own time period: some of them surface periodically in different contexts, and some of them simply persist. None of them just go away.

Smiler points out one assumption that applies to all the theories in his survey: that “gender affects individuals across a broad cross-section of their lives by prescribing certain behaviors and proscribing others, from personality attributes through attitudes, and from vocational choices through leisure activities” (16). I have not found any literature that credibly complicates this assumption, and it strikes me as accurate, so I will labor under it as well, focusing on the ways in which those prescriptions and proscriptions are constructed, reflected, and maintained rhetorically in popular culture.

Smiler sees the women’s movement and the gay rights movement as the context in which gender was “discovered,” and claims that one effect of this discovery was that thereafter, men were studied as men, and not as “idealized, nongendered humans”(15). He refers to the period prior to the seventies as “prehistory,” a time during which masculinity was conceived of as a “single, coherent construct.” A 1936 inventory by Terman and Miles codified the constructs of masculinity and femininity as polar opposites and measured the masculinity of subjects in terms of the degree to which they were “powerful, strenuous, active, steady, strong, self-confident, with preference for machinery, athletics, working for self, and the external/public life.” Masculinity was also characterized by dislike of “foreigners, religious men, women cleverer than [they], dancing, guessing games, being alone and thin women.”(17). Sound like anyone you know? Low scores on the masculinity test (by males) were considered problematic and predictive of a range of pathologies.

Many of the tenets of masculinity proposed by Terman and Miles persisted, but the perceptions of where they came from and what they meant changed among the psychological and sociological communities. In my vastly oversimplified version of Smiler’s timeline of gender theory in psychology, we can see the notion of a fixed, natural, idealized masculinity in the “prehistoric” era give way to the “androgyny movement” of the seventies, in which both “masculine” and “feminine” traits exist to greater and lesser extents in all people, largely determined by “historical accident”(Bem). This theory couched most gender traits in positive terms, and high degrees of *both* masculine and feminine traits were perceived as posi-

tive. In androgyny theory, gender traits were considered distinct, but not oppositional. Another nascent school of thought in the eighties was the “ideology movement” which posited that the tenets of masculinity represented an ideology to which individuals were compelled to conform. The tenets of this ideology included nonfemininity (or antifemininity), independence, status-orientation, heterosexuality (or antihomosexuality), toughness, and risk-taking (Brannon) (18). The names of the measures associated with the ideology movement—“Macho Scales” and “Hypermasculinity Index”—reveal a growing sense that too much masculinity could be toxic.

The eighties saw a further move towards conceiving of masculinity—and gender in general—in terms of the problems it caused. The “sex role stress paradigm” envisioned gender as the most complex of the many roles we are required to perform as members of communities and measured it in terms of the extent to which attempting to inhabit these roles caused “restriction of the person’s ability to actualize their human potential or the restriction of someone else’s potential” (19). In the mid-nineties, a school of thought emerged in which the notion of “multiple masculinities” was key. This idea that masculinity takes many forms—and that people shift between those forms, depending on the social context—still informs most current theory, whether that theory conceives of gender as an essential part of our identities, a repertoire of roles we play, an ideological stance, or a social construct.

This brief history of psychological theories of gender is meant to provide background against which I might proceed with my project: a rhetorical analysis of an artifact of popular culture. I might just as well have provided a history of the trends in feminist literary criticism, discourse theory, or portrayals of men in television situation comedies; but I chose psychology because it has the longest tradition of the methodical study of gender, and theories in this discipline have enabled the emergence of new research questions and methodologies. My point here is that the shifts in thinking about the provenance and meaning of masculinity are available for scrutiny all across our culture, in areas as disparate as academia, the workplace, pop psychology, talk shows, and so forth. The conversation

about gender identity and politics in all of these realms is as much a reflection of attitudes toward gender as it is a construction of them. In the rhetorical spirit of using every available perspective to theorize on the “ways of the scramble” (Burke), I will borrow from various disciplines, with a particular focus on the linguistic, in order to tease out the exhortations and ideologies embedded in this highly gendered text and examine the ways in which it offers a range of masculine subjectivities for its reader.

*Maxim* magazine originated in Britain as part of the “new lad” school of publications, which includes primarily *Maxim*’s competitors, *FHM* and *loaded*, that began in the mid-nineties. By the time *Maxim* launched to great fanfare and immediate commercial success in the U.S. in 1997, an entire discourse about the “new lad” was already part of British culture. The “new lad” can be conceived of as a character or a masculine subjectivity both created by and reflected in British popular culture. He exists largely as a reaction to the “new man,” a sensitive aesthete informed and constructed by the influence of feminism and the major movements of the last thirty years of gender theory. The “new lad,” on the other hand, is unabashedly invested in traditional hegemonic masculinity, although he often tempers this orientation with “irony<sup>1</sup>” to pre-empt protestations of sexism, perhaps even from himself. He is typically college-aged, but can remain in this state of extended adolescence indefinitely, and he is the demographic that makes *Maxim* the best-selling men’s lifestyle magazine in the U.S.

The “new lad” and the phenomenon of “laddishness” appear frequently as a theme in the British press concerning media, education, and culture; and there has been a fair amount of British scholarship about men’s

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<sup>1</sup> Bethen Benwell, in *Masculinity and Men’s Lifestyle Magazines* calls this form of irony a kind of “mischievous knowingness,” that “puts the burden upon the receiver to share the joke, regardless of their usual politics.” She says of this form, so typical of ‘lad’ magazines, “an expression of ironic intention (‘only kidding’) is a frequent accompaniment to a politically-unpalatable sentiment since it allows the sender to save face whilst preserving the form (and therefore potentially the meaning) of the original, surface utterance intact” (20). However, unlike verbal irony, which can be indicated by “air quotes” or other non-verbal cues, “the presence of irony in men’s magazines is something which is rarely recoverable from the text at all but relies upon a more global knowledge that sexism in ‘new lad’ culture is ironically, nostalgically and harmlessly meant...”(20). It seems to me that this form could be described as “pseudo-irony,” or, in conversation “irony” (with “air quotes”). I find that pseudo-irony is used as a blanket disclaimer to inoculate against criticisms in areas other than sexism as well.

lifestyle magazines. But despite the fact that *Maxim* has a circulation of 2.5 million in the U.S. (the content in the U.S. magazine is virtually the same, with some cultural adaptations), and the (ironic) celebration of traditional masculinity has spawned whole genres within American pop culture, little scholarship exists about men's lifestyle magazines here, and the American analog to the "new lad" does not even have a name. Problematic American masculinity is usually studied in "crisis" terms; for example, boys falling behind their sisters in school, joining gangs, and becoming nihilistic and antisocial. Perhaps, compared to this, irreverent "laddishness" seems like a minor concern. Nonetheless, a seemingly reactionary movement is always worth investigating, especially when it is presented veiled in glossy layers of tantalizing pseudo-irony as are the masculinities of *Maxim*. And as for a solution to the lack of language to discuss the American version of the "new lad," I propose the use of the term "new dude" for the subject position and for his behavior, "dude-ishness."

Judith Butler claims, "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Traister, 293). If so, then how do texts contribute to the constitution of gender? Is this view reconcilable with Sunderland's contention that we should analyze gender as a "construction of a range of masculinities and femininities through a range of gendered discourse in a range of topically related texts"? (Stribbe, 34). The intersection of gender as performance and gender as constructed is evident in the frequently didactic features of *Maxim*. *Maxim* teaches its readers how to perform the "new dude" construction of masculinity.

One of the tropes that *Maxim* uses to instruct its readers in masculinity is the "badass"—the old school hero who, through his audacity, toughness, risk-taking, and sexual prowess, represents a role model for the "new dude." The traits of the badass correspond closely to some of those in the Terman and Miles inventory from 1936: he is "powerful, strenuous, active, steady, strong, and self-confident." Men characterized as being badass (adj.) or being *a* badass (n.), would be off the charts on the Macho Scales, especially in the areas of toughness and risk-taking. *Maxim* regularly profiles extreme athletes, martial artists, mercenaries and serial killers, whose

derring-do is written of in tones of reverence, whether they are praised for their BASE jumping accomplishments or lauded (“ironically” of course) for their body count and sadism.

In an article in the March, 2008 issue entitled “D.C. Smackdown!” *Maxim* pits Republicans against Democrats in a six-round “battle for badass supremacy,” by profiling members of each party and having a panel of judges determine which side wins each round.<sup>2</sup> The “rounds” are categories of manly deeds, including “Lady-Killers,” “Party Animals,” “Military Valor,” “Trash Talking,” “Random Acts of Machismo,” and curiously, “Embarrassing Infractions,” a category for which the politicians earn points for their *non*masculine shame (one politician cried, another was a college cheerleader, and John Kerry’s infraction is loving to windsurf). The first five rounds align with “new dude” constructions of masculinity, but the “Embarrassing Infractions” category can be explained as part of what Benwell calls “a rhetorical structure that creates ambivalence through a continual oscillation between heroism and anti-heroism.” She writes “By distancing himself from masculine constructs, either through anti-heroism...or through an ironic gloss, the magazine man achieves a kind of invisibility—his self-awareness pre-empts critical (feminist) scrutiny” (162). Like the use of pseudo-irony, the hero/anti-hero shift is a hedge: the “new dude” cannot be pinned to any one ideology. In fact, a lack of commitment to anything (even that which is revered is not sacred), except for humor and fun, is an aspect of “new dude” masculinity.

In “D.C. Smackdown,” former presidential hopeful Fred Thompson is profiled under the heading of “Lady Killers”:

“When the phlegmatic *Law & Order* star was asked what his most prized possession was by the AP, he responded, “Trophy wife.” *The New York Times* considered whether the cleavage of his 24-year-younger wife, Jerri would help get votes. (Um, nope.) Fred has ac-

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<sup>2</sup> In the interest of full disclosure, I’m compelled to mention that Hillary Clinton and Maxine Waters are among the Democrats profiled in the “Trash Talking” round. There are quite a few other instances when the term “badass” is applied to women, especially those who are involved in violence in some way. In this respect, *Maxim* aligns itself with the “androgyny” school of gender theory.

tually fathered children with his babe wife, which is as inspiring as it is repulsive" (99).

Here, the pseudo-irony and hero/anti-hero toggling is in full effect. There are not many textual cues that this passage is meant to be ironic, except for possibly the parenthetical "um, nope" comment and the juxtaposition of "inspiring" and "repulsive." If we accept the surface meaning of the text, are we to believe that "new dude" masculinity condones treating women as commodities and possessions? Or do we read it ironically as a feminist critique of Thompson and his ilk?

The answer is more complicated than either of those: the ambiguity in even this short passage offers multiple subjectivities for the "new dude" to inhabit, or multiple (often simultaneous) masculinities for him to perform, depending on the social context. At once, the "new dude" may feel nostalgia for the traditional masculinity of his father or grandfather's generation, and an unrestrained urge to mock the heroes of those generations as sexist pigs. He may also feel, and/or perform, reverence for an old codger with a hot young wife; and feel and/or perform disgust at sexual images of the couple. Furthermore, the feminist critique implicit in the passage about Thompson is not lost on the "new dude" — it is in fact a more plausible reading than the surface meaning. But, as is the case with the proposition of hero worship, the "new dude" is not asked to think about it too hard or take it too seriously. In a case of traditional irony, *Maxim*, through the gloss of pseudo-irony, teaches not only traditional hegemonic masculinity, as many critics accuse, but also the ambiguous, fluid, contingent, performative masculinity proposed by current theory. Sociolinguist Scott Fabius Kiesling writes, "Stance is...the location of the structural coupling between performativity and structure; it is in stances that identity performativity takes place"(251). The ambiguity and ambivalence of *Maxim's* ideologies offers "new dudes" a variety of stances to shift between as they practice performing masculinity.

Another common trope in *Maxim* (and one of the categories in "D.C. Smackdown") is variously called "trash talking," "talking smack," or "ball busting." This is the practice of ritual insulting, which, like the switch from

heroic to anti-heroic modes of discourse, is often a fallback stance to be used in a case where a threat of dangerous levels of seriousness or sincerity looms. It is also represented as an art, and *Maxim* frequently offers primers, guides, and collections to be enjoyed by the connoisseur or practitioner. Sometimes the insults are ostensibly meant to be used against the reader's enemies, but more often, they are to be offered in the spirit of good-natured ribbing of friends. In a *Journal of Popular Culture* article called "Male Gossip and Language Play in the Letters Pages of Men's Lifestyle Magazines," Benwell compares the ritual insult in the genre to *Flyting*, a Norse practice of verbal swordplay, and *Sounding*, also known as "The Dozens," a mostly African American social practice that usually involves the insulting of mothers. All of these rituals are conducted primarily by males and, as Benwell argues, are meant to reinforce masculine values and social structures. In the case of men's lifestyle magazines, Benwell contends that the discourse of insult is part of a reaction against the intimate, friendly tone, mockingly referred to as "synthetic sisterhood," employed in women's magazines.

In an article called "*Maxim's* Guide to Ball Busting," the reader is provided a list of insults for many occasions and social contexts, including "General Cruelty," "Bestest Pals," "Sex and Dating," "The Office," and "Chillin'." Most of the insults involve impugning the sexuality, masculinity, penis size, or sexual prowess of one's friends, or making outrageous sexual claims about their mothers, sisters, and girlfriends. These insults, presented in the usual Teflon package of pseudo-irony, are full of linguistic turns that reveal much about ideologies of gender and sexuality. To be fair, these barbs are clearly meant to be funny and representative of the type of discourse that a "new dude" would only engage in with someone with whom he was close enough that offending him would be impossible. This is one way in which this type of ritual maintains group identity by protecting the male bond—we even can think of this as strengthening that bond by pushing it to its limits. Nevertheless, raw homophobia and hegemonic masculinity are key to the humor of these "busts" and even though they are meant to be funny and "ironic," they are not quite satire in that they do not invite a critical consideration of their inherent ideologies.

However, there are two “busts” that take a different turn that I am interested in because they self-consciously address issues of male intimacy and discourse and simultaneously display the limits of the “new dude’s” tolerance for this kind of reflection. The format of this article sets up a scenario and then provides the appropriate insult for the occasion.

**Example 1**

Use when: Your best friend has just taken a bullet for you.

Bust: “It takes a brave and honorable man to commit such a selfless act of heroism. Or do you have a thing for me?”

**Example 2**

Use when: A friend who is dying of a rare disease tells you that he’s blessed to have had you in his life.

Bust: Gotta go...SportsCenter is on.

The values that contribute to the humor in these two “busts” are very much the tenets of traditional masculinity. In “bust” #1, the speaker applies masculine virtues to his dying friend, but at the moment that the open admiration verges on unacceptable intimacy, he juxtaposes these virtues with the specter of homosexuality, traditional masculinity’s antithesis.

In the second “bust,” there are no accusations of homosexuality, but there is an expression of what Kiesling calls homosocial desire. Kiesling argues that there are safe venues and channels, like fraternities, for these kinds of expressions. However, the scenario in “bust” number one, presumably a one-on-one situation, is not one of these venues. Perhaps even more than the sentiment behind the expression of homosocial desire in this exchange, the style in which it is presented is depicted as inappropriate. The phrase “blessed to have you in his life” is clearly the rhetoric of “synthetic sisterhood,” and the kind of thing that the softest “new man” might be expected to say. The phrase “Sports Center” quickly grounds the speaker in traditional masculinity and defends against the contagion of the “blessedness” rhetoric. The joke would not have been as funny if the dying friend had said “I fuckin’ love you, dude,” because the contrast between the “femi-

nine" language of emotional intimacy and the reaction of abandonment would not have been as stark. But also, the reader would not identify with the character who abandons his dying friend, because the dying friend has not transgressed the linguistic conventions of the "new dude" even if he has pushed the boundaries of the topics of conversation. Given the circumstances, this expression of intimacy would be forgivable, and the character who abandons his friend would be the villain.

Both of these "busts" bespeak an inability to respond to a gesture of love from another man, which is a comedic device recognizable from sitcoms, buddy movies, and "bromances." As is the case in the "D.C. Smack-down" the surface meaning of the utterances is not a tenable interpretation, but a strictly ironic reading (i.e., "this is what you would say if you were a complete asshole") is problematic as well.

These two "busts" make two interesting comments about "new dude" discourse. In the first case, the discursive conventions of ritual insult prevail even in the dire situation of the battlefield, and thereby maintain a comforting social order. One can imagine the friend who took the bullet being reassured by the constancy of the discourse that everything would be all right ("my buddy wouldn't call me gay if he thought I was dying.")

The critique inherent in "bust" number two is *not* that men are by nature insensitive and incapable of emotional honesty. A more nuanced reading can interpret it as almost a lament of the degree to which "new-dude" masculinity has precluded the possibility of taking anything seriously; and also as an affectionate portrayal of a new dude who is both protected and afflicted by the slick veneer of pseudo-irony. Here, the dying friend is portrayed as ridiculous for adopting feminine discourse in his moment of weakness. But the friend who flees to watch Sports Center is not a hero; rather, he is almost equally absurd, constrained as he is by the "new dude" discourse. Nonetheless, the reader identifies with the abandoner because he is aware of the ways in which he himself is constrained by "new dude" conventions. This relates to the heroic/anti-heroic shift common in "new dude" discourse. The heroic is something to admire, and perhaps aspire to, but the new dude recognizes his weakness and shrugs it off with the nonchalance born of a "knowing and ironic relationship to the world of

adult concerns" (Gill, 37). This shrugging indicates the end of the conversation—the "new dude" does not need to discuss the social constraints of his own discourse. That is the kind of nonsense in which a new man—or a woman—might engage.

### Conclusion

Sales of *Maxim* are still strong, and its website is wildly popular. And the "new dude" discourse sells millions of movie tickets and advertising space on television. In fact, the trope of the man-child who is reluctant to abandon the comfort of his "new dude" lifestyle reveals a growing consciousness of this phenomenon. However, it is most frequently presented as a loveable quirk, rather than a problem.

I don't suggest that "new dude-ishness" is some kind of crisis into which we need to pour all our resources. But I do think we would be wise to continue investigating the ideologies that inform it. Even if the end result of "new dude-ishness" is an "ironic relationship to the world," we should keep in mind that "new dudes" sometimes make decisions that affect people around them. When backed into a corner and faced with the seriousness of the world, what ideologies will the "new dude" turn to? Will he seriously consider and criticize every possible perspective? Will he embrace the feminism that he has grown up "good-naturedly" excoriating? Or does he rely on the tenets of traditional masculinity, in which he recognizes foibles, but generally regards with nostalgic affection?

I also do not suggest that the only subjectivities available for young men are those found in "new dude" culture. Other subjectivities, related to other cultures and their discourses, and sometimes deliberately adopted from historical models, appear, sometimes unexpectedly ("emo kids" on myspace) and make themselves available. Men's lifestyle magazines are an inexhaustible source for the study of not just constructions of masculinity, but for the construction of femininities (obviously), sexuality, consumerism, aesthetics, politics and more.

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