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"Masculinity and Maturity Taught by Mothers:" Familial Politics and Gender Identity Crisis in Western Literature and Film

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Abstract

Young male characters represent (whether through words or actions) cultural ideals about masculinity within literature and film. However, because masculinity is a culturally constructed identity, (there is a strong difference between "biological sex" and "social gender"), masculine identity must be learned or absorbed by the individual male character during the course of his development. While society and culture play a crucial role in the self-development and self-identification of masculinity, familial relationships are amongst the most influential aspects that shape the development of gender. This thesis focuses specifically on the development of son characters that are forced to develop their masculinity under the tutelage of mother characters due to the lack of a father figure. It also focuses on how mother characters are presented as an obstruction to the development of masculinity within their sons. Western Culture perpetuates an ideology that sons must break away from their mothers in order to achieve maturity and masculinity. Such action on the part of son characters is not easy; son characters are reliant upon their mothers as they are simultaneously nurturers and the means by which sons learn their masculinity in the absence of the father. However, son characters lacking an actual biological male as a father figure are inherently presented as immature and underdeveloped. This portrayal favors the perspective that the development of maturity within son characters requires the presence of a father figure; thus does Western Culture undermine the importance of mothers in the development of sons. This thesis is divided into four separate chapters the cover a variety of mediums and time periods. Chapter One focuses on the Homeric Epics, Chapter Two centers around William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Chapter Three explores Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, and Chapter Four critically analyzes the modern popular culture film *Fight Club*, directed by David Fincher.

Introduction

"Men Raised (Only) By Women"

Specific historical or cultural contexts mandated distinct (although sometimes similar) practices and norms of masculinity. These differing practices, however, share the common objective of establishing masculinity within young males. Such is the paramount importance of the development of masculinity within young males that societies and cultures consistently remind and enforce within males (whether overtly or through subversive means) perceived masculine traits and actions. The fact that "masculine traits" have to be established and enforced within young men calls to attention an interesting aspect of masculinity; that masculine traits are not *naturally* found within biological males. Rather, masculinity is a *cultural* state of existence that is ultimately *learned* and *performed*.

I wish to call attention to the specific claims that masculinity is capable of being "learned" and "performed." Again, to understand the theory that I intend to explore and argue for in this thesis, it is essential to understand that such a theory is based on the assumption (indeed, the acceptance) that "masculinity" and "femininity" do not naturally exist within humanity. This leads to the conclusion that masculinity and femininity are purely social constructs, often legitimized and defined by societies and cultures as "natural." If social gender (masculinity and femininity) is indeed entirely unrelated to biological sex (male and female), nature thus plays no direct role in the development of gender. This results in the theory that males are *naturalized* into masculinity. By this, I define a naturalized masculine male as pre-reflectively acting, speaking, and perceiving the world through a socially constructed paradigm. Such a paradigm life is not necessarily detrimental or harmful to the male living such a life. The unnatural aspect of a naturalized male is that such a life is performative. This means that males are unaware that the

actions and language that help define their masculinity within society do not naturally come from the fact that they are biologically male. Masculinity is an artificial construct that is performed and learned *pre-reflectively*.

The theory that gender is performed and naturalized into humanity, rather than social gender correlating with biological sex, has existed for some time. Within her article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," Judith Butler challenges conventional interpretations and definitions of gender by theorizing that gender is not a "stable identity"[1] that is incapable of changing or reappropriation, but rather a self-imposed state of "social temporality."[2] By this, Butler defines gender (specifically, what it means "to be masculine" or "to be feminine" in a specific social or historical context) as a *temporary*, *fluid*, and *changeable* state of existence. Butler comparatively defines gender as being similar to the performative nature of acting, going so far as to describe gender as a "performative accomplishment," complete with a "mundane social audience."[3] The audience she refers to represents a society that is prepared to accept the performance of the actor as the norms by which to define (and enforce) what it means to be masculine or to be feminine. If one is to accept that gender is, in fact, a state of temporary performativity, Butler highlights that the possible act of "gender transformation"[4] must also be accepted. By this, Butler theorizes that any human being, regardless of whether the specific human in question is "biologically male" or "biologically female," is potentially capable of learning, appropriating, and performing the

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[1] Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* (1988). p. 519

[2] Butler, p. 520

[3] Butler, p. 520

[4] Butler, p. 520

societal norms and expectations of what it means to "perform masculinity" and "perform femininity."

The specifics of the theory that I wish to explore within this thesis directly relates to a potential implication not initially highlighted by Butler within her article. Butler defines gender as a performative and as a state of existence that is in a constant state of fluid temporality. As gender is an artificial construct that naturalizes humanity to "naturally (i.e. "unconsciously") live unnatural lives," masculinity and femininity is not inherently a part of the human condition but rather, a condition that is *learned*. Such an implication directly correlates to a central theory of this thesis; if gender is an artificial construct that is unconsciously *learned*, it is equally possible that masculinity has the potential to be consciously *taught*. This theory about the possibility of "gender teaching" has a more specific implication. If biological sex has little impact on the ability of gender to be learned, performed, and taught, then the potential for a specific sex to teach a member of the opposite sex the performative nature of what it means "to be masculine" or "to be feminine" must also exist.

Societal norms and laws, however, might discourage or even forbid the teaching of a "specific gender" by a "specific sex." In other words, biological females (specifically mothers in the context of this thesis) may be able to teach biological males (sons) the practices and norms of masculinity. Yet cultural or social pressure may ultimately discourage these situations, placing favor on the ideology that young men must learn masculinity from other biological men, especially fathers. This thesis focuses on how such discouragement comes at the cost of undermining the efforts of mothers, despite the fact that mothers potentially are just as effective as men at teaching masculinity. I theorize that such discouragement is a response to the "threatening" act of mothers teaching masculinity to sons; the threat of such an act is that has the

potential to undermine the social importance of biological males and their traditional roles as policy makers for their families. Social and culture, however, are not the only pressures that discourage that practice of mothers teaching masculinity; this thesis critically analyzes another, very specific source of discouragement. Although Butler's article and her theory of "performativity" were originally intended for the academic fields of feminist theory and philosophy, I would argue that her theories on performativity are equally valid in the application of critically analyzing literature and the performing arts.

I have highlighted the possibility that the masculine gender is a socially artificial construct that can be learned, performed, and taught by both the male and the female sexes. However, I have also indicated that fictional male characters can be influenced, learn, and develop personal perceptions of masculinity from maternal sources. It is these "maternal sources," the methods by which "the mother" seeks to instill masculinity within the biological male (the son figure), and the consequences of the mother being the source from which the son derives his "handed-down, learned masculinity" that this thesis will focus on. Western Literature, Art, and Culture has explored for centuries situations where son characters (specifically, young men) find themselves in a situation where they are forced to learn masculinity from a mother character or source. The exact paradigm I explore in this thesis is the analysis of how male "son characters," having yet to mature into "masculine men," must look to their mothers for guidance. However, literature and the arts discourage this; indeed, much of the conflict and chaos of the specific works I explore within this thesis determine that in order for sons to mature into masculine men, breaking away from the mother is required. Furthermore, the son characters that I explore within the thesis initially are immature for a common reason: the lack of a father figure. As literary and performing arts have the potential to reflect (and/or criticize) the society that it

originates from (whether that reflection/criticism be directly or indirectly), the relationships between humans (including the relationships between sons and mothers) is also creatively portrayed through fictional characters. The relationships between son and mother characters portray a vast amount of cultural values and expectations of what it means "to be masculine" or "to be feminine" within a specific cultural or historical period. Historically, this has led to specific dichotomies in which sons were forced to adopt a certain performativity in order "to be masculine" while women were required to adopt a different performativity in order to adhere to gender roles. However, this does not mean that mothers were unaware of the actions (the performative acting) required to achieve a masculine performativity; mothers were simply constrained by societal norms and gender expectations to act in such a role. Again, this lends further credence to the potential possibility of gender teaching; mothers are capable of consciously teaching their sons how to live masculine lives, and sons unconsciously learn from their mothers how to pre-reflectively perform a masculine identity. Such "potentiality" inherently weakens the role of the father in the development of sons. Literature and film thus responds to this threatening potentiality by portraying sons lacking father figures as incomplete, immature, and chaotically destructive to the social order.

In the critical analysis exploring and arguing for the distinct and central importance of the figure of the mother within Western Culture, it is essential to fully understand the context by which "the mother" will be defined and utilized throughout this thesis. A male character may in fact learn the performative nature of their "societal masculinity" through a maternal source that is the "biological mother." However, "the mother" may exist in other forms that expand beyond the biological limitations of the actual familial mother of the male character. Such a mother may manifest itself in a variety of ways, sometimes within "vessels" or "carriers" that have no

biological connections of maternity (or even no biological connections at all) to the male character. This thesis also will focus on the essential question of the purpose and potential consequences of the mother seeking to instill a son with the performative skills required to perform masculinity within a specific society. Despite being a flexible, artificially constructed aspect of the human condition, the concept of gender often resides within societies and situations that stress the importance of recognizing that the dichotomy between actual biological male character and biological female characters is sharp and distinct. Furthermore, this rigid divide between male and female has to potential to be (and often is) enforced by political law and/or societal norms and expectations. This thesis includes specific examples (notably in Chapter One, which focuses on the Ancient Greeks) of how external pressures consciously enforce the rigid divide between male and female. This results, in relation to the concept of the "mother," in a situation by which the "mother," whatever or whoever the source, may be aware of what is required to achieve the necessary performativity of masculinity. The "mother" may even possess the skills in appropriating the performativity of masculinity along with the ability to teach the performativity. However, because "the mother" has some form of social or political limitation upon her/it (due to the sharp distinctions of what is appropriate behavior for the male sex vs. the female sex), "the mother" is portrayed as severely limited in her ability to "teach the performative masculine."

Nevertheless, despite her limitations, the fact that the father figure is initially uninvolved in the development of the son's masculinity creates a dependency within the son on the mother. Such is the dependency of sons on "the mother" that male characters seek affirmation of their masculinity from "the mother." Within specific instances, "the mother" may even choose to actively enforce masculinity within the male still requiring tutelage on what it means, "to be

masculine." The male character thus undergoes a form of "binding" to the mother. It is the act of "binding" (along with the act of a biological male learning and being affirmed of his own masculinity through a maternal source) that is a source of conflict and drama within a myriad of literature and film. This thesis explores the seemingly contradictory situation in which male characters are placed within seemingly paradoxical situations in which the absence of father figure within their lives forces them to learn masculinity from "mother figures." This paradoxical situation, however, does not necessarily result in the best interests of the sons. As such, the specific male characters analyzed within this thesis share some commonalties. They initially lack father figures, resulting in the importance of mother figures within their lives (i.e., they are "bound to their mothers" in some form), as their mothers are a means by which they are required to establish their own identity. However, sometime during the development the immature son, a force or figure disrupts "the bond" between the mother and the son. Such a disruption directly relates to the conflict of the story, and ultimately, contributes to the positive or negative consequences that occur out of the conflict.

Chapter One: Detaining Mothers

"Immature Demigods and Incomplete Mortals in the Greek Epics"

Since Antiquity, Western Literature has illustrated the relationships between mothers and sons. Sometimes, such examples of the mother/son relationship demonstrate the process through which sons develop under maternal care in the absence of a father figure, along with the consequences of such development. Specifically, the historically important and foundational epic poems *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* provide a model of the relationships between mothers and sons through young men (Achilles from *The Iliad*, Telemachus from *The Odyssey*) and their respective mothers; Thetis from *The Iliad*, and Penelope from *The Odyssey*. Both sons find themselves developing their masculinity in an environment that is noticeably lacking a true father figure; Peleus, the mortal father of Achilles, is entirely absent from *The Iliad*, playing no role in the development of his son's masculinity throughout the poem. Likewise, *The Odyssey* chronicles not only the adventures of Odysseus but also how such adventures have left Telemachus without a father throughout the majority of the epic (indeed, throughout the entirety of Telemachus's life until the concluding books of *The Odyssey*). The absence of fathers in the lives of the young men (specifically, an absence during the majority of the events chronicled within the epic poems) results in seminal moments within the sons' lives in which a father figure is lacking at moments when the sons need such a figure to provide guidance and protection. Without a father figure to provide such guidance or protection, mothers are forced to assume the role of protector and contribute directly to the development of their sons' masculinity.

The character development of the young men (who have spent their entire lives learning masculinity from a maternal source) mirrors each other in both of the epic poems, in that the young men within the poems start out as incomplete or immature. Ancient Greek culture had

very specific practices and notions of masculinity. Within his book *Imagining Men,* Thomas Van

Nortwick distinctly focuses on the concept of *separation*, and how understanding such a concept

"allows a fuller understanding of how the Greeks conceived a masculine life."[5] Masculinity for

the Greeks, according to Nortwick, relied upon *competition* and *difference*; achieving

masculinity was a *contest* between men, and achieving masculinity required that men stand

above their male peers and fellows. The initial quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles

highlights this competitive view of masculinity; Nortwick describes masculinity as a "zero-sum

game" for the Ancient Greeks, as they assumed "that there is a finite amount of honor available,

so that if one man gets more, then someone else gets less."[6] *Separation* is thus a cornerstone for

masculinity in Ancient Greek culture. However, the young men of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*

have yet to obtain the Greek ideal of masculinity due to their lack of separation from both their

peers and their mothers. As the young prince of Ithaca who has yet to achieve dominance over

the male suitors who are attempting to claim Penelope (the wife of Odysseus) as their own,

Telemachus has yet to separate himself in a distinctive manner from his fellow men. However,

one could argue that Achilles (as a demigod blessed with incredible physical prowess) has

already achieved the separation required to establish his own identity as a masculine man. Both

of the young men, however, share the commonality of having yet to achieve separation from

their mothers. As such, the epic poems establish the sons as lacking in masculinity; Achilles in

particular symbolizes this lack of masculinity, for his separation from his fellow men is both

literal and figurative in Book 1 of *The Iliad*. He literally separates himself from the company of

his fellow soldiers (soldiers whom he has already proven to "stand above" in combat), but his

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[5] Van Nortwick, Thomas. *Imagining Men.* Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008. p. 13

[6] Nortwick, p. 13

conversation with his mother proves his lack of separation from his mother. The inability to separate himself from his mother, despite his physical prowess, demonstrates his lack of maturity as a man.

Such a lack of maturity comes from the lack of a father figure; thus, within *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, Homer creates a pair of correlating men that are forced to learn masculinity from a maternal source. However, he ultimately presents the young men as immature. It is thus reasonable to infer that Homer, and to a greater extent the Ancient Greek culture that his literature represents, was aware of the possibility of men forced to learn masculinity from a feminine or a maternal source. The character development of the young men of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey,* however, indicate that Ancient Greek culture abhorred such scenarios, necessitating (indeed mandating) that sons somehow needed to connect with a patriarchal figure in order to achieve mature masculinity. Such connection is not an easy task for the son; the immaturity of sons that have learned masculinity from their mothers results in sons with "flaws" in their masculinity. These flaws contribute to dramatic conflict, further reinforcing how men raised by women are ultimately incomplete and immature until an act of "rejection" occurs. I call this rejection the "breaking of the bond" between the mother and the son. The task is not easy for the son, for the mother has been a constant source of protection and a nurturing source; more importantly, the breaking of the bond is a dramatic conflict in itself because the son figure cannot achieve other goals until he learns to stand apart from his mother.

Book One of *The Iliad* promptly introduces many of the traits of an immature son through the introduction of Achilles. By immature, I am not specifically stating that Achilles is entirely lacking in masculine traits, despite the lack of a father figure throughout the poem. Indeed, Homer establishes Achilles as "brilliant" and physically capable ("Achilles of the swift

feet"); Homer even portrays Agamemnon, king of Mycenae and commander-in-chief of the

Achaean (Greek) army, grudgingly acknowledging Achilles as an exceptional warrior.[7] In spite

of this, the immaturity of Achilles is in fact the catalyst that initially causes the conflict within

The Iliad. This immaturity is a result of him having yet to separate from his mother. The initial

conflict starts as a dispute between men; Agamemnon evokes the anger of Achilles by laying

claim to Achilles' prize of war; a young Trojan woman by the name of Briseis. It is the moment

of losing Briseis where Achilles first demonstrates his immaturity as a young man; having lost

the initial argument and unable to get his way, Achilles "weeping went and sat in sorrow apart

from his companions…many times stretching forth his hands he called on his mother."[8]

Separation from fellow men is an important part in establishing masculinity within Greek

culture; however, the separation must also include the separation from the mother, something

that Achilles initially has yet to achieve. Indeed, Van Nortwick claims that according to Ancient

Greek culture, the process of separating oneself from other men and being overly reliant on the

mother is a sign of immaturity. Nortwick claims, "To reach full manhood, heroes in Greek

Literature always need to separate from their mothers and come to terms in some way with

wisdom that is associated with the world of their fathers."[9] Nortwick points out an essential

aspect of my argument; while the development of Achilles underneath the guidance of his

mother Thetis has provided him with the reputation as the greatest warrior in the Achaean Army,

the fact that he still relies upon his mother is a sign of his incomplete development as a man.

Because of his immaturity, Achilles takes a course of action perceived by Ancient Greek

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[7] Homer. *The Iliad.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951. Book I, ll. 59-62

[8] Homer. *The Iliad.* Book I., ll. 349-351

[9] Nortwick, p. 7

culture as childish; this childish action, in turn, is detrimental to the development of Achilles in terms of both maturity and masculinity. In short, Thetis plays the role of a loving mother who gives her unconditional support to her son; however, because Thetis is also a divine being within *The Iliad*, the unconditional support that she agrees to give Achilles in fact impedes his development towards manhood. Nortwick claims how Achilles, having used his relationship with his divine mother to rally the divine forces of the gods in "supporting his vengeful response to Agamemnon," is a situation where he "cannot learn what he must about his own essential nature as a man."[10] Thetis plays the role of mother and father, protector and nurturer for Achilles. However, because Achilles has developed into an immature man who is overly reliant upon his mother, *The Iliad* implies that there is something incomplete about the development of Achilles. Nortwick describes how the omission of Peleus (the father of Achilles) is striking in the patriarchal culture of the Greeks, and how such an omission further suggests the incomplete development within Achilles as a man.[11] The fact that Achilles has developed into an incomplete man directly relates to the dilemma of the development of men under women; without a father figure, mothers are forced to play the role of both protector and nurturer. However, the flawed and immature development (as portrayed by Achilles) of men under such circumstances implies that mothers *cannot* effectively raise their sons as father figures. On the contrary, *The Iliad* seems to imply that a certain *lack* of protection from the mother is necessary in order for the son to develop as a man. As such, the Greek Epics imply that mother figures cannot assume the mantle of an absent father, for such protection is in fact detrimental to the development of masculinity. The sons therefore must break the bond that is detaining them, and accept an

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[10] Nortwick, p. 7

[11] Nortwick, p. 10

absence of a protective mother in order to fully develop into masculine men, rather than remain as immature and incomplete sons that are a direct cause of the conflicts found within the Greek Epics.

The necessity for an absence of an overprotective mother assuming the role of a father figure relates directly to the initial conflict of *The Odyssey*, along with the development of Telemachus (the young son figure of this specific epic poem). Telemachus is born into a world in which his mother is forced to take on the mantle of both protector and nurturer, due to the absence of Odysseus. Much like *The Iliad*, Homer presents a scenario in which the lack of a true father figure directly relates to the initial conflict of the epic. The lack of Odysseus in the lives of both Telemachus and Penelope directly results in a conflict within Ithaca, manifested in the form of the suitors and their desire to claim Penelope away from Odysseus. Penelope plays the role of both nurturer and protector of Telemachus; like the relationship between Thetis and Achilles in *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey* suggests that such a relationship cannot effectively lead to the development of Telemachus as a mature, masculine man. Like Achilles, Telemachus receives the assistance of a divine goddess. However, while the divine intervention of Thetis was in fact detrimental to the development of the masculinity and maturity of Achilles, the assistance that Telemachus receives from Athena actively guides Telemachus along a path that will reunite him with the "world of his father."[12]

The "world of the father" is an important aspect of the development of masculinity within Telemachus and Achilles, for the existence of the "world of the father" explains why young men had to learn masculinity from a biological male in order to achieve a "proper form" of masculinity. Recall that masculinity for the Ancient Greeks relied upon *separation*; a young man

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[12] Nortwick, p. 35

established his masculinity not only through the separation from his mother, but also by standing apart from his fellow men. Nortwick describes how "obsession with competition is an enduring feature of Greek culture," citing examples such as athletic games, politics, and dramatic festivals (and the competition between playwrights at such festivals) as venues of self-achievement and masculinity.[13] Thus, the "world of the father" is literally the "world of competition." As such, Homeric Epics are not simple entertainment pieces, but rather pedagogical, historical, and culturally relevant texts that instruct young men on how masculinity is achieved through competition. Furthermore, such texts convey an ideology that devalues the ability of the mother to raise masculine sons effectively. Greek culture demanded that masculinity be taught by a biological male because only the biological male could be exposed to the highly competitive (and thus, masculine) "world of the father." Women and mothers were forbidden from the competitive world of athletic games, politics, and the theatre; women most certainly did not fight in the "competitive" practice of war. As such, Homer again acknowledges that sons may develop and achieve *some* masculine development despite the lack of a father figure (recall Achilles and his combat prowess). However, the Homeric Epics claim that biological males were exposed to a "world of competition" in which masculinity was defined and developed. Mothers could never experience this world firsthand; because of this, sons could never truly develop as mature masculine men until such reunion with the competitive world of the father occurs. Furthermore, such a reunion can only occur through the separation of the son from the mother.

This reunion with the world of the father further serves to break the detaining bond between Penelope and Telemachus, ultimately leading to the development of Telemachus as a mature, masculine man. Indeed, the breaking of such a bond occurs as early as the opening book

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[13] Nortwick, p. 7

of the poem, when Telemachus chastises his mother for her melancholy response to a bard

singing about the Trojan War. Penelope, in her amazement to the aggressive response of her son,

"gazed in wonder and withdrew, her son's clear wisdom echoing in her mind."[14] Resolved to

listening to Athena's advice to "call the islanders [suitors] to assembly and speak [his] will,"[15]

Telemachus demonstrates his willingness to actively assume the position as the protector of his

father's estate. This willingness is demonstrated when he claims his intent to hold an assembly in

which the suitors will gather before him and adhere to his demands that they cease their attempts

to claim both Penelope and Ithaca. Curiously, a woman (Athena) instigates the process by which

Telemachus attempts to establish his own masculinity and sever himself from the protection of

his mother. Furthermore, is it implied that Telemachus was fully aware that such advice was

given to him by Athena, as "in his heart he knew his visitor had been an immortal."[16] Such a

scenario suggests that *The Odyssey* makes an interesting commentary on the development of

masculinity within young men; a *feminine influence* is not necessarily detrimental to the

development of masculinity. Rather, Homer's portrayal of Athena, and how she contributes to

the development of Telemachus from boy to a man, suggests that immaturity occurs only when

the influence over the son consists of a *maternal influence* that is intermingled with socially

accepted patriarchal ideals; an influence that developed out of the necessity of an absent father

figure.

     Athena and Penelope are both female figures that have a direct relation to the manner in

which Telemachus (at the specific point of his life when *The Odyssey* occurs) develops his

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[14] Homer. *The Odyssey.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998. Book I., ll. 408-409

[15] Homer. *The Odyssey.* Book I., ll. 321-322

[16] Homer. *The Odyssey.* Book I, ll. 472-473

masculinity; yet each woman plays a significantly different role in how they affect Telemachus

and his maturity. In addition to suggesting to Telemachus that he aggressively demand that the

suitors leave, Athena also instructs to "Talk to that noble sage of Pylos, Nestor, then go to

Menelaos, the red-haired king of Sparta, last man home of all the [Achaeans]."[17] In suggesting

that Telemachus leave the relatively safe and comfortable world of Ithaca behind to search for

his father, Athena is also pushing Telemachus on a path that will ultimately lead him far away

from the protection and nurturing of his mother. Thus, Athena is providing Telemachus with the

chance to develop his masculinity and mature as a man, far from the detaining presence of

Penelope. In contrast to Athena, Penelope's maternal affection (rather than her biological sex as

a female) is detaining to the development of Telemachus; Nortwick highlights a specific moment

in Book Four "where we hear about Penelope's great distress at learning that her son has slipped

out of the palace to make his journey. She, at least, is not ready for Telemachus to grow up,

whatever Athena's plans may be."[18] Like Thetis's reaction to responding to the distress and well-

being of her son Achilles, Penelope responds out of a desire to both care for her son's well-being

and act as the protector of her son in the absence of Odysseus. However, as Thetis's reaction to

protect and care for Achilles initiated many of the conflicts that plagued the Achaeans in *The

Iliad*, Penelope's reaction to protect her son is not necessarily beneficial to the development of

Telemachus's masculinity. Indeed, the rejection of the mother and the breaking of the bond is an

essential step in the development of son figures within Greek mythology, as the son realizes that

"he must leave the potentially smothering attentions of his mother and come to terms with the

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[17] Homer. *The Odyssey.* Book 1, ll. 329-330

[18] Nortwick, p. 34

world of his father."[19] Such rejection is not necessarily easy for the sons, as it includes the rejection of the only patriarchal figure that the sons have ever known in the absence of the father: the mother.

Both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* conclude with the young men achieving a form of self-control obtained through the reunification with the world of the father. Nortwick comments on how the achievement of mature masculinity comes from the ability of the world of the father to provide "his son a model for how to move into the adult world, balancing the drive for dominance with the need for cooperation."[20] Indeed, both Achilles and Telemachus possess the competitive, masculine drive for dominance at the start of the epic poems. This is manifested through the rage of Achilles and the anger that Telemachus possesses towards the unruly suitors. A drive for dominance with the need for cooperation is thus one of the specific aspects of masculinity that the young men have yet to develop while simultaneously "the focal point for the plot" and the conflicts of the epic poems.[21] Both the poems end with the successful transition into maturity by the young men by accepting the lessons of the world of the father: specifically, lessons of self-restraint. The world of the father for Achilles is initiated not by the father himself but by Priam, father of Hector. By book 24, Achilles has slain Hector in combat out of vengeance for the death of his friend Patroclus; as such, Priam is the father of one of Achilles' most hated foes. Despite such a status, however, Priam arrives as "a suppliant" to Achilles, evoking the world of the father by stating:

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[19] Nortwick, p. 35

[20] Nortwick, p. 39

[21] Nortwick, p. 39

> "Achilles, like the gods, remember your father, one who
> is of years like mine, and on the door-sill of sorrowful old age.
> And they who dwell nearby encompass him and afflict him,
> nor is there any to defend him against the wrath, the destruction.
> Yet surely he, when he hears of you and that you are still living,
> is gladdened within his heart and all of his days he is hopeful
> that he will see his beloved son come home from the Troad."

- The Iliad, Book 24, ll. 486-492

By evoking the memory of Achilles' own father, Priam thus provides Achilles with the final step needed to achieve masculine maturity. Priam's speech involves parallels between himself and Peleus, both with young sons whom protected their fathers. Yet the parallels end when Priam reminds Achilles that he at least still has the opportunity to return home alive, and Priam wishes for Achilles to show self-restraint on his "drive for dominance" by allowing the body of Hector the chance to return home as well. The fact that Achilles agrees to such self-restraint, shortly before the conclusion of *The Iliad*, signifies his maturity as a man; maturity noticeably lacking prior to his reunion with the world of the father, an act in turn that relied upon the breaking away from the bonds of the world of the mother. Similar self-restraint by Telemachus also leads to a successful resolution of *The Odyssey*, both in terms of success of Odysseus's plan and simultaneously the successful development of Telemachus as a young man. Prior to his reunion with the world of the father, Telemachus possessed competition and the drive for dominance; traits that Ancient Greek culture considered essential for masculinity. However, following his reunification with Odysseus, the plan to overthrow the suitors is successful due to Telemachus learning the necessity of self-restraint; such learning was only possible through the process of breaking away from Penelope. Thus, despite his insatiable desire to overthrow the suitors (a desire bred from the noble yet immature need to dominate the suitors), *The Odyssey* reaches a successful conclusion because "Once the plotting to throw the suitors is underway, [Telemachus] is completely reliable as a keeper of secrets, from his mother, from the servants, and of course

from the suitors."[22]

       The Iliad and *The Odyssey* demonstrate that, from the perspective of the Ancient Greeks, a mother attempting to fill the vacancy of an absent father is detrimental and detaining to the development of sons. Such a situation is the catalyst that sets the plots of the epic poems in motion. While the mothers of both poems are nurturing and caring towards their sons, such behavior ultimately causes chaos and conflict. It is up to the sons to reset the balance of their worlds; an unbalance caused by their own immaturity due to the absence of the father. Breaking the bond with the mother and reuniting with the world of the father ultimately leads to the success of the sons in both the terms of the plot and the terms of their own masculinity. However, breaking the bond is not an easy task. While this chapter demonstrated the success story of sons who break the bond, the following chapters focus on sons whom are unable to break such a bond and the tragedies and conflicts that consequently occur.

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[22] Nortwick, p. 39

Chapter Two: The Death of the Patriarch

"Making the Bond Unbreakable in Macbeth"

The Iliad and *The Odyssey* demonstrate situations where sons undertake journeys in which they achieve masculinity and develop as mature young men; this maturity results through the act of "breaking the bond" with their mothers. Such breaking of the bond is not an easy task; the mother has been a constant source of both protection and nurturing. As such, the mother is both the only patriarchal and maternal figure that the son has ever known. The success of the sons within the Greek Epics in coming to terms with the world of their fathers is because the sons are able to break apart the bonds to their mothers; thus, the breaking of the bond contributes directly to the successful resolutions of the Greek Epics. The young men establish themselves as masculine men without necessarily adhering to the teachings of their mothers as the means by which to establish and define themselves as men. Sons do not always break the bond itself, although this happens to be the case (and part of the conflict and character development) within the Greek Epics. However, the failure to break the bond with the mother can be just as potent of a conflict within literature and/or film.

Furthermore, while the enormous power that the true, biological mother can have in the development and affirmation of masculinity within the son, (such as Thetis and Penelope), it is important to understand that maternal power can manifest itself and impress/enforce masculine ideals upon a son figure from another source that is not the "biological mother." William Shakespeare provides a notoriously infamous example of a female character who wields maternal power to control a "son figure" through the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth within the tragedy of *Macbeth*. Despite being married to, rather than the mother of, Macbeth, the character of Lady Macbeth, according to Janet Adelman's book *Suffocating*

Mothers, nevertheless wields a power that Macbeth is "terribly subject" to. This power is especially potent because, as Adelman points out, there is a lack of a biological father to provide Macbeth with a biological male source of masculinity.[23] Adelman is correct in identifying that the "mother source" of *Macbeth*, in the absence of a true biological mother, is "diffused throughout the play, evoked primarily by the figures of the witches and Lady Macbeth."[24] Indeed, Adelman claims that Macbeth undertakes a form of "bloody rebirth," replacing his original origin with a "dangerous maternal origin through the violence of self-creation" and through a "decisive masculine act."[25] In other words, Adelman claims that the initial defining act of Macbeth, which was the bloody execution of the Scottish traitor Macdonwald, was a masculine moment in which Macbeth attempts to recreate himself as a masculine figure through the act of violence. At the same time, this is simultaneously and paradoxically a maternal moment, in which Macbeth reappropriates his masculinity by undergoing a form of "bloody rebirth." The moment in which Macbeth slays the traitor Macdonwald is a masculine action; however, the fact that Macbeth later has the desire to affirm his masculinity through the process of leaving the mother behind (in this case, breaking away from the mother character diffused through both Lady Macbeth and the witches) is also relevant. Such is the strength of the bond that the maternal figures of Lady Macbeth and the witches have over Macbeth that even in the process of attempting to break away from the mother through masculine actions, his very actions ironically strengthen the bond that the mother has over him.

   The bond rests upon the existence or the lack of existence of a father figure within

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[23] Adelman, Janet. *Suffocating Mothers.* New York: Routledge, Chapman, and Hall, Inc., 1992. p. 130

[24] Adelman, p. 130-131

[25] Adelman, p. 130

Macbeth's life. Recall that, like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the lack of a father figure is instrumental to the initial conflict of the epics. The necessity for the sons to achieve maturity and reconcile with the world of the father by breaking away from the mother is a necessity that applies to the development of Macbeth as well. However, while the Greek Epics placed the son figures in situations where the son figures could take the journey required for development and maturity away from their detaining mothers with relative ease, Macbeth does not have this luxury. This is due to the ever-present Lady Macbeth and the supernatural prophecies of the witches that consistently haunt Macbeth's mind. *Macbeth* is constructed to greatly exaggerate the masculinity of Macbeth in order to portray that the efforts of Macbeth to break the control of the mother figure through the process of "bloody masculine actions" in fact carries out the will of the mother. Adelman sums up this up, pointing out the "paradox through which [Macbeth] is never more [Lady Macbeth's and the witches] creature than when he attempts to escape [the mother figure of Lady Macbeth and the witches]."[26]

The attempt by Macbeth to break away from the mother source ironically empowers the mother's hold over him. His desperation to prove his masculinity and solidify his power as a masculine man rests upon his domination over other men. To achieve this, however, the solidification (in his mind) of his masculinity rests upon an act that will simultaneously make the bond between "the mother" and "the son" unbreakable: the death of a patriarchal or dominating power (in other words, any power that can result in a loss of influence over the son figure). The act of patricide is empowering to the mother figure. Manipulating the son figure into doing her bidding is the key through which the mother figure attempts to create an unbreakable bond between mother and son while simultaneously severing any potential or actual restrictions that

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[26] Adelman, p. 130

the "patriarchal" or "dominating" power has upon the mother. Within the specific example of *Macbeth*, the rightful king of Scotland, Duncan, serves as a patriarchal power that stifles the power and ambitions of both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. It is important to take note of the fact that Lady Macbeth identifies the possibility of political power through murder. This ambition is similar to the bloody action in which Macbeth both asserts his own masculinity and achieves political power through the slaying of the traitor Macdonwald. Thus, Lady Macbeth suggests that patricide is a means thorough which Macbeth can further affirm his masculinity, both through the bloody action of murder itself and through the political power that such violent, ambitious actions could potentially provide him. The lack of a true father figure results in Macbeth relying upon "the mother" figure diffused within Lady Macbeth as a source of both protection and nurturing; however, Lady Macbeth is also a means by which masculinity is enforced within Macbeth. Recall that the masculinity within Macbeth is very similar to the masculinity that initially resides within Achilles. This creates a contradictory paradox; Lady Macbeth enforces masculine traits within Macbeth, yet the fact that Lady Macbeth (as the mother) is the one enforcing masculinity further solidifies the bond between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Similar to the Homeric Epics, this is presented as problematic; masculine traits such as the ambitious drive to dominate other men can indeed develop within sons despite lacking a father figure, yet ultimately, *Macbeth* demonstrates that men who rely upon mothers to enforce their own masculinity ultimately are presented as immature. Like Achilles, Macbeth is also a great warrior and capable of violent, bloody action; however, both sons are incomplete in their development due to the lack of a father figure as a source to enforce and guide their masculinity.

Such is the power of Lady Macbeth over the development of the masculinity of Macbeth that Macbeth changes his plans when Lady Macbeth calls his manhood into question. In a

moment similar to Telemachus and the assertion that he places over Penelope in regards to both the fate of his father's estate and his own development as a man, Macbeth initially attempts to assert his domination and control over his masculinity. He does this by forcefully stating to Lady Macbeth, "We will proceed no further in this business/He hath honored me of late, and I have bought/Golden opinions from all sorts of people."[27] At this particular moment, Macbeth is literally conflicted between two traditional "masculine traits;" allegiance and honor to Duncan contrasts directly with personal glory, power, and domination over other men. Lady Macbeth, through her ambition, becomes an enforcer of masculinity for her husband. She even appropriates a "masculine trait" that ultimately leads to the conflict and the tragedy of the play: the empowering of the son (and indirectly, the mother) through the murder of the patriarch by the hand of the son. Lady Macbeth specifically calls upon masculine and feminine traits when she enforces her will over Macbeth; she immediately calls out Macbeth's masculinity, telling him "When you durst do it, you were a man; And to be more than what you were, you would be so much more the man."[28] Lady Macbeth impresses upon Macbeth the only "masculine traits" worth having; similar to the masculinity of the Ancient Greeks, such traits rely upon self-achievement through dominance over men, as is the case of Macbeth usurping the throne from Duncan and solidifying his own personal power. Unlike the Greeks, however, Lady Macbeth considers the trait of self-restraint (a masculine trait bestowed upon the young men of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* that ultimately lead to their successful development as men) as anything but masculine. Indeed, she urges immediate action rather than self-restraint. This is seen when she enforces that such immediate actions are required in order to solidify himself as a "respected and

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[27] Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth.* New York: The Penguin Group, 2000. Act 1.7, ll. 31-33

[28] Shakespeare, Act. 1.7, ll. 49-51

masculine man;" she claims that such hesitation does in fact "unmake him"[29] as a man. Thus

does Shakespeare present the flaw of a maternal presence enforcing masculinity; Lady Macbeth

is indeed effective is enforcing some preconceived masculine traits within Macbeth, as

demonstrated by her vehement support of his ambition and his potential ascension to the throne

of Scotland. However, the fact that she rejects other masculine traits such as the filial loyalty of a

subject to his monarch and the need for self control ultimately leads to the immaturity of

Macbeth, which results in the tragedy of his incomplete development as a man.

Lady Macbeth differs greatly from the mothers of the Greek Epics in that she does not

actively detain the masculinity of Macbeth. Indeed, her desire to enforce masculine traits of

ambition and dominance over other men within Macbeth is so powerful that she brutally rejects

preconceived "feminine traits" of gentleness and maternity. Ironically, such a rejection occurs

after a revelation of tenderness; she claims to have maternal instincts by stating, "I have given

suck and know/How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me."[30] However, immediately

following the revelation of maternal instincts and the potential for nurturing feelings, Lady

Macbeth reveals that while she is perfectly capable of playing the role of the mother, she is just

as capable of enforcing preconceived masculine traits of violence and ambition. As such, the

mother figure of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* encourages the son to actively achieve masculinity and

domination over other men, in contrast to the mothers of Greek Literature and their continuous

detaining of the development of their sons. However, Lady Macbeth shares a commonality with

Thetis and Penelope in that, while Lady Macbeth is far from a nurturing figure to Macbeth

(ironically, she plays the role of active enforcer of masculinity, a role traditionally undertaken by

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[29] Shakespeare, Act. 1.7, ll. 54

[30] Shakespeare, Act. 1.7 ll. 54-55

the father figure), her involvement with the masculinity and development of Macbeth is not necessarily beneficial to his maturity as a man. Like the young men of the Greek Epics, the "maturity" of Macbeth relies upon learning masculinity as a whole. Lady Macbeth enforces ambition, violence, and dominance over other men, which results in Macbeth becoming a character similar to Achilles; he is a formidable and violent individual lacking in self-restraint and overly reliant upon the maternity provided by Lady Macbeth. Thus does Macbeth demonstrate an inability to fully develop as a mature, masculine man under the vehement but ultimately limited enforcement of Lady Macbeth.

Lady Macbeth plays the dual role of a familial wife to Macbeth while simultaneously using a form of political maternity to enforce his masculinity. Recall that the initial political nature of *Macbeth* results in Lady Macbeth being married to Macbeth (on a familial level) while simultaneously having to submit to King Duncan on a political level; thus, while she is the wife of Macbeth, she is bound to the will of Duncan as well. To free herself from the political husband that is Duncan, she must rely upon a man that ultimately has a filial relationship with Duncan: her husband. Lady Macbeth thus fits within the paradigm of a maternal figure using her son to eliminate a restrictive force. Despite her brutal effectiveness in exercising power vicariously through her husband, it is still restricted by limitations. The limitations of her biological sex prevent her from acting directly; however, her power is also limited by Duncan, as Duncan's political superiority over her husband is simultaneously indirect political superiority over her. Thus, her removal of Duncan from power in order to provide Macbeth with an empty throne to ascend to accomplishes a dual objective. She removes a restrictive force that prevents her from exercising the full extent of her power while simultaneously placing a son through which she shares the maternal bond with in a position of power.

Duncan, however, is more than simply a patriarch. Adelman describes Duncan as taking on both maternal and patriarchal characteristics, as he is the source of masculine authority through which the other male characters seek to appease in order to achieve "name and gift." She also describes him as "the source of all nurturance," resulting in another source of maternal power that sharply differs from the "witches' poisonous cauldron and Lady Macbeth's gal-filled breasts."[31] Thus, Adelman centers on the threatening nature of Duncan in regards to the specific "mother source" that is the witches and Lady Macbeth. Duncan serves to potentially eliminate the need for the mother source that is Lady Macbeth and the witches. He possess the masculine qualities that the son figure of Macbeth may seek to aspire to; thus, does Duncan potentially have the means to possess the qualities that the mother figure tries to reappropriate in order to control the son. He also possesses maternal qualities; Duncan is threatening in that he is not only a patriarchal character that provides the masculinity that the son figure desperately craves, but he is also another "mother source" that surrounds the son figure himself. This is a threat to the Lady Macbeth and the witches. Because such a patriarchal force is threatening to the control that the mother has over Macbeth, she will respond with aggression and force in order to ensure that her control over her son is not disrupted in any way. Lady Macbeth's ambitious plans and constant pressure for Macbeth to murder Duncan is not only a means to solidify her own power through the removal of a restrictive source. It is also a means to remove a potentially serious threat to the control she has over the son figure. The fact that Macbeth, rather than Lady Macbeth, is the individual to carry out the murder is important, as it demonstrates the level of control that Lady Macbeth has managed to enact over her husband through the "binding" that has occurred and the reliance that he has in her to affirm his own masculinity.

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[31] Adelman, p. 132

The death of the patriarch, particularly a death caused at the hands of the son, does not come without consequences to the son figure. *Macbeth* demonstrates the tragic irony of how the death of a patriarchal figure, specifically motivated by the mother in order to solidify her status as "protector" (and thus, "the bond") in fact is one of the most dangerous things that a son can do. Adelman focuses on this specific topic; she claims that "the abdication of protective paternal power (absent with the death of Duncan) seems to release the destructive power of a female chaos."[32] Thus, the mother figure actively transforms from the relatively controlled figure seeking to make the bond between herself and her son unbreakable through the death of the patriarch (personified by Lady Macbeth) to the witches that "in Macbeth, [embody] agents of storm and disorder."[33] While Macbeth attempts to establish his masculine dominance through the symbolic patricide of Duncan, this action ironically does not help him establish his masculinity (contrary to the claims of Lady Macbeth). Furthermore, it leaves Macbeth without a father figure. The absence of a father figure leaves him effectively helpless to the terrible will of "the mother." What makes him all the more helpless is that her will was voracious enough to motivate him to the act of patricide in the name of masculinity, which ironically resulted in the loss of a benevolent protector without achieving the masculinity that his mother claimed would he be his once he committed patricide. Ultimately, Macbeth is unable to escape the will of the mother; the witches in their role as the mother of Macbeth following the death of Duncan (indeed, Hecate refers to Macbeth as "a wayward son"[34] of the witches) ultimately binds Macbeth to their will by subjecting him to prophecies. The greatest tragedy of Macbeth is that such prophecies contribute

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[32] Adelman, p. 113

[33] Adelman, p. 113

[34] Shakespeare, Act 3.5, ll. 11

directly to his doom. From the very start of the play, the prophecies of the mother (the witches) stir him to ambition. The mother then enforces such ambition through the form of Lady Macbeth, and following the permanent binding of the son to the mother (through the death of Duncan), Macbeth passes the point of redemption in the eyes of his countrymen. Ironically, both Macbeth and the Scots whom oppose him assume that Macbeth acted out of free will and personal ambition; tragically, while this is far from the truth, this does not save Macbeth from his fate. Indeed, the chaotic danger that the mother places Macbeth in threatens to engulf the entirety of Scotland as well. As such, while such chaotic power and danger stem from the mother, Macbeth unwittingly carries out her terrible will. While this was through the belief that he was establishing his own personal masculinity through the dominance of other men, such actions inevitably leads to the tragic conclusion of the play. In order to save Scotland from the chaotic power the mother has achieved through the death of the patriarch, it is the son himself who must be destroyed so that the mother no longer has the means by which to exercise her terrible will.

Macbeth is similar to Achilles and Telemachus in that the conflict of the plot occurs out of a lack of mature masculinity within the son figure; such a conflict also similarly occurs out of the lack of a father figure. However, the similarities end at this point, for while the young men of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* successfully escaped the bond of their mothers, *Macbeth* demonstrates how the strength of the bond means that sometimes, sons are unable to escape "the bond." Furthermore, *Macbeth* highlights the threatening nature of the patriarchy; indeed, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* demonstrate that the patriarchy has the potential to dissolve the bond between "the mother" and "the son." Ironically, Macbeth further demonstrates how the mother may reappropriate the patriarchy; the death of the patriarch is a means by which the mother can make the bond between herself and the son unbreakable. The son cannot escape the trap, as he

was the one who created his own "personal trap" in the first place, yet Macbeth does not reside

in his self-created trap very long. The chaotic state that the mother places Scotland in through the

will of the son is relatively short lived, along with Macbeth himself following the death of the

patriarch. *Macbeth* focuses on the short-term consequences of the death of the patriarch and the

immediate ramifications of such an act. However, as we will see in the following chapters, an

unbreakable bond that is long-term has fantastic yet ultimately detrimental, tragic and/or self-

defeating consequences for the son, which in turn creates chaos and conflict in the world

surrounding the son.

CHAPTER 3: Defending the Mother's Existence

"Desperately Needing 'Mother' in Psycho"

Hitchcock scholar Tania Modleski writes within her book *The Women Who Knew Too Much; Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* that "fear of the devouring, voracious mother is central in much of Hitchcock's work."[35] Indeed, it is reasonable to argue that one of the most enduring villains of classical Hollywood Cinema takes the form of a "devouring mother;" by this, I refer to Mrs. Bates of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*. The most shocking aspect of the "devouring nature" of Mrs. Bates is that she has the power to install a sense of fear in both her potential victims and her son (arguably, another victim of her devouring nature). Norman Bates is not blameless for the actions that occur throughout the film. However, it is important to understand that, like Macbeth and the young men of the Greek Epics, Norman Bates is bound to his mother as a source of his masculinity and approval, and his struggle to break such a bond plays an important aspect in his personal character development.

What differentiates Norman Bates is that unlike Macbeth, Achilles, and Telemachus, Norman Bates is not specifically a dynamic character who undergoes a form of transformation throughout the course of the story. At the time of his introduction within *Psycho* itself, Bates has already undertaken many steps similar to Macbeth; steps that ultimately lead to the tragedy of Macbeth, which mirrors the steps taken prior to the events of the film that resulted in the tragically disturbed character of Norman Bates himself. Like Macbeth, Bates was unable to achieve the success that the young men of the Greek Epics were able to achieve; they were both unable to successfully break "the bond" between themselves and their respective mothers.

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[35] Modleski, Tania. *The Women Who Knew Too Much.* New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2005. p. 109

Furthermore, such a bond is solidified by similar circumstances. These circumstances include an initial absence of a true father figure, the possible inclusion of a father figure to take the vacant spot, and the death of such a patriarchal figure. However, while sharing some commonality in the developmental back-story of the characters, *Macbeth* and *Psycho* proceed along very different courses. Although both firmly demonstrate that the absence of a father figure and a mother figure who attempts to enforce masculinity and certain perspectives are central to the main conflicts of each specific story, the conflicts themselves manifest in different ways. Whereas *Macbeth* centers on how the death of the patriarch immediately causes major repercussions and conflict for the son figure, Norman Bates is introduced to the audience as someone who has already undergone the major events following the death of the patriarch. As such, the central conflict of *Psycho* stems not from the attempt by the mother figure to establish maternal dominance over her son through the death of a patriarch but rather, the consequences and conflicts that occur when both the mother and the son figure attempt to <u>sustain</u> the existence of such dominance.

The initial meeting between Marion Crane and Norman Bates illustrates a fascinating aspect of the conditions behind the act of sustaining the existence of the mother; during a memorable conversation between Crane and Bates, Bates comments on how people "[Are] all in our private trap…we scratch and claw…and for all of it, we never budge an inch."[36] At this specific moment, Bates is defining "the trap" that he finds himself in; the trap of having an unbreakable, ever present bond with the mother. This is a bond that he cannot separate himself from despite his initial appearance of earnestly wishing to escape such a bond. Although he initially presents his predicament as something that doesn't bother him ("I was born into [my

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[36] *Psycho*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Paramount Pictures, 1960. Blu-Ray.

private trap], I don't mind it."[37]), moments later he reveals the depths of his trap; when told by

Marion Crane that he should mind the situation that he is in, he responds "Oh, I do, but I say I

don't."[38] The tragically voracious nature of the son's dependence on his mother through the bond

is hinted at through this discourse. Norman feels an uncontrollable subconscious need to protect

the existence of his mother and to sustain the bond that has established between them, yet he is

fully aware of how sustaining the existence of the mother is analogous to sustaining the existence

of the private trap that he vehemently expresses his resentment towards. Robin Wood describes

the condition of being trapped by "the bond" in the book *Hitchcock's Films* as "the condition of

permanent anguish whence development becomes impossible."[39] This implies that Bates is

potentially aware of the troublesome and disturbing nature of his reliance upon his mother.

However, the fact that his previous actions in the past have made the bond with his mother

unbreakable leaves him unable to escape to a condition where his development beyond a son

devoted to his mother is possible. Without the possibility of development, Norman is reduced to

the unenviable position of protecting the only existence he is capable of experiencing; that of a

son who is devoted to protecting the existence of the mother figure. Again, the discourse Norman

has with Marion Crane reveals his inability to escape his own private trap, as he states,

"Sometimes, when she talks to me like that, I feel I'd like to go up there, and curse her, and-and-

and leave her forever! Or at least defy her! But I know I can't. She's ill."[40] The private trap and

the inescapable need for Norman to ensure the continued existence of his private trap is powerful

enough that, ironically, we learn later within the film that Norman's protective instincts extend to

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[37] *Psycho*

[38] *Psycho*

[39] Wood, Robin. *Hitchcock's Films.* New York: Castle Books, 1969. p. 116

[40] *Psycho*

such an extremity that he eventually attempts to protect the mother from herself.

The presence of the mother is inescapable, as she is constantly watching Norman and making sure that he carries out his protective duties to ensure her continued existence. The fact that he constantly acknowledges "her" existence throughout the film demonstrates his conscious acknowledgement of the presence of the mother; the mother figure does not exist outside of his conscious knowledge. Close analysis of the scenic composition of the Bates Motel (from Bates's personal room where he shares a bite to eat with Marion Crane to the room that Marion Crane was to spend the night in) reveals that birds play a symbolic motif through which the mother is constantly surveying both Norman and anything that might threaten her existence. A fascinating aspect of his need to protect his mother is that Norman Bates is so protective of his mother that his initially pleasant and mild-mannered decorum abruptly takes a far more sinister turn the moment Marion Crane suggests that his mother is placed within an institution. At this moment, Marion Crane herself takes on maternal qualities as she attempts to nurture Norman Bates from the seemingly overbearing mother that Norman has described to her. Norman responds that he would never subject his mother to such an institution, commenting on how he despises the idea of "cruel eyes studying [her]."[41] His defensive and protective instincts again refer back to the private trap and his need to sustain the existence of such a trap, a trap born out of the bond to his mother. Indeed, he continues his passionate defense of his mother by expressing his personal thoughts aloud, stating, "My mother there? Oh, but she's harmless! She's as harmless as one of those stuffed birds!"[42] Ironically, such a statement is far from the truth. The fact that he refers back to the stuffed birds relates to the symbolism of an "ever-present mother," a mother who

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[41] *Psycho*

[42] *Psycho*

ironically subjects Norman Bates to the very fate he claims to protect his mother from. Bates is

under the constant cruelty of "cruel eyes studying [him]," rendering the claims that both "the

mother" and the "stuffed birds" are "harmless" as falsities.

Bates is constantly surrounded by the devouring presence of the mother; the private trap

is inescapable, at all times and in all locations. While not as disturbing or evident as the stuffed

birds within the office that constantly surround and watch him (much like the presence of the

mother), the mother impresses her will through other means. The room that Marion Crane stays

in is filled with birds as well, symbolically representing that in addition to constantly observing

Norman Bates, the mother's presence is all-consuming, constantly watching for any threat to her

existence. The fact that "mother" resides within the psychotic mind of Norman Bates as a

persona (rather than an actual person) demonstrates an interesting paradigm; the mother persona

killed Marion Crane because, according to forensic psychiatrist Dr. Fred Richmond during the

concluding scenes of the film, the mother persona felt her existence threatened. The existence

was threatened due to Norman's attraction to Marion. Similar to Macbeth, the mother persona's

dominance over her son was threatened to such an extremity that (like Macbeth), the only means

by which to maintain control over the son was to have the son kill any threat to the existence that

she was used to; an existence where she has full control over her son. The fact that Norman

Bates himself (as it is later revealed) killed Marion is also similar to Macbeth; by carrying out

the deed, they themselves solidify the unbreakable bond through the murder of a threatening

presence. A final parallel between Macbeth and Norman Bates is the symbolic "washing the

blood" off of their hands immediately following the murder of the threatening presence; like

Macbeth, *Psycho* demonstrates that merely cleaning up the physical evidence of a crime does not

wash away the guilt of the son. While guilt plays an important role in both *Macbeth* and *Psycho*,

Norman Bates is perhaps even more susceptible to guilt than Macbeth is. Both sons are driven to madness and tragedy due to guilt, but in Norman's case, we learn by the end of *Psycho* that guilt itself has retrospectively created the mother; not the actual biological woman that was Norman Bates's mother, but the devouring mother persona whom Norman Bates is forever bound to.

It is during the moments immediately following the famous "shower scene" where the mother murders Marion Crane and when Norman Bates attempts to clean up his mother's crime that Norman reveals the depth of his need for the mother's existence. This is in sharp contrast to a claim made moments earlier by Bates, in which he repeatedly (though unconvincingly) states to Marion Crane about the depth of "mother's" need for *him*. Even during the cleaning up of the murder, "mother" is constantly enforcing her will upon her son. This is something that cannot be hidden from; the birds within Marion Crane's room that were initially watching her apply to Norman as well, constantly ensuring that he defend her existence. Even Marion Crane herself is a figure through which the mother enforces her will upon Bates; her death reduces her to the same symbolic motif through which the mother's presence makes herself known. Like the stuffed birds, Crane's dead body (more specifically, her "dead eyes") cruelly and constantly study Norman, making her presence known, and ensuring that Bates continues to defend her existence through the disposal of Crane (the fact that Marion's last name "Crane" is a bird is also no coincidence). Again, this is ironic because Norman Bates was the individual who murdered Marion Crane, effectively making his efforts to clean up after the mother synonymous with protecting himself. However, this in fact demonstrates the strength of the bond that his mother's existence has over Norman, in that by ensuring his continued existence through his attempts to hide the mother's crime, Norman is also simultaneously ensuring that his mother's existence is sustained as well. The bond between Norman and "mother" is so unbreakable that their fates are

intertwined.

Such an unbreakable bond can only occur through what Modleski refers to as the "haunting presence" of the mother that has resulted in Norman's "psychic obliteration."[43] Like *Macbeth*, the haunting presence of the mother is diffused practically everywhere around Norman Bates; from the birds surrounding him to his fractured psyche to his victims himself does the mother make her presence felt. Modleski refers to the mother's presence as "defilement," claiming that the feminine/maternal is inherently subversive to male symbolic systems and masculine notions of identity and order.[44] I would argue that the "defilement" that the mother's presence causes is subversive to another aspect of masculinity as well: the development of Norman's masculinity. Like the young men of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, Norman's masculinity cannot develop while in the presence of his mother; however, as we have come to see, Norman's entire existence depends upon the existence of his mother, making the development of his own masculinity impossible. Thus, as a son who merely serves as a means through which his mother can exert her terrible will, Bates is like Macbeth in that his own actions of defilement are identical to his mother's defilement. The cleaning scene is such defilement; Modleski refers to the cleaning scene as a "ritual of defilement" conducted by Norman following the "ritual of defilement" conducted by "mother."[45] The ritual of defilement by Norman is thus symbolic of Norman's devotion to his mother; the length of the cleaning scene demonstrates the importance of the action by Norman to appease the mother and to symbolize Norman's bond to his mother. The tragedy of Norman Bates is that, like Macbeth, Bates's circumstances mirror that of the fate

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[43] Modleski, p. 109

[44] Modleski, p. 109

[45] Modleski, p. 109

of his victims. The devouring presence of the mother has figuratively "swallowed up" Norman's mind. Likewise, "mother" has also swallowed up Marion Crane through her murder and the disposal of her body in the swamp, the conclusion to the ritual of defilement that Norman undertakes as a means to both defend his mother's existence while simultaneously demonstrating his need for her. Fittingly, the conclusion of the ritual of defilement reveals (briefly) the mother's existence *within* Norman; as the scene fades to black, Norman smiles slightly as the car is swallowed up. Thus, the mother has swallowed up Norman Bates and Marion Crane at the exact same moment, smiling in satisfaction because a threat to her existence has been taken care of by the hand of her son. This in turn is a cause for equal satisfaction as it demonstrates his willingness to do anything to protect her.

Norman Bates demonstrates his need for his mother and the lengths he is willing to defend her existence through the ritual of defilement and the murder of Marion Crane; however, the mother herself never makes a physical appearance throughout the majority of the film, despite her suffocating presence and the defilement that such a presence causes to those around her. The film itself reveals the reasoning behind this: its twist ending (that the mother of Norman Bates is in fact dead, and that the mother that is the primary antagonist of the film and Bates are in fact the same person). In the resolving scene of the film, the history behind Norman Bates and his mother reveals one of the most shocking aspects of the bond between Bates and his mother. Bates is fiercely protective of his mother's existence; however, we ironically learn that Bates is so protective of his mother's existence that he ultimately attempts to protect his mother's existence against the actual "physical mother" herself. Having "been born into a private trap," his dependence upon his mother also made him extremely jealous; furthermore, it is described that Bates was born into an existence where he was raised alone with his mother following the death

of his father. However, when his mother took a lover, the lover threatened "the mother" that Bates was inclined to protect; thus, the killing of his "physical mother" was to preserve her existence as he knew it. As he was already bound to his mother, Bates was forced to defend and preserve her existence in his mind, ultimately creating a "mother persona" that he would forever defend. Thus, while the mother persona is a voracious presence that ultimately devours the son, Bates's case is fascinating in that his dependence upon his mother is ironically a dependence upon his "idea of mother." Such irony is no less dangerous, however, because the need for Bates to defend the idea of his mother's existence is so powerful that it drives him to extreme actions of violence in order to defend the mother's existence. Again, he is forever bound to this existence due to his guilt in murdering his mother years before the events of the film.

The relationship between the son and the mother within *Psycho* is exceptionally complex due to the mother existing as less of an actual biological person and more of a presence that is "diffused" throughout the setting of the film (to an even greater extent than *Macbeth*.) Nevertheless, the diffusion of the mother makes her even more sinister; her initial "physical appearance" (the shower sequence) was described in an interview between Francois Truffaut and Alfred Hitchcock by Hitchcock himself as intentionally the most "violent scene of the film to create a 'harrowing memory.'" Such a "harrowing memory," from Hitchcock's own perspective, was useful in "[carrying] over to the suspenseful passages that come later;"[46] thus does Hitchcock create a setting that mirrors Bates himself. The "shower sequence" obliterates any sense of security and identity through a "harrowing" moment; in a similar fashion, the murder of his mother by his own hands is the defining moment in which Bates's own identity is forever obliterated, with the memory of his mother "carrying over" into the rest of his life. Like the film

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[46] Truffaut, François. *Hitchcock*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967. p. 210

itself, the memory of such a harrowing moment cannot be escaped or forgotten. Even when such a moment has passed, the consequences of such a moment forever bind Bates to his mother's presence; a presence that the "shower sequence" forces the audience to also forever be bound to.

Identity plays an important part in the development of the son; Bates is another example of how the lack of a father figure and an overbearing mother obliterates both the chance of development and the achievement (from the son's perspective) of a masculine identity. In Norman's specific case, such complete, mature identity cannot develop nor can his masculinity due to his personal identity forever coexisting with the identity of "the mother." The identity crisis within Norman Bates and his inability to establish his own masculinity over the domineering presence of his mother is the direct cause of the conflict within the film *Psycho*. While the film does not explicitly reveal that the identity crisis initially develops within Norman due to a lack of a father figure and overbearing mother until the conclusion, the lack of a father figure is nevertheless noticeable throughout the majority of the film. *Psycho* is not the only film that highlights how the lack of a father figure and an inability to establish masculinity constantly causes conflict and chaos in son characters. Such an identity crisis within son figures due to a lack of a father figure continues to haunt other son figures within contemporary and modern film as well.

Chapter 4: Rebellious Sons

"Creating an (Incomplete) Father in Fight Club"

The "crisis of identity" within sons when it comes to establishing their own masculinity has existed for centuries; such a crisis drove the young men of the Greek Epics to take a journey to leave the world of their mothers behind to reconnect with the world of the father. A similar crisis drove Macbeth to the murder of Duncan (ultimately and ironically carrying out the will of the mother figure diffused through Lady Macbeth and the witches, forever binding him to her will while removing a threat to the bond). Finally, Norman Bates demonstrates such a need for the mother that he ironically seeks to protect her existence by any means necessary; this results in an act of binding (the murder of his mother) that binds his mother's existence to him forever while simultaneously obliterating his identity. However, while such a crisis of identity ultimately drove and contributed to the conflicts that the sons were forced to face, each of the sons shared the commonality that they did not directly challenge the mother herself in order to establish their own identities. Even Bates, who murdered his own mother, established the "mother identity" as a means to cope with his own guilt, ironically fracturing his own identity in the process. *Fight Club*, a modern film adaptation of a Chuck Palahniuk novel and directed by David Fincher, shifts perspectives. Like other son figures, The Narrator experiences an identity crisis, resulting in an inability for development and maturity. Unlike other son figures, his immaturity causes him to initially conflict directly with the mother.

In her book *Extra-Ordinary Men*, Nicola Rehling describes The Narrator as someone who personifies "the ability of white heterosexual masculinity to stand as the universal

identity."[47] However, she also claims that the protagonist paradoxically also experiences "the

sense of a profound absence of identity, articulating the need for identity politics…and

appeal[ing] to victim status in order to rid them of the burden of their oppressive ordinariness."[48]

Thus does Rehling center on the cause of the conflict between the son and the mother. The son

figure adheres to what is considered modern societal norms of masculinity, yet such adherence

does not provide him with what he considers a masculine identity, resulting in his belief that his

current lack of masculinity is due to an overbearing presence of femininity and maternity.

Indeed, within the opening scenes of the film, The Narrator firmly establishes his belief as a

victim to a detaining mother; he describes his current generation of young men by claiming,

"Like so many others, I have become a slave to the IKEA Nesting Instinct."[49] Such phrases

directly imply his disdain for society. The mother of *Fight Club* is thus diffused as a constant

presence surrounding the narrator and inhibiting his development in a similar manner to

"mother" from Psycho. The mother impeding The Narrator's maturity is society itself, thus

making The Narrator's direct conflict with the mother exceptionally chaotic (as the film later

reveals). His description of himself as "a slave" also resembles Bates's description of a "private

trap." Both characters were born into a state of having been bound to their mothers, both are

unable to escape such binding, and the fact that The Narrator describes society as an "IKEA

Nesting Instinct" demonstrates his attachment to a comfortable lifestyle that is similar to

maternal nurturing. This is similar to Bates' attachment to "mother's existence".

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[47] Rehling, Nicola. *Extra-Ordinary Men : White Heterosexual Masculinity in Contemporary Popular Cinema.*
Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009. p. 2

[48] Rehling, p. 2

[49] *Fight Club*. Dir. David Fincher. 20th Century Fox, 1999. DVD.

Unlike Bates, the subjective and unreliable nature of The Narrator gives insight into his perspectives of the bond. He demonstrates his opinions on how he is convinced that the bond is emasculating by nature and how it is the direct source of his identity crisis, claiming, "I'd flip through catalogs and wonder, 'What kind of dining set defines me as a person?'…We used to read pornography. Now it was the Horchow collection."[50] While darkly comical and crude, The Narrator early on reveals his dissatisfaction with his own identity as a man. The only identity he believes that sons without a father figure (like himself) are able to establish in modern society is through the highly feminized practice of consumerism. This practice is breed out of the "IKEA Nesting Instinct" instilled in them by highly maternal society and such a practice provides sons comfort and a nurturing presence. Similar to the Greek Epics, however, The Narrator perceives such a practice as detaining to their masculine identities. Furthermore, The Narrator claims that the dominating presence of the mother of society is so severe that men cannot establish their masculinity by traditional means. His sarcastic remark about men shifting their attentions from pornography to sales catalogs is the ultimate slur on how he perceives heterosexual masculinity has become overly feminized. From his perspective, the traditional ultimate means to establish heterosexual masculinity (sexual intercourse and desire with/for women) has been replaced by a practice that (from his perspective) symbolizes an overdependence on the mother of society to define one's identity.

The Narrator thus establishes what Rehling defines as "hysteria." She claims, "Male hysteria takes a variety of forms."[51] I would argue that such hysteria takes the form of both Norman Bates "mother persona" in *Psycho* and the persona of Tyler Durden for The Narrator in

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[50] *Fight Club*

[51] Rehling, p. 69

Fight Club. This hysteria is a direct result of a lack of identity and thus, a lack of existence; for Bates, his identity rests upon the existence of "mother," whereas The Narrator's hysteria from a lack of identity results in the creation of Tyler Durden. Like Macbeth and Bates, The Narrator faces a harrowing moment that ultimately obliterates his identity. In the case of The Narrator, the harrowing moment is the chaotic destruction of an identity that he has already expressed as overly feminized due to his detainment within an overly maternal society. The obliteration of his identity was the explosive obliteration of his apartment; the destruction of his consumer goods and possessions is thus symbolic of the destruction of an identity that he resented. However, it is important to note that Tyler Durden (who the film later reveals is a persona that resides within The Narrator, similar to how the mother resides within Bates) was the person who shattered The Narrator's identity. As such, Tyler Durden's action of destruction is synonymous with The Narrator shattering his own identity. Initially, it would appear that The Narrator is following a similar path to the young men of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. He is attempting to break the bond between himself and an overly maternal and detaining society, seeking to reconnect with a "lost world of the father" in order to mature and establish his own masculinity. Unlike the young men of the Greek Epics, despite The Narrator's initial adherence to Tyler Durden's lifestyle and his belief that following Tyler's philosophy will ultimately help him achieve his masculinity, the nature of Tyler Durden ultimately deconstructs this perspective.

By the "nature" of Tyler Durden, I refer to the fact that Tyler Durden, like "mother" from *Psycho*, is not a physical human being but rather a figure drawn from the repressed anger and resentment of The Narrator. Rehling describes that the Tyler Durden persona is a response to the male hysteria of the "soft man" that is initially The Narrator; the "wild man" persona of Tyler

Durden thus "vents his repressed rage and anger, primarily at women."[52] Tyler Durden becomes

a father figure to the narrator because Durden initially achieves a similar objective to Odysseus

from *The Odyssey*. Through charisma, he establishes himself as a figure that leads The Narrator

away from the protective yet detaining "world of the mother." Fittingly, the initial "leading

away" occurs in the initial fight scene of the film; Tyler Durden surprisingly instructs The

Narrator to "hit [him] as hard as [he] can."[53] This spawns the philosophical ideology behind

"their" creation of Fight Club: that there are no winners or losers. Rather, "it is enduring pain

rather than inflicting pain that affirms virility."[54] Such a totalizing statement of affirming virility

(and thus masculinity), however, deconstructs itself from the moment that it is established. I

would argue that Fight Club, as an organization, utilizes the act of fighting and the enduring of

pain as a means by which to perform masculinity and to ensure masculine dominance.

Ultimately, such claims fail due to the totalizing nature of such statements; women are just as

capable of feeling pain as men, thus rendering the claim that enduring pain is the route to

masculinity as an absurdity. Thus, while Tyler Durden becomes a father figure to the son that is

The Narrator, because such a father figure was created from the psyche of an immature son

figure, the father figure is immature as well. As the preceding chapters have demonstrated,

immature sons are directly related to the conflict and chaos that surround them. The incomplete

father proves to be dangerous as well, as the immature father (who ultimately developed from an

overly detaining mother presence) of Tyler Durden constantly feeds The Narrator's hysteria of a

lack of identity. The means by which the incomplete father attempts to establish an identity for

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[52] Rehling, p. 69

[53] *Fight Club*

[54] Rehling, p. 67

the son (literally, the son trying to establish his own masculine identity), leads to chaos as well. Like Macbeth, The Narrator's journey to establish his own masculine identity by attempting to break away from the mother (specifically, his social deviance and his rejection of material possessions) ironically undermines his own identity while simultaneously contributing directly to the chaos and the conflict of the film. In addition, the fact that "incomplete fathers" are a source of chaotic development within sons highlights the importance of "true" father figures. Only true father figures can provide sons with the guidance needed to achieve mature masculinity. In the context of *Fight Club*, The Narrator does indeed develop masculine traits under Tyler Durden (such as a desire to stand apart from the maternal society that he has come to resent). However, the fact that Tyler Durden is incomplete as a father figure results in The Narrator traveling down a path that is not a *correct form* of masculinity. This *incorrect* masculinity results in chaos and destruction, particularly against the feminine and the maternal (symbolized by society and the character of Marla Singer). This contrasts to the correct form of masculinity achieved by Telemachus, which at least embraces some form of the feminine and coexists peacefully with it.

Tyler Durden, as a figure of The Narrator's imagination, is figuratively seductive to the Narrator because he initially does not take on the role of an incomplete father; rather, Tyler Durden initially plays the role of a fellow son dissatisfied with the suffocating presence that an overly maternal society plays in the lives of modern men. Indeed, Tyler "seduces" The Narrator into a world devoid of the mother; following the destruction of his apartment (and thus, the destruction of his identity, albeit an identity that had undergone severe irreparable emasculation), The Narrator contacts Tyler and meets him at a bar. It is at the bar that Tyler attempts to reshape The Narrator's perspective, albeit in a darkly humorous and crude manner. He claims that worse things are possible than the destruction of a feminized identity within a men by off-handedly

remarking about how "a woman could cut off [his] penis while [he's] sleeping and toss it out the window of a moving car."[55] Rehling states that at this particular moment, "Tyler [is] flippantly refer[ing] to the Bobbit case in the early '90s, where the symbolic castration of men at the hands of women was rendered literal."[56] Ironically, by bringing up a "literal castration" of the masculine by the feminine, Tyler is also commenting on The Narrator's former identity; such an identity was symbolically emasculating The Narrator, as the maternal femininity of society had forever figuratively castrated him. From Tyler's perspective (and thus, from the perspective of the deeply repressed hysteria of the Narrator), the obliteration of such an identity was required in order for "the son" to break the bond and thus have the freedom to create a new identity. Indeed, The Narrator undergoes his own ritual of defilement by defiling his own body when the Tyler Durden persona chemically burns his flesh; such a ritual of defilement directly relates to the ideology of Fight Club that enduring pain is a means to affirm masculinity. I would argue that the burning of the flesh is thus symbolic of The Narrator's desire to burn away a taint that the maternal society has left upon him. Again, this deconstructs itself for two distinct reasons; women can also endure pain and The Narrator is following the ideology of an incomplete father figure in order to achieve his masculinity. The fact that such ideology is destructive by nature contributes directly to the chaotic events of *Fight Club*. In addition, following the ritual of defilement, Tyler claims that, "it's only when we've lost everything that we're free to do anything."[57] From Tyler's perspective, a masculine identity that has been symbolically castrated is worse than having no identity at all; such is the extreme antagonism that Durden has against

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[55] *Fight Club*

[56] Rehling, p. 71

[57] *Fight Club*

the mother that from his perspective, the only feasible solution is not to repair a flawed identity but rather to destroy it.

It is the need for the destruction of identity and the destruction of the bond, rather than undertaking a journey to develop into a mature masculine identity by breaking away from the bond, which separates The Narrator considerably from the young men of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. While the Greek Epics demonstrated the perspective that breaking away from detaining mothers was a necessity in order for sons to reconnect with the world of the father, such breaking away did not mandate that the mother herself needed to be destroyed, nor did it reject feminine influences as a whole. Indeed, recall that a woman (Athena) actually assisted in the development of the masculinity of Telemachus during the opening lines of *The Odyssey*. Tyler Durden, however, makes his perspectives very clear in the notorious bathtub scene; while sitting naked in a bathtub next to The Narrator, Durden comments, "We are a generation of men raised by women, and I'm beginning to wonder whether another woman is really the answer we need."[58] Furthermore, Rehling claims that *Fight Club* is unusual as a film because it "[points] to the fragility of (male) heterosexual identification" and that "the narrator creates Tyler in order to express the homoerotic desire that is forced within patriarchal culture."[59] Durden and Rehling comments reveal a crucial and ironic weakness in the development of heterosexual masculinity within patriarchal cultures. The presence of women is required for heterosexual masculine identities, and the rejection of the feminine is thus a rejection of heterosexual masculinity.

This weakness of heterosexuality does not necessarily prove that The Narrator's desire to reject the feminine to achieve the masculine defines The Narrator as homosexual. *Fight Club*

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[58] *Fight Club*

[59] Rehling, p. 71

ultimately demonstrates that masculinity deconstructs itself in the process of attempting to achieve it. The Narrator attempts to follow the totalizing ideology that the achievement of masculinity requires the rejection of femininity, but ultimately is actions are anything but totalizing. Indeed, *Fight Club* reveals Tyler Durden as a seemingly hyper-masculine yet contradictory, incomplete, and immature father figure spawned from the repressed psyche of an equally immature son. The greatest immaturity of the son is that, despite his initial claims of a rejection of the maternal (and thus, the creation of Tyler Durden) The Narrator cannot rid himself of the need for a maternal, nurturing presence in his life. The Narrator simultaneously desires that which he claims to reject. Like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the cause of the conflict is the simultaneous dependence upon a single "sex" to provide both patriarchal protection and guidance of masculinity along with maternal nurturing. In an amusingly ironic twist, however, The Narrator attempts to rid himself of the mother through the rejection of the overly feminized society (and women in general) that he believes has consumed his life. Yet he finds great comfort in feminizing and maintaining (albeit privately) a homoerotic desire for his fellow men. Such a moment occurs within the early scenes of the film, before Tyler Duren manifests; the darkly humorous scenario in which The Narrator finds comfort in the arms of Bob, crying between his "bitch tits" cruelly and disturbingly highlights his seemingly paradoxical desires. The intrusion of Marla Singer within the previously all-male group (appropriately named "Remaining Men Together") shatters his paradoxical desires. He seeks to achieve a maternal form of comfort (evidenced by his ability to temporarily cure his insomnia and sleep following crying sessions into Bob's "bitch tits"), yet he wishes *the source* of such comfort to come from his fellow biological men. Because women and society (from his perspective) ultimately undermine masculine identity, the narrator struggles against the mother represented by a

maternal society itself, but does not reject the maternal comfort. Such struggle is paradoxical, confusing, and stems from the hysteria of The Narrator's lack of a mature, masculine identity.

The identity crisis of The Narrator, due to the constantly surrounding mother and the inability of the incomplete father of Tyler Durden to provide mature guidance into masculinity, directly contribute to the climatic conflict of Fight Club. The Narrator, like Macbeth and Norman Bates, decides to commit "patricide." Similar to Macbeth, patricide is perceived by The Narrator as the means by which to establish his own masculine identity. Rehling succinctly points out Tyler's immaturity as a father figure due to him being "an unstable vision of masculinity, at times durably phallic and heterosexual, and at others more feminine and the object of homoerotic desire."[60] The Narrator has thus created an incredibly chaotic and unstable situation; rather than creating a father figure that balances harmoniously with the maternity of society, The Narrator is torn between two conflicting forces of the maternal and the patriarchal. Each force attempts to hold dominance over him by presenting themselves as the sole source through which the Narrator can create a masculine identity with maternal or feminine comforts. Ultimately, however, The Narrator's decides to cease his struggle against the maternal in the films' concluding scenes. Rehling describes this moment as The Narrator "reconcil[ing] with the feminine," for "by literally shooting himself in the head and expelling Tyler, the narrator gains psychic unity and heterosexuality in one fell swoop."[61] In a single act, The Narrator has rejected the incomplete father (a product of the smothering maternal presence of society), solidified the bond with the mother, and reestablished a heterosexual identity. However, such a heterosexual identity is still reliant upon the presence of the mother. This contrasts with the young men of the

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[60] Rehling, p. 72

[61] Rehling, p. 77

Greek Epics who achieve mature masculinity through the reunion with the "world of the father."

Likewise, The Narrator ends up contrasting with both Macbeth and Norman Bates as well; such

was the chaos of their inability to achieve mature masculinity that ultimately, their identity crisis

as young men led to their own destruction. The Narrator ends up in a state of equilibrium; like

Macbeth and Bates, *Fight Club* centers on a male character whose inability to establish his own

identity as masculine man causes chaotic events to occur around him, and such chaos occurs by

traveling down an "incorrect path." The Narrator, however, does not travel past the point of

redemption. The film ends with The Narrator having yet to develop as a mature, masculine man.

Unlike Macbeth and Bates, his "incorrect journey" towards a masculine identity does not end up

destroying him. This results in an ambiguous conclusion to both the film and the narrator's state

of mind/identity that leaves potential room for the eventual maturity of The Narrator.

  Fight Club, while full of conflict, literally ends with The Narrator where he began: a

young man with an identity, but an identity that relies upon the existence of the mother. Such

existence causes less conflict and chaos around the narrator, but ultimately, the existence is

unstable due the identity crisis that such an existence instills within the son. The strength of the

bond between the mother and the son demonstrates that inevitably, without a proper father figure

to help a son break the bond and develop mature masculinity, the son is unable to develop a

masculine identity that does not rely upon a maternal existence. This inability may cause chaos

and conflict (as is evident in *Fight Club*) as the son struggles against the mother, but because

Tyler Durden is incomplete as a patriarchal figure, the bond between the maternal society and

The Narrator is never entirely broken, despite his claims throughout the film to reject femininity

and maternity. The fact that The Narrator decides in the end to defend the mother's existence

against the incomplete father is evidence of how the bond still has some hold over The Narrator.

The initial conflict between the son and the mother concludes with reconciliation between the maternal society and The Narrator (symbolized by his decision to expel the socially destructive persona of Tyler Durden). In spite of this, the final frames (specifically, two frames) of a semi-erect penis (reminiscent of Tyler Durden's habit of splicing pornography into family films) implies "the provisional nature of The Narrator's psychic healing since, as [film director David] Fincher notes, 'the spirit of Tyler Durden is still kinda out there.'"[62] As such, *Fight Club* ends with both the potential for The Narrator's eventual maturity along with the potential for a renewed conflict between the son and the mother. Without a proper father figure to help the son develop into mature masculinity, the continued identity crisis of the son carries with it the potentiality for chaos and conflict to eventually resurface. Such conflict might cause destruction surrounding the world of the son, but ultimately, the son will forever be bound to the mother and the cycle of identity crisis, rebellion, and reconciliation between the mother and the son will repeat itself unless a mature father figure is present to help break the cycle.

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[62] Rehling, p. 77-78

Conclusion

"Undermining the Culturally-Depicted 'Primordial' Feminine"

During his epic ten-year journey back to Ithaca, Odysseus is presented with a rare yet dangerous opportunity; he has the chance to encounter and listen to the song of the Sirens. Odysseus is aware of the danger of the Sirens' song; the beauty of their song carries with it a primordial power. It is impossible to listen to the song of the Sirens and not succumb to them; the beauty of the song results in men becoming the willing slaves of the Sirens. Men who succumb to the terrible beauty of the song are forever bound to their own destruction. Ironically, such knowledge of the terrible power of the Sirens' song is known to men prior to listening to it. Ultimately, however, this knowledge does not prevent men who choose to defy such warning from succumbing to their own self-created traps of destruction.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno critically analyze this moment in their text *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Odysseus yields to the same curiosity and defiance that has previously resulted in countless men succumbing to their self-created traps of destruction. Indeed, in the specific case of the Sirens, "Defiance and infatuation are one and the same thing, and whoever defies them is thereby lost to the myth against which he sets himself."[63] (Adorno and Horkheimer, Pg. 58-59). Unlike his son Telemachus, however, Odysseus has the maturity to exercise self-restraint; he "recognize[s] the archaic superior power of the song" that his status as a "technically enlightened man" has little defense against.[64] Nevertheless, his curiosity inspires him to commit an act of defiance against the primordial and terrible beauty of the Sirens' song; his maturity as a man, however, allows him to rely upon his cunning, which Adorno and

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[63] Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. *Dialectic of Enlightenment.* New York: Herder and Herder, 1972. p. 58-59

[64] Adorno and Horkheimer, p 59

Horkheimer describe as "defiance in a rational form."[65]

Odysseus has himself bound to the mast of his ship while simultaneously ordering that

his men stuff beeswax into their ears. Such a move ensures that his men are not only protected

from the primordial power of the Sirens' song, but he also literally ensures his own protection

from himself. Knowing that he is helpless to resist the power of the Sirens, the beeswax ensures

that his temporarily deafened crew would be unable to hear Odysseus' begging or orders to untie

him from the mast. The moment he hears the song, he succumbs to the primordial power that has

lead to the doom of men before him; however, his precautions protect him from such a fate. Thus

at this moment does the mature masculine identity of Odysseus triumph over the primordial

feminine power of the Sirens. Adorno and Horkheimer claim "Despite all the power of

[Odysseus'] desire" and the primordial "quality" of the Song, the power of the feminine "is

neutralized to become merely the wistful longing of the passer-by."[66] In this moment, Odysseus

demonstrates the ideological qualities of a "true father figure" in Western Culture. His maturity

as a man does not require him to directly combat a primordial power wielded by a feminine

force. Rather, his maturity allows him to defy such power without ironically succumbing to it (a

fate suffered by both Macbeth and Norman Bates due to their lack of maturity as men).

The primordial power of the Sirens is in their beauty and femininity. Western Culture

claims that such primordial power is found within "the bond" between the mother and the son.

We have seen that, similar to the men who were immature enough to believe that they could defy

the Sirens, son figures who attempt defiance against their mothers without maturity ultimately

create their own private traps. Without the development of mature masculinity, the son is forever

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[65] Adorno and Horkheimer, p 59

[66] Adorno and Horkheimer, p 59

doomed to create chaos and destruction to those around them. Sometimes, like the men who succumb to the primordial power of the Sirens, such chaos and destruction ultimately leads to a tragic fate for the sons themselves.

The primordial nature of women and mothers portrayed within Western Culture thus creates a need for mature, masculine men; the chaos that exists in a world without such men thus portrays women as destructive to social order. Such destruction and chaos may even be unintentional and come from a seemingly benevolent source; Penelope and Thetis are loving mothers who care deeply for the well-being of their sons. Similarly, the maternal society of *Fight Club* ultimately leads to the chaotic figures of Tyler Duren and The Narrator, yet "society herself" is portrayed as relatively nurturing to "her sons." While the sons figures represented in this thesis come from a myriad of time periods and cultures, the commonality of immaturity through a lack of a father figure points to the ideology that society needs mature, masculine men (like Odysseus and Duncan) to serve as guides for young men and sons. Such guidance does not state that women are unnecessary; however, Western Culture undermines the importance of mothers in the development of their sons. The ideology that Western Culture depicts women and mothers as possessing a "primordial nature" thus results in ideology that mature, masculine men are a necessity in order to help protect their sons from the chaotic nature of women. However, the fact that Western Culture portrays women as chaotic, primordial and more related to the natural world lends weight to the theory of another ideology perpetuated by Western Culture; that men potentially serve to protect the cultural and social order that the primordial nature of women (and immature sons without a mature masculine man to guide them) ultimately destabilize.

During the introduction of this thesis, I focused on Judith Butler's theories of

performativity and gender. The fact that her work focuses in the fields of gender studies and philosophy is important for this thesis because she concludes that the performative nature of gender means, from my perspective, that sons are quite capable of developing their masculinity and maturity under the tutelage of only mothers. The real-world relationships between mothers and sons may not be chaotic. Yet for centuries, Western Culture has portrayed members of family units that lack a father figure as the head of the family as flawed, immature, and as a family surrounded by chaotic and primordial forces that are ultimately destructive to the social world around it. These "chaotic members" may include males (sons) as well. Thus has Western Culture greatly stressed (I would argue, exaggerated) the need for family units to have a mature, masculine man serve as the *pater familias* ("father of the family") to ensure order. This leads me to perhaps one of the most controversial conclusions of this thesis; some of the most canonical works of Western Culture have for centuries inherently presented mothers and women as destructive not only to society and culture, but to the family unit itself. Western Culture thus inherently favors men playing a leading role in the family unit. Men not only fulfill the role of father, they are also traditionally perceived (even in modern society) as the head of the family. I would argue that with this ideology affecting the family unit, men are thus equally favored by Western Culture as the most effective choices for positions of political power and social dominance. Indeed, for centuries women were forbidden from politics and positions of social power.

I do not claim that the father figure, in the real-world, is not an important part of the family unit; it is not my intention to undermine the importance of men in the development of their sons and the roles that they play to the well-being of their families. I only wish to emphasize my theory that literature, art, and film have been and continue to play an

exceptionally important part within Western Culture. I believe that it not only serves as entertainment, but it also has the potential to influence social practices and even politics. I also wish to stress that the overemphasis of the desperate need for a father figure to protect the family unit from a primordially chaotic mother may have potentially undermined the power of women and mothers in the historical societies of Western Culture. Gender theorists and philosophers such as Butler claim that social gender and biological sex are unrelated; however, for centuries, Western Culture has promoted an ideology that opposes these theories. Again, such an ideology (reinforced by literature, art, film, and popular culture) is inherently undermining to mothers and women; my inclusion of the contemporary film *Fight Club* within this thesis proves that such an ideology continues to exist within contemporary Western Culture.

Modern Western Culture has undergone radical changes over the centuries; I do not claim that female and maternal roles in modern society have not changed throughout history. Nevertheless, the ideology of the "primordial woman" and the "mature, masculine man" has persisted in spite of changes in social and philosophical perspectives. This ideology existed in the art and culture of the past; it continues to exist in entertainment and popular culture of the present. Such an ideology will continue to persist well into the future. Thus, although politics, society, and philosophical perspectives will continue to evolve and develop, the influential nature that culture has over Western Civilization will continue to promote an ideology that is inherently favorable to the masculine while simultaneously detaining to the feminine.

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