

Capitalism and Schizophrenia in Gotham City – The Fragile Masculinities of Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight Trilogy*

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Abstract

My article examines the various presentations of masculinity in Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight Trilogy* and their dependency on gadgets and theatricality. The success of a man’s performance of his masculinity is measured in how convincing he is as either hero or villain and in his exertion of power. I argue thereby that the men appearing in the three installments are stereotypes that cater to a heteronormative world view and constantly need to reassure their sexuality and gender affiliation to persist within the society of Gotham. By contrasting the films’ protagonist Bruce Wayne and his superhero alter ego Batman with the villains, I conclude that the masculinities are fragile because they strongly depend on money, physical strength and control over other, physically and financially weaker people, otherwise they are not of value for the predominant heterocentric, capitalist community. I thus want to stress that the city (and through it the films themselves) requires an immaculate masculinity that is as good as unattainable and promotes obsolete role models. Furthermore, I will point out the subordinate role of femininity in the films which again emphasize the films’ focus on the desire for a hypermasculine saviour.

1 When *Batman Begins* was released in 2005, critics praised Nolan’s adaptation for its gritty realism and departure from Joel Schumacher’s campy vision of the superhero who was originally created by Bob Kane in 1939¹. With villains who are more terrorists than troublemakers and a direct connection between capitalism and crusade, it is striking how Nolan’s hero may be progressive concerning comic book verisimilitude but languishing with regard to its presentation of masculinity and femininity. This Batman (Christian Bale), it appears, may be post-9/11 but he is far from post-gender. Although *The Dark Knight Trilogy* presents diverse masculine characters (as far as a predominantly white male cast can be considered diverse), all of them end up being stereotypes that cater to a mainly hetero- and phallogocentric perspective. This may not come as a surprise, as portrayals of gender roles and gendered bodies in mainstream media, popular culture, and comics especially are often exaggerated² but they are nevertheless an important factor as they can shape and influence the continuation of gender stereotypes because people - children and teenagers in particular - look up to these characters as role models (cf. M 37). There might be different ideas to express

¹ In his *Guardian*-review, Peter Bradshaw calls the work of Nolan-predecessor Schumacher “errors of taste” and *Batman Begins* a “big, bold and [...] dark film” (Bradshaw 2005).

² One might think here of the way the bodies of superheroes such as Superman, Wonder Woman and likewise Batman are drawn, usually with a costume that highlights their muscles but also their primary and secondary sexual characteristics.

your masculinity, the trilogy tells us, but the only successful one is that of the “billionaire playboy philanthropist”³ who has the means and the money to be a part-time superhero.

2 However, even this hardly attainable concept of masculinity is inherently fragile, as it has no value on its own⁴: it only works in contrast with other, seemingly inferior types of men. Without the supervillains, the superhero is just an entrepreneur and they in turn are only criminals. Furthermore, whether they are good or bad, the male characters presented in the three films of the series rely heavily on gadgets to exaggerate their masculinity and thus depend heavily on the capitalist structures of Gotham to avoid losing their meaning⁵ in the city’s gender regime, as will be discussed in the following. In order to provide a theoretical background for the analysis of masculinity in the *Dark Knight Trilogy*, a short overview of cultural constructs of masculinity will be given and applied to the men of Gotham before the character of Bruce Wayne / Batman will be further examined and compared to the villains he has to defeat. The three main female characters, Rachel Dawes (Katie Holmes, in the second installment replaced by Maggie Gyllenhaal), Selina Kyle / Catwoman (Anne Hathaway) and Miranda Tate / Talia Al Ghul (Marion Cotillard) will be partially included into the analysis, however, as the female characters are flat throughout, the main focus will remain on the various male characters because they are, I argue, still stereotypes yet far more developed than the female ones. The aim of this article is it to show that masculinity in Nolan’s *Batman*-films is never a stable entity but it has to be reconstructed and embellished over and over again in order to remain in contention for the male omnipotence the city promotes as its ideal. At the same time, it will be examined how every kind of masculinity, at least in the films, needs an opponent that reveals its flaws and demonstrates where the male performance is insufficient. Without this adversary, the masculinities remain empty and without purpose, they are so fragile that they are always in danger of not being masculine (and thus socially accepted) enough. It will thus be demonstrated how contradictory Gotham’s paradigmatic masculinities are.

Manners (and Bodies) Maketh Man

3 Gender as a social construct is perceived through two influencing factors: the way one looks and the way one acts. The outer appearance and the behaviour determine, due to the

³ This is how Tony Stark / Iron Man describes himself in the first *Avengers* instalment.

⁴ According to Karl Marx’s “law of value”, value is measured in the amount of human labour necessary to produce a commodity. Gotham, in a metaphorical sense, produces masculinities but they are only of value when they contribute to the economic prosperity of the city and nothing else.

⁵ Losing their meaning, i.e. their gendered purpose as controllers of the city would render them obsolete, the city would come dangerously close to losing its favoured heterocentric order.

conventions of society, whether someone is regarded as more or less masculine. Typical masculine behaviour patterns are, for example, “endurance, strength, and competitive spirit” (Wharton 75). Furthermore, Schrock and Schwalbe assert that a decisive factor in establishing masculinity is the ability to exert or resist control (cf. 280). This is an important observation concerning *The Dark Knight Trilogy*, as one of the key conflicts in the series is the question of who is in control of the city, the law or the criminals. The fight for the city appears to be a constant competition between Batman and the villains and strongly depends on physical as well as mental strength. Since both the superhero and the villains in the trilogy are almost all male⁶, the films focus strongly on masculine agency. A popular means, especially in superhero films, to express this masculine agency is through the body:

Men’s bodies have long been symbols of masculinity [...]. They reveal (or at least they signify), manhood’s power, strength, and self-control. [...]. Maybe it’s no longer through doing hard work but by working out, and maybe now its chemically or surgically enhanced, but still men believe the title of that feminist health classic: Our bodies are ourselves. (Kimmel 224)

The coding of the superhero- and villain-body ergo follows a simple pattern: a ripped body means physical strength, a nonathletic body mental one; but the body is always the preferred instrument to exercise control over others as long as its owner is in control of it himself. Furthermore, the male body in comics and their adaptations is perceived as even more masculine the more it is marked from previous fights and traumatic experiences. Scars and prostheses are visible markers of a turbulent, character-forming past and the men of Gotham present their scars proudly. Scars are not markers of a loss control, quite the opposite; they signify that the man is able to regain control even under life-threatening circumstances.

4 Yet, not only behaviour and appearance are significant aspects regarding the construction of masculinity, but also sexual orientation, most notably heterosexuality, as it is “a key component of hegemonic masculinity” (Wharton 212) and “[h]egemonic versions of masculinity [in turn] are closely tied into capitalist values of rationality, calculation and self-interest [...]” (Holmes 58). This observation fits in seamlessly with the portrayal of the men in Gotham City. Securing the city means acting in self-interest because it guarantees acknowledgement from the community and the possible acquisition of a heroic status. Attacking the city is also a deed of self-interest as it means subjugating it to the villain’s own moral principles. In this context it is striking that the majority of the men in the city are portrayed as visibly heterosexual, they have families or date partners of the opposite sex.

⁶ Although Miranda Tate / Talia al Ghul can generally be considered a villain because she fakes her own identity to harm Bruce Wayne, Wayne Enterprises and eventually the whole city, I argue that her actions are motivated by the death of her father and he thus remains the mastermind behind the crimes.

Minorities are invisible; the heteronormative community of Gotham is no space for queer characters which becomes – as will be explained later on – obvious when the Joker appears. Gotham’s capitalist society favours heteronormativity because, in their opinion, it is only through the subjugation of minorities (women, queer men, men suffering from mental illness) that the hegemonic masculinity can survive. The hegemonic masculinity, in turn, is decisive because, again according to the Gothamites, it guarantees the reproduction of men who can secure the city with their economic potency. Capitalism is therefore the predominant domain of the “modern White Men” (Deleuze and Guattari 182)

5 Just like gender, the roles the men in Nolan’s batuniverse⁷ assume are socially constructed as well. Scientists, lacking physical strength to control people, resort to their research to do so. The rich heir has to save the city because he can afford to do so and the mercenary is expected to serve as a soldier. All these kinds of different masculinities presented in the films are grounded in power and control and have a strong tendency to theatrical appearances. The better the men perform their assigned role of masculinity, the more they will succeed.

Bruce Wayne, the Capitalist Crusader

6 The Waynes are first introduced as the ultimate picture-book family. Thomas Wayne (Linus Roache) is a self-made billionaire, the owner of Wayne Enterprises and a philanthropist who has financed a cheap transport system to make the city accessible to the poor. His wife Martha (Sara Stewart) is the beautiful loving partner by his side who shares with her husband an exquisite taste in luxury goods and opera. Like most happy families in comics and comic adaptations, they are not meant to last forever. The superhero needs to experience a trauma that changes his / her world view and motivates him / her to fight evil. Young Bruce Wayne (Gus Lewis) suffers two of them: the fall into a well which is inhabited by a pack of bats, the literal bat cave, and the murder of his parents by a thug outside the opera. As “almost all anthropologists and ethnographers agree that masculinity appears transculturally as something to be acquired, achieved, initiated into – a process often involving painful or even mutilating rituals [...]” (Solomon-Godeau 71), Bruce’s fall and his parents’ death can be seen as his first step into manhood. Bruce is no longer the son that is cared for but the sole heir of a corporation and longs for a proper, more heroic male role.

7 With the loss of his parents, the only male guidance in his life is provided by the family’s butler Alfred (Michael Cain). Alfred may be a *fatherly* figure due to his age and

⁷ Batverse is the term commonly used to describe the comic universe in which the *Batman* stories take place.

knowing Bruce since birth but he is no *father* figure⁸ which might explain why the grown-up Bruce becomes very interested in Ra's al Ghul (Liam Neeson), "a man greatly feared by the criminal underworld" (4:04). Al Ghul appears to fill Bruce's idea of heroic masculinity that his father left empty after his death. He teaches him that "theatricality and deception are powerful agents" (17:23), something his alter ego Batman internalises, and muses "you must become more than just a man in the mind of your opponent" (17:28). As Bruce cannot avenge his parents' death⁹, and thus 'man up', he needs to find another way to properly learn how to fight crime. The exclusively male school of the League of Shadows seems to be the perfect place to accomplish this task, as it offers to turn men, and men only, into legends. Justice, the audience is taught, is, of course, a male prerogative. However, this fight for justice follows a dangerous agenda, as Bruce realises that the League of Shadows is nothing but a terrorist organisation that aims to destroy Gotham, the modern day Rome or Constantinople, a cesspool of immorality and criminality, and Bruce's hometown. Gotham becomes a metaphor for his parents and as their son (and a son of the city), Bruce needs to rectify what he could not do for them and he ultimately destroys the school.

8 This raises the question behind Bruce's true motivation: does he become Batman because he really wants to aid others and fight crime or does he only do it to compensate for his own traumas and prove to himself that he can be "man enough" to prevent crimes from happening? His choice of superhero gear points in the direction of the latter. As the epitome of the capitalist consumer, Bruce compensates the loss of his family with expensive investments in military equipment that Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman), researcher at Wayne Enterprises and friend of Thomas Wayne, acquires and enhances for him, most notably the Batmobile, a stylised tank. Fox also helps to improve the Batsuit, a uniform which was originally meant to protect soldiers but deemed too expensive to go into mass production. This is an important issue because it emphasises what distinguishes Bruce from other men: money. Bruce can be a superhero because due to his inheritance he can afford to be one. The Batsuit is therefore not simply armour, it is also a display of hypermale financial potency. Its design reflects the theatricality¹⁰ as demanded by al Ghul but it is also modeled after a

⁸ This may be attributed to the fact that Alfred as a butler rates low in the prestige-obsessed ranking of Gotham. The butler is not as financially potent as the industrialist, hence he cannot be a father to the heir.

⁹ Chill (Richard Brake), the men who murdered them, is shot by a woman from the cartel of mobster boss Falcone (Tom Wilkinson).

¹⁰ The term "theatricality" is frequently used in all three movies, however, in a derogatory context which has barely anything to do with dramatic performance in a theatre. What they actually mean is hiding one's true identity through the use of special effects and masquerading. It is interesting, still, to see how the notion of "theatricality" changes within the three films. In the beginning, it has a positive connotation as it is described as something desirable by Ra's al Ghul because the members of the League of Shadows use it to distract their

muscular, and thus highly masculine, male body. Furthermore, it can be understood as a “body without organs” (Deleuze and Guattari 4), a symbolic corpus that carries meaning; it is a walking metaphor for the overcoming of trauma and at the same time a visualisation of emotional scars. As the “body without organs” is “desire [,] it is that which one desires and by which one desires” (Deleuze and Guattari 165), it is visually appealing and modeled after the perfect male body, complete with defined abs. The Batsuit may hide Bruce’s true identity, yet at the same time it emphasises his masculinity. The choice of gear is therefore extremely self-serving not only for Bruce’s protection, but also his ego. He cannot simply fight crime as an everyman, such as Jim Gordon (Gary Oldman), he needs to turn himself into a symbolic überman because, as he puts it, “as a symbol, [he] can be incorruptible, [he] can be everlasting” (40:33). For a man who has everything a man in Gotham can desire, becoming an abstract symbol is the only possible enhancement left.

9 Another way to emphasise his omnipotence is by demonstrating his heterosexuality. Bruce learns early on that his inheritance makes him powerful and grants him control, however it cannot buy him the love of his childhood friend Rachel (Katie Holmes). Rachel’s rejection represents a significant loss of control and therefore a loss of masculinity. In order to reestablish it, Bruce asks Alfred what “somebody like [him]” does to which he replies “drive sports cars, date movie stars, buy things that are not for sale” (1:04:39). Following this logic, Bruce has already reached peak masculinity by being an attractive, rich bachelor. There is a special behavioural pattern reserved for this type of man. Consequently, Bruce does his best James Bond-impression, flirts with his own secretary and turns up to an appointment with not one but two ladies in a sports car. When the ladies bathe in the restaurant pool and the waiter threatens to throw them out, Bruce simply buys the whole hotel. “A man often demonstrates his masculinity by wielding power” (Lips 14) and Bruce again does so by demonstrating his superior financial situation. Still, this triumph is only temporary, as Rachel witnesses the scene and although Bruce desperately tells her “Inside I am more” (1:08:01), she leaves in disgust when Bruce’s escorts drive up and cheerily proclaim “Bruce, we have some more hotels for you to buy” (1:08:01). In *The Dark Knight*, Bruce continues this strategy and shows up with a prima ballerina from the Moscow Ballet at a fancy restaurant where Rachel has dinner with Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart). When Harvey remarks that it took him three weeks to get reservations there, Bruce smugly mentions that he owns the place (18:57), a remark intended to weaken Dent’s masculinity as it reveals his financial inferiority. It appears as if Bruce frequently needs to reassure his own straightness, which is denied by Rachel, the ideal

enemies. However, the citizens of Gotham use “theatricality” derogatory to emphasise how inauthentic and staged Batman’s appearance is.

partner who could establish his masculinity in the heteronormative society. Yet she threatens said straightness when she chooses Dent, by showing up to events with either several or particularly desirable women. Since neither his body nor his money impress her, he needs to prove to himself (and on a larger scale the society of Gotham) that it is not him that is the problem because other women surely are interested. As he cannot control her, and she is the only woman he cannot get, the narrative needs her to die. Similarly, when in the final battle between Batman and Ra's al Ghul the latter says that Bruce is "just an ordinary man in a cape" (1:57:58), this is the biggest possible insult for a man who aims to be a symbol and Batman lets him die in the wreck of his father's train. Bruce's masculinity is fragile because it is highly dependent on vanity and financial means. Although Alfred warns him "you're getting lost in this monster of yours" (1:35:43), Bruce's onset of megalomania becomes even more obvious when he confronts the corrupt cop Flass (Mark Boone Junior) who defends himself with "I swear to God" to which Batman replies "swear to me!" (1:11:59) and he proudly exclaims in *The Dark Knight* that "Batman has no limits!" (13:09), a fatal misjudgement, as both the Joker (Heath Ledger) and Bane (Tom Hardy) will show him. For Bruce Wayne, masculinity comes at a high financial but also physical and societal cost. When he is shown at the end of *The Dark Knight Rises* living anonymously with Selina Kyle, it becomes clear that he cannot be both a symbol and a playboy billionaire philanthropist. The symbol is an abstract entity, much like the signified in a structural sense, whereas the wealthy playboy depends strongly on materialism and is therefore favoured by the capitalist structures of the city. A successful masculinity, at least in Gotham, cannot be an omnipotent, an omnipresent, masculinity, which is why he has to let go of the control over his hometown.

Mad Mind over Body: Dr. Jonathan Crane

10 The first, and only recurring, villain in the trilogy is Dr. Jonathan Crane (Cillian Murphy), head psychiatrist at the Arkham Asylum who also operates under the alter ego "Scarecrow" due to his preferred gadget of imitation. This gadget is necessary because he always runs the risk of not being taken seriously. Crane is no physical threat as opposed to Bane, who breaks both Batman's back and spirit, and he is less creative than the Joker. Still, he is a threat because of his schizophrenic personality, best reflected in the scene when Batman wants to know who he is working for and calls him "Crane" to which Crane replies "Dr. Crane isn't here right now. But if you'd like to make an appointment..." (1:25:17). For Crane, and also for Gotham, mental illness is a tool to support the capitalist structures of the city. Manipulating others into bouts of schizophrenic behaviour creates a climate of anxiety

and violence and violence, in turn, increases production (Deleuze and Guattari 447). Furthermore, unlike Bruce and later on Harvey Dent, he is also completely immune to the charms of childhood-sweetheart-turned-reporter Rachel Dawes, mainly because she implies early on that he is corrupt. Crane's one true love is medicine, even though he has no interest in healing but only in hurting people. His purpose in the structures of Gotham is to be an example of straightforward thinking masculine sobriety that cannot be distracted by feminine allures and instead focuses on increasing the capitalist value of the city by supplying the corrupt and the underworld with mind-altering substances. He researches a psychosis-inducing drug and, like a true academic, needs funding for his project which he receives from Bruce's former mentor Al Ghul. He is only in control of others because of the drug, therefore he is, in comparison to the other villains, less powerful because he strongly depends on Al Ghul's money.

11 Crane's attitude and also his represented idea of masculinity, namely that of a man who exerts control with his brain and not his muscles, are revealed in another encounter with Rachel, when Crane tells her "I respect the mind's power over the body. It's why I do what I do" (1:21:42) and he behaves accordingly. The physical work is done by Falcone's thugs, it is Crane's task to supervise Al Ghul's orders, in this case to poison Gotham's water system with the drug. Yet Crane is, for a villain, unusually self-aware when he tells Falcone "I am more than aware that you are not intimidated by me, Mr. Falcone" (45:20); Falcone is only scared of Crane when he learns that he is working for somebody else, namely Ra's al Ghul, which means that Falcone is not in control of the situation. Falcone assumes that he, as a ruthless mob boss, can intimidate the scientist by blackmailing him but Crane is clever and uses his "Scarecrow"-mask on him which turns Falcone into yet another insane inmate. Still, it is striking how throughout *Batman Begins*, Crane is treated more like a nuisance than a proper villain and he only becomes a threat when it dawns on Batman that he is doing business with his former mentor. Crane thus needs to borrow Al Ghul's money and his muscle power (in the form of various delinquents working for Al Ghul) to oppose Batman. Considering that Ra's Al Ghul teaches Bruce early on how to produce a hallucinatory drug from a dried flower which triggers fear within the unconscious, it takes him a surprisingly long time to see the connection between Al Ghul and Crane. When Crane and Batman finally meet, Crane tells him "you look like a man who takes himself too seriously" (1:15:04), a burning insult for the ego underneath the Batsuit and an allusion to the Joker's catchphrase "why so serious?".

12 However, although both Crane and Bruce appear to embody two completely different ideas of masculinity, they both share an affinity for theatricality. Both men use their masks to

intimidate people and to enhance their performance of a man in control. But Crane cannot keep up with Batman's high level of theatricality and thus suffers the ultimate punishment for a man, he is defeated by a woman, namely Rachel who shoots him off a horse with a taser. Crane has a short moment of masculine redemption when he ultimately assumes the role of a judge at the mock-court in *The Dark Knight Rises*, in true theatrical fashion with scarecrow-like straw sticking out from his suit. He is immediately perceived as more masculine because he is, for the moment, in a powerful position and has control over others again. Nevertheless, his masculinity remains fragile as it again depends on another, more powerful man, namely Bane.

Why So Heteronormative? The Joker

13 The Joker is one of the most interesting villains in the batverse for two reasons: he is anti-capitalist as he has no deeper, economic motivation for his crimes other than the pure joy of causing mayhem and he is the closest *The Dark Knight Trilogy* comes to featuring a queer character. Although the Joker never comments on his sexuality, his appearance and his mannerisms strongly depart from the heterosexual norm the city so strongly favours. He is introduced through the dialogue of two robbers, "Happy" and "Dopey", wearing clown masks who seem to be only partially familiar with him:

Happy: "So why do they call him the Joker?"

Dopey: "I heard he wears makeup."

Happy: "Makeup?"

Dopey: "Yeah, to scare people. You know, war paint." (2:03)

The makeup cannot simply be makeup in a feminine sense, which is why the other guy corrects this deviation from heteronormativity and adds that it looks like warpaint, a typical masculine gadget used to intimidate the opponent. After robbing the "mob bank", which wrongfully seems to establish the Joker as another character with capitalist motivations, he infiltrates a meeting of exclusively male mobsters. Although in the batverse of the comics the Joker is only one of various dazzling personalities, in Nolan's version he sticks out like a sore thumb due to his extravagant clothes and unkempt appearance. The mobsters may not be friendly with each other but they immediately gang up against the one deriving from the gangster norm. When one of them interrupts the Joker with "enough from the clown" (24:35), the Joker's strategy becomes obvious. He needs to be even more criminal, more dangerous than the others to be taken seriously. The Joker seems to use the slightly androgynous style to be underestimated on purpose. The less masculine he appears, the stronger is his surprise effect and in a world where law and crime are almost exclusively male-represented and only

the watchdogs are female, behaving neither distinctly male or female can, allegedly, only be an advantage.

14 However, the Joker is less complex as he appears because his narrative is extremely constructed or, as Vilja Johnsons describes it, “his identity is empty, as his story of origin constantly shifts” (Johnson 964). He frequently reinvents the cause of his scars¹¹ but always with the same intention – to arouse pity. In this way, the Joker’s narrative is “a fairly pointed mockery of the need for back-stories for villains in the first place, the easy psychoanalysis that reduces every choice to an after-effect of some early trauma” (Tyree 31). It also severely mocks Bruce Wayne, as everything the Batman represents is rooted in trauma. The Joker has no financial desire, as becomes clear when he burns a pile of money, he seeks to disrupt the moral principle of the people, or as Alfred characterises these kinds of villain, “some men aren’t looking for anything logical, like money [...]. some men just wanna watch the world burn” (52:58). In the capitalist world of Gotham, men who are not interested in money attract negative attention, they cannot be controlled and deliberately evade the heteronormative order. The Joker says that he wants to show the mob and the police, both epitomes of masculinity, “how pathetic their attempts to control things really are” (1:44:24) and when masculinity is all about control, the Joker dares to be queer in order to challenge it. Although his appearance is sometimes likened to that of a flamboyant dandy (cf. Barounis 310), a role although ambiguous still commonly associated with masculinity, his queerness becomes most obvious when he invades the hospital where Harvey Dent receives treatment dressed in a nurse outfit. The Joker reaches his goal, gaining access to Dent, by posing in drag. It is in the eyes of the hypermasculine male community the craziest thing a villain can do. Dressed as a woman, the Joker even manages to manipulate Dent into seeking revenge for Rachel’s death. In Dent, the Joker has found an easy victim because he is now like him, disfigured, physically imperfect to a point of unattractiveness and therefore less masculine. This exploitation of hurt masculinity becomes also obvious during his crime spree where he surrounds himself with men, and again men only, who suffer from mental illness and are therefore othered just like him because they are not strong, not masculine enough. His henchmen tend to react hysterically when caught, a mode of behaviour which is still commonly recognised as a female malaise, and so fits their portrayal as weak, less manly men. As Deleuze and Guattari define “[m]adness [as] a definite danger” (188), and hysteria has been labeled as a kind of madness, these men are the perfect companions for the Joker.

¹¹ Once he says that his father was a drinker who slit the corners of his boy’s mouth and asked “why so serious?” (29:11), another time he gave them himself after his gambling wife was disfigured by a mob (49:12).

15 Also contributing to his queerness is the Joker's love story-pastiche. Repeatedly, he plays upon clichéd presentations of heterosexual relationships and turns them into homosexual innuendos, particularly involving Batman. At the beginning of *The Dark Knight Rises*, various Batman imposters, complete with cheap Batsuit-imitations, roam the city and long to be heroes just like their role model. The Joker abducts one of them, records a video message with him and when the police find the dead hostage, he is still wearing his Batman costume but his face is covered in the Joker's make-up. This can be read as a metaphor of homosexual unity, a love-child of both men. The Joker thus tries to queer Batman by pairing him with a man, namely himself, instead of a woman, something the heterocentric order of Gotham strictly denies. When the Joker lets himself get caught on purpose, the Joker's aggressive flirting continues. He tells Batman "you complete me" (1:24:40) and purrs "to them [the police], you're just a freak. Like me" (1:24:52). The Joker threatens Batman's heterosexual masculinity when he says that they are alike which results in Batman grabbing him by the collar and beating him around the cell. As the police men watching want to interfere, Commissioner Gordon prohibits them from doing so and remarks about Batman "he's in control" (1:25:39). Gordon thus confirms Batman's heterosexual power and debilitates possible homosexual connotations. Through his mannerisms, the Joker makes himself appear sexually submissive on purpose. During their final fight on a skyscraper, the Joker almost falls to his death but Batman, again, catches him by his collar. The Joker muses "I think you and I are destined to do this forever" (2:08:40), again hinting at the romantic aspect of the relationship between hero and criminal which is later on turned into reality when Batman and Catwoman become lovers. But Batman as the hero is not enough of a heterosexual man to resist the Joker's advances and he knows that deviating from the order must be punished. The Joker initially challenges the morals of the Gothamites in several aspects. He asks what is socially acceptable, both with regard to conscientious conduct and expression of masculinity. Ultimately, he fails in both areas, he cannot corrupt the people and they do not allow deviation from the prescribed heterosexual, and capitalist, norm which is why he is jailed.

Two-Faced: Harvey Dent

16 Unlike the other male adversaries, Harvey Dent is not initially a villain, just a competitor which may be even worse because Bruce can neither persecute nor punish him. As "[m]asculinity is usually defined in terms of a particular heterosexual aggressiveness" (Holmes 58), by competing for the love of Rachel both Bruce and Dent try to validate their

own masculinity. But Dent has a decisive advantage: as an upright District Attorney, he is called “Gotham’s white knight” (17:09) by Jim Gordon and so immediately opposed to Batman as the dark knight. Therefore he does not have to create an alter ego, he can openly assume the role of the savior of the city and free it from the corrupt and criminal. Furthermore, Dent has a clear understanding of what it means to be a man in Gotham City: “You either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain” (20:10), a phrase Batman repeats towards the end (2:16:17), only to add that he is “not a hero, not like Dent” (2:16:27). But not even Dent can fulfill the ideal of the white knight, as it becomes clear after his lover Rachel is killed by the Joker and he is left with half of his face burned:

Dent represents humanity as innocent and good, but this is a false representation. Dent – and humanity – is guilty and evil. Batman’s symbolic turning of Dent’s head, concealing his true nature and perpetuating the veneer of his goodness and innocence, is simultaneously the suppression of the truth about humanity and the revelation of Batman as an anti-Christ figure. (Bott 245)

Hailing Dent as a hero is an ‘alternative fact’, as he is not the one who saved the city. However, it seems to be significant that he assumes this role. Dent cannot simply be a moral man, he needs to be more, a hero that can be worshiped. If the public learned that Dent failed, the whole ideal of the white knight, and with it an important concept of masculinity, would be at stake and therefore the truth needs to be bent. Like all men in the trilogy, Dent experiences a significant loss of control and this manifests itself in his habit of throwing a coin to make a decision. To come to a decision himself would mean that he consciously takes responsibility for his actions, throwing the coin means he does not. Dent cannot be a hero who saves his girlfriend so he becomes a villain who avenges her. Before Rachel’s death, Dent refrained completely from theatricality because he did not need it. With her by his side, he had everything that his rival Bruce desired while showing him that money cannot buy everything. Once she is dead, Dent parades his scarred face as a reminder of the pain he has suffered. His masculinity has lost its purpose, namely to protect her and the city in general, his eigenwert as the white knight is gone. Additionally, reterritorialisation is impossible, as the city already has enough villains, so there is no role left for him to occupy. Dent is a victim of the city’s hegemonic structures and needs to die. He fails as a potential leader and does not manage to take revenge upon the people who caused his misery, he therefore does not live up to Gotham’s expectations of masculinity.

Selina Kyle – What’s New Pussycat?

17 Female characters are spare in the trilogy and this has a simple reason: women in the batverse cannot be trusted. They do not return love (Rachel), steal (Selina) or are not who they claim to be (Miranda/Talia). At the beginning of *The Dark Knight Rises*, Selina, in the telling role of a maid serving at a dinner party at Wayne Manor, is merely an effective plot device. Her function is it to lure Bruce, who has been living as a recluse after Dent’s death, out of hiding, as he catches her when she tries to steal his mother’s pearls. When she first appears, a congressman stops her and remarks “sweetheart, not so fast with the chow” (7:34). Selina is visibly annoyed, yet when she flees Wayne Manor with the pearls, she enters the limousine of the same congressman and purrs “can I get a ride?” to which he replies “you read my mind” (12:19). The congressman is later on reported missing. Her use of the sexual pun “ride” reveals that Selina has learned how to manipulate men for her own good because sexualisation is the norm in Gotham City. When she tries to rob Daggett (Ben Mendelsohn), another corrupt businessman, one of his guards catches her in the act and remarks “nice outfit. Those heels make it tough to walk?” (49:54). Selina is constantly sexualized because “[female objectification] serves not only to signify heterosexuality and mark the boundary between gender groups, but it also protects males from homophobic abuse by their peers” (Schrock and Schwabe 285). Men use Selina to assure their own sexuality and therefore avoid becoming victims themselves. It is also striking that while Bruce is only accused of theatricality when he is in the Batsuit, Selina is always sexualized, whether she poses as Catwoman or herself. At the same time, Selina is always in control of the situation because she knows how she is expected to act. Selina has adapted to the city and the gender roles it accepts. In one instant, she changes from skilled fighter to helpless victim as this is how a woman is expected to perform in a dangerous situation.

18 Bruce Wayne is fascinated by her, however it is striking how differently he treats her from Miranda Tate. Miranda is, or rather poses, as a successful independent businesswoman, like him she does not depend on money because she has enough of it and so he can court her. Selina, in contrast, steals to survive, she needs what Bruce has and thus he treats her condescendingly. When she mispronounces “Ibiza”, Bruce whispers to her “you wouldn’t want these folks realizing you’re a crook, not a social climber” (32:50). However, Selina, the femme feline in the catsuit never opposes the man in the batsuit, presumably because she realises that they are much more alike than Bruce suspects. Once they join forces, and Selina saves him by shooting Bane after Miranda/Talia had stabbed him, Bruce has to accept that she is the woman Alfred always wished to be by his side. This pairing also makes more sense

regarding the capitalist structures of the city: the financially independent Miranda/Talia would always threaten Bruce's economically vetted masculinity; she simply does not need him to assure her livelihood.

19 Selina is, due to her poverty, less independent than she appears, and her femininity is just as fragile as the masculinities in the city. As “[g]ender norms operate by requiring the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity and masculinity, ones that are almost always related to the idealization of the heterosexual bond” (Butler 231-232), Selina Kyle has no other option than to end up with Bruce Wayne. He is her heteronormative ticket out of poverty and he can grant her, due to his financial power, the new identity she desired. Unlike the other female characters, Bruce can control her and so affirm the heterosexual bond and therefore his masculinity.

Force of Nurture: Bane

20 Batman's final and most potent adversary is Bane, a mercenary, and like Bruce a former student of Ra's al Ghul and the League of Shadows. This shared relationship situates Bane as a mirror to Bruce. Bane emphasises that following the League's confused ideology leads to extremism. Unlike the other villains, Bane refrains from using an alter ego. By using his real name, it appears as if he wants to prove that his masculinity is so solidified that he does not have to hide behind a disguise (even though he wears a mask which covers significant parts of his face). The mask, in turn, has a similar function as the batsuit (which again emphasizes Bane's mirror function) and the Joker's makeup, it both covers and highlights marks of trauma, in Bane's case the injuries he suffered when saving the young Talia al Ghul. Even so, the mask not only supplies him with necessary oxygen, it also serves as a signature feature: “No one cared who I was till I put on the mask” (3:14). When Bane is shown again down in the sewers, he is sitting with his bare back to the audience, revealing a large scar on his back. Bane's whole body is a reminder of the traumas he suffered and unlike Batman, body and armour are one entity as opposed to two separate spheres. Bane is what society nurtured him to be. As Alfred remarks, Bane was “born and raised in hell on earth” (38:24) and so the role of the villain, a villain society created, is the only one he can occupy.

21 It is important to notice in this context that whatever Bane does it has to be bigger and more effective than anything the villains before him did. Bane's crimes are almost phallic in nature, they demonstrate hypermale potency and a deep desire for destruction. His raid on the stock market reveals thereby a significant aspect of his world view. When one of the brokers tells him “this is stock exchange, there's no money you can steal”, Bane replies

“really? Then why are you people here?” (41:10). Where the Joker questions the morality of the people, Bane exposes the financial heart of the city as the root of all evil and thus implies that Bruce Wayne as the heir of Wayne Enterprises is a significant part of it. This is also reflected in the way the people treat Bruce after the stock market collapses and he loses his fortune. One man yells at him “how’s it feel to be one of the people?” (1:00:48), emphasising that Bruce before has never belonged to the ordinary mortals of the city due to his wealth. When Bane takes the whole football stadium as hostages and kills Dr. Pavel (Alon Aboutboul) in front of them, Gotham quickly deteriorates into. By prompting the audience in the stadium (as representatives of the city) “take control. Take control of your city” (1:27:13), he furthermore positions himself as one of them, something Batman and Bruce Wayne could never be. The people of Gotham, having longed for a chance to strip the rich and the ruling off their power, and thus metaphorically castrate them, are all too eager to see how Bane will make Gotham great again.

22 Similarly, Bane challenges and questions the masculinity of the other men. In one scene between Daggett and Bane, Bane sends away Daggett’s assistant to threaten Daggett. Daggett tries to prohibit this by ordering “no, stay here. I’m in charge” to which Bane counters “do you feel in charge?” (1:01:48). Inducing a loss of control, and therefore a loss of masculinity, is Bane’s preferred modus of operation. He proclaims himself “Gotham’s reckoning” (1:02:10) and a “necessary evil” (1:02:10) which in a way makes him also a symbol. Bane’s megalomania is thus no smaller than Bruce’s, who openly wished to become a symbol. Although they expelled him, Bane declares “I am the League of Shadows” (1:10:39) and once again demonstrates that he is in control. He combines physical power (in the course of the film he snaps various necks and Bruce’s back with his bare hands) with mental one (he manipulates the people of Gotham into anarchic behaviour) and is therefore the epitome of controlling masculinity.

23 Still, the superhero narrative would fail if evil won and so Bane has to be defeated. After Bane breaks Bruce’s back and he is thrown into the pit Talia al Ghul escaped from, he undergoes a healing process of biblical proportions¹² and can face Bane in a final battle. Bane’s defeat is imaginably easy, Batman simply opens the mask and Bane has to suffocate from the loss of oxygen. Without his mask, a gadget of survival but also theatricality, a man cannot persist, which is also reflected in Bruce’s retirement from his superhero alter ego and his anonymous life with Selina. In the end, Bane’s masculinity depends on a piece of plastic

¹² His unusually quick healing process (considering that he must be almost paraplegic) hints again at Gotham’s desire for a Christ-like symbol, a saviour who can overcome his own weakness to defeat the foreign threat in the form of the Arabic Ra’s al Ghul and the British/Latin American Bane.

which guarantees his survival: without it he is just as fragile and powerless as all the other men. Talia, before she is killed by Catwoman, says that Bane's "only crime was that he loved [her]" (2:13:19) and in a metaphorical sense this is the only crime he committed to himself. Guarding her initially caused him the injuries that now cost him his life, the highly masculine role of the protector therefore ends in disaster for him. Masculinity, the films seem to teach us through Batman, Harvey Dent and Bane, suffers under women, as they damage it and this deters them from becoming and remaining heroes.

Conclusion: Decent Men in Indecent Times?

24 At first glance, the masculinities represented in the *Dark Knight Trilogy* appear manifold. The men are physically strong or intelligent above average, they grew up in poverty or wealth, are here to destroy Gotham or save it. Yet, what they all have in common is that they prefer to hide behind masks. Whether they are masks in the traditional sense, such as Batman's Batsuit, Crane's "Scarecrow" or Bane's stylised respiratory mask, or intangible ones, like the Joker's make-up or Harvey Dent's burn scar, all of them are markers of trauma and humiliation and therefore potential symptoms of weakness. Weakness, in turn, is unaccepted in the society of Gotham. The city demands strong masculinities, however, at the same time it deconstructs them by creating new, seemingly insuperable threats. This leaves the men in a constant state of fear of their own fragile gender, they need to prove it by antagonizing other, supposedly more masculine men.

25 Furthermore, the trilogy depicts its masculinities as a product of their time, a typical approach of post-war comic fiction. But for a series that started in the mid 2000s, the concepts of masculinity presented are surprisingly obsolete and insubstantial. The gender roles the films offer are limited, it all amounts to the men either being heroes or villains, there is nothing in between. The more theatrical they are while performing, the more likely they are to succeed, which is why in the end Batman can be the only man left standing. Yet even the hero repeatedly needs to demonstrate his heterosexuality because a stable heterosexual identity is the most desirable form of masculinity. While the films do acknowledge that other expressions of gender exist, they are also quick to emphasise that they are unsuccessful. Batman, they seem to tell us, is the superhero we deserve because in the end he gets the woman in the catsuit. Rachel, the former love of his life, is easily forgotten. Yet even Batman needs to pay a price: he needs to abandon his superhero identity and make space for a younger generation, as indicated by Blake finding the deserted cave. Gotham is no country for old man

which is why the avenging son of the city disappears into his self-chosen exile and watches from afar like a benevolent but distant father.

26 In conclusion it can be said that the men of Gotham make names for themselves by diminishing others. Even Batman's strong, smart and wealthy persona does not keep him from using violence and the torture of others because the capitalist morals of the city demand that masculinity expresses itself through power and control. What distinguishes him from others is that he has the financial means and conforms effortlessly to the preferred heterosexual norm to perform most effectively. Yet without his armour even the dark knight is only the everyman Bruce Wayne. It thus seems that Nolan argues that not the times themselves are indecent but the demands for an unattainable form of comprehensive, immaculate masculinity.

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