

Undoing Masculinity: *The Full Monty*

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Abstract

In 1997, Fox Searchlight Studios released the modest film, *The Full Monty* to critical praise and financial success. The film, which on the surface is a simple comedy, is about a group of out-of-work steel mill workers who decide to become male strippers as a way to make some money. But in its presentation of gender rules and roles, it challenges and problematizes the ideas of traditional gender roles while illustrating an advantage to practicing both traditional and non-traditional gender roles, thereby defying the easy label of masculine and feminine. When these men decide to strip, they are shedding both traditional gender roles as well as their clothes and reasserting a new empowering agency.

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We may not be young, we may not be pretty, we may not be right good, but we're here, we're live and for one night only we're going for the full monty.

Dave (Mark Addy) introducing Hot Metal in  
*The Full Monty*.

Gender is thus a regulatory norm, but it is also one that is produced in service of other kinds of regulations (53).

Judith Butler

*Undoing Gender*

Ideas of gender identity have become fairly static, while the conditions that determine gender have been and continue to be in flux. Norms and regulations regarding masculinity and power have been under constant re-evaluation in the 20<sup>th</sup> and on into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Shifting roles of women in society and in the home have caused some crises in terms of successfully identifying gender along a binary heteronormative paradigm. To wit popular culture has seen its fair share of screen portrayals whereby traditional gender roles are challenged: *Kramer vs. Kramer*, *Victor/Victoria*, *Boys Don't Cry* or *The Game Plan* to name a few. In 1997, the working-class comedy, *The Full Monty*, was released in Great Britain and The United States. It was a modest film that achieved significant box

office and critical success. As film and gender scholar Heather J. Hicks recognizes, “Again and again over the course of the last 50 years, authors and filmmakers have come to express work relations in gendered terms” (49-50), and *The Full Monty* was no exception. The film centers on a group of unemployed men in Sheffield, England whose lives have been affected by the sudden collapse of the local steel economy. In searching for a way back to solvency, they decide to become male strippers. In shifting their identities from working-class steel mill workers to strippers, they reveal a great deal about the conundrum of living in and adhering to a binary gendered society. Much has been written about the threat that the feminine power places on male identity in this film. But rather than a threat from the feminine power, I see this film as more of a complication to normative gender roles, even a questioning of the validity of those roles. In many ways the success of these six men is closely linked to more than a reaffirmation of their traditional role, but an undoing of the masculinity that defined them in the first place. This paper will examine the decentering and recentering of the working-class masculine gender identity that takes place as a result of the activities of these six men.

The traditional gender binary is one which has favored one over the Other and historically the signifier of that power position has been the “Phallus”. Men have had domain over both the literal and figurative Phallus, as their position in society can attest. As the Phallus is not a fixed symbol, it derives its meaning, like other signifiers, from its juxtaposition to the Other. When Jacques Lacan is addressing a symbolic Phallus, or the free-floating signifying Phallus, its meaning is determined in relation to an Other. For Judith Butler, that Other is the feminine which defines Phallus and thus gives power to the masculine. The problematic of this notion is that the power is not truly in the Phallus,

but the Other who defines that Phallus, “By claiming that the Other that lacks the Phallus is the one who is the Phallus Lacan clearly suggests that the masculine subject who ‘has’ the Phallus requires this Other to confirm and, hence, be the Phallus in its ‘extended’ sense” (*Gender Trouble* 59-60). The implication here is that if the Phallus is not the location of power, but in the juxtaposed subject that defines it, then the status of the Phallus as power is tenuous at best. Furthermore, if the signified who determines the location of the Phallus truly has the power, from a semiotic (or Lacanian) point of view, does that not indicate trouble for a normative gender hierarchy? What's more, if identity at its very base level is dependant upon this hierarchy for defining itself, then a disruption to this hierarchy would also mean a crisis of identity. This is where we enter *The Full Monty*.

In *The Full Monty*, the city of Sheffield looms large, cinematographically, dominating the screen, and reminding the viewer of the urban decay that has infected this once thriving steel town. The film begins with a promotional tourism filmstrip from the early 1970s that invites people to visit Sheffield, “a city on the move” (*The Full Monty* n.p.). In this video, filmed a quarter of a century before the setting of the film, Sheffield is seen as a vibrant growing city that “employs 90,000 *men*” (emphasis added, n.p.). The filmstrip emphasizes the value and importance of men in constructing this city and this city’s identity, which in turn reaffirms the power of the working-class man in Sheffield.<sup>1</sup> This is city where, “Victorian slums have been cleared to make room for the homes of the

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<sup>1</sup> I am primarily examining the crisis of identity that confronts the working-class of Sheffield, as indications are that other classes are not facing the same crisis in the film. An example of this would be Mandy’s (Gaz’s ex-wife) new boyfriend Barry. He appears by all accounts to be employed and financially situated.

future” (n.p.). Homes, the site for domesticity and the traditional domain of the feminine are being cleared away in favor of the cold steel high-rise tenement apartments. The city has undergone a masculine make-over in this filmstrip. However, the reality of contemporary 1997 Sheffield is that the city failed to empower working-class men. The “homes of the future” became the slums of the present. Most of the men we see in the film are unemployed. And inactive smoke stacks of the once great steel industry serve as visual reminders of the impotency of contemporary Sheffield, an impotency shared by at least one character in the film. It is a city that is wallowing in its own inactivity. The image of Sheffield is a constant reminder of the once-perceived potential of this city and a metaphor for the current status of the men and their masculine identity in Sheffield.<sup>2</sup>

The men of *The Full Monty*, like the city of Sheffield, have become a decaying symbol of what once was.

Since the basis of identity of Sheffield has for so long been determined by the industry of steel, then the laborers also defined themselves through their work in the steel mills and factories of Sheffield, “If I am someone who cannot ‘be’ without ‘doing’ then the conditions of my doing are in part the conditions of my existence” (Butler *Undoing Gender* 3). Without work, the working-class men of Sheffield do not exist, in that they

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<sup>2</sup> During the fall of 1994 and the spring of 1995, I lived in Sheffield while attending The University of Sheffield. During my stay there, I witnessed the decay and corrosion of Sheffield’s identity as a city. As a matter of fact, the city was actively trying to redefine itself as “The Welcoming City”, working to attract visitors to the city by way of their new mega-mall, Meadowhall. The apparent de-masculization of the city was evident in the city’s redefinition of itself as a center of shopping and commerce, not the once hyped steel; however, the residents and city leaders were still proud of their steel legacy, touting Sheffield steel as the best in Europe.

are no longer “doing”. Early on in the film, Gaz, his friend Dave, and Gaz’s son, Nathan, are attempting to steal some beams from an abandoned steel mill, the same steel mill they once worked in. Even though economic conditions have changed, they still rely on their former work and job site to help define their existence. Interestingly, however, steel will not help them to define who they are, as their attempted heist is a failure when they lose the steel beams in the canal outside of the factory.<sup>3</sup> Another former location of masculine power that also indicates the gender crisis of Sheffield is the Millthorpe Pub. Following the failed attempt at the mill, Gaz, Dave and Nathan walk by the pub where women have formed a queue to see the Chippendales dancers. Gaz notes, “Women only? It’s a bloody working men’s club” (*The Full Monty* n.p.).<sup>4</sup> Quickly Gaz then insults the masculinity and sexuality of the club’s featured attraction, the Chippendales dancers, referring to them as “poofs” and then explaining, “I don’t know what you’ve got to smile about (talking to a Chippendale’s poster). I mean he’s got no willy for starters, has he?” (n.p.). This is important first of all for a baseline of where, from a traditionally heteronormative binary, a group of male strippers would fall, but it also indicates something of Gaz’s attitude toward such behavior by men. Additionally, in a working men’s pub, “the only ‘working men’ in the club are the Chippendales dancers” (Hicks 51). The decentering of the symbol of the Phallus is indicated outside the pub, but also by what Gaz witnesses in the pub. Gaz and Nathan sneak into the men’s restroom, so that Nathan can go into the club and find Dave’s wife and send her out. While Gaz waits

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<sup>3</sup> Their former site of employment, the Millthorpe Steel Mill, will be important later in recentering and refocusing their identity.

<sup>4</sup> The dialogs quoted in this essay are taken from the English, U.K. Subtitles of the 1997 DVD. To most accurately reflect the cultural and social flavor of the dialog, all U.K. slang and spellings remain intact.

for Nathan to return, Jean, Dave's wife, comes in with several of her friends. Gaz sneaks into an empty stall and watches the women further invade a masculine space. There Jean talks of Dave to one of her friends, "No. I couldn't do it to (cheat on) Dave...But it's like he's given up. Work. Me. Everything" (n.p.). This scene establishes the foundation for Dave's identity conflicts over his social status as unemployed. As the film later reveals, the loss of work for Dave affects all areas of his gender identity as he becomes self-conscious about his appearance and weight, and impotent.

To cheer her up, one of her friends decides to urinate in a men's urinal standing up, commenting, "I weren't in Girlguides for nowt (sic, nothing)" (n.p.). The inverted gender conditions of this scene show the crisis of identity the Sheffield economic collapse has caused; clearly the implication of Girlguides, a Girl Scout affiliated organization in the United Kingdom, indicates that her performative act of urinating standing up, was not an isolated occurrence, and secondly, she is not the only woman who can perform this task. Indeed Gaz perceives this as a threat to the existence of masculinity as the next scene indicates.

The spectacle of seeing a woman urinate standing up is one that confuses not only Gaz, but also the other unemployed men at Job Centre the next day:

Gaz: I tell you, Women start pissing like us. We're finished, Dave."

Dave: Yeah, but how? You know... how?

Terry (another Job Centre patron): Genetic mutations, isn't it? They're turning into us.

Gaz: A few years and men won't even exist... except in zoo or summat (sic something). I mean we're not needed no more, are we? Obsolete. Dinosaurs.

Yesterday's news. (n.p.)

Not only have the women invaded the masculine sphere of a "working men's pub," but they also have begun to adopt the physicalities of men, even if only in jest. "That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the acts which constitute its reality" (Butler *Gender Trouble* 185). So the behaviors of individuals are what determine the gender of individuals. The problem then here is that due to a collapsed steel industry economy, neither men, nor women, are behaving in such a manner that would signify the traditional masculine and feminine binaries and hierarchies. Furthermore, the power of the Phallus, which according to Butler lays within the feminine, now also belongs to the feminine, as the scene the night before has indicated; so far the sight of the woman urinating standing is the only suggestion of a Phallus, albeit a metaphoric one. The men of Sheffield are frozen by this and have become passive and inactive, as we see them doing nothing, except smoking and playing cards at the Job Centre. Not only are women actively performing roles once dominated by men, but also they are apparently the few active agents in Sheffield.

The gender conflicts that arise from the economic crisis illustrate the trouble with a heteronormative gender binary. Judith Butler, regarding the dissonance between sexuality and gender, writes that the possibility of a gender paradigm not based on a binary structure would, "[seek] to show possibilities for gender that are not predetermined by forms of hegemonic heterosexuality" (*Undoing Gender* 54). In other words, the traditional gender rules that regulate what men or women should do need to be



reevaluated and abandoned, so that gender is no longer seen along a hierarchical continuum. With their compromised masculine identities, Gaz, Dave and the rest of the central characters, seek to reclaim their traditional roles and activities to reassert some kind of agency in their life. Initially they are looking to reclaim their traditional gender roles and the heteronormative Phallus, which symbolically is now of and belonging to the females of the text. In an effort to recenter their own Phallus, the men of Hot Metal, which is what they name their dance troupe, must abandon their traditional gender performances and adopt behaviors and practices that are not conventionally masculine.

“You call them Chippendales men? Degrading is what it were” (*The Full Monty* n.p.). Although Gaz has little respect for what he perceives as the emasculated Chippendales dancers, he cannot deny the potential for earning money that the prospect of stripping holds. And for him money is what holds the key for Gaz to maintain his last vestige of masculine power, fatherhood. “The film more than once more than suggests that stripping represents a degrading and unhealthy departure from conventional masculinity” (Hicks 56).

For the men of Hot Metal, stripping is a hybrid activity that merges their former identities with new activities. Roland Barthes wrote, “To start with the striptease is a *sport*...Then the striptease is identified as a *career* (beginners, semi-professionals, professionals), that is, to the honourable practice of specialization (strippers are skilled workers)” (86). The men of Hot Metal while practicing a traditionally feminine act of dancing and stripping maintain many of the qualities of masculine sport and work. First of all, the abandoned Millthorpe Steel Mill that employed Dave, Gaz and Gerald is the site of their rehearsals. This closely ties the activities of stripping as “work”. And not

work in an exclusively feminized way that Barthes discusses, but also a masculine work that these men once engaged in at their plant. Furthermore, in the practice of their routine, Gerald grows frustrated with the men's inability to form a line. Horse is finally able to explain the dance to the others by paralleling it to a football (soccer) strategy:

Gerald: All I want to do is get you into a straight bloody line. What do I have to do?

Horse: It's the Arsenal off-side trap, isn't it?

Gerald: The what?

Horse: The Arsenal off-side trap. Lomper here is Tony Adams, right? Any bugger looks like scoring we all step forward in a line and wave our arms around like a fairy.

Dave: Oh well, that's easy (*The Full Monty* n.p.).

During a break from choreography the group meets at a local empty field and for exercise and team building. Not only do they exercise, but they engage in a game of football. The mixing of these traditional gendered activities complicates the traditional gender label of stripping. While they were not the ones who initially blurred the daily practices that complicated gender, by engaging in activities and practices that span the spectrum of gender performativity, this film explores the benefits of doing away with measuring gender by strictly traditional roles.

The film culminates with a striptease at the same pub, the Millthorpe, where the Chippendales dancers performed at the beginning of the film. While during the first scene, this was the location of female power, as men were subjected to the female gaze, the location takes on a whole new meaning in this latter scene. The film up to this point

has demonstrated women as staking a claim to the Phallus, and The Millthorpe was the location that most demonstrated the shift in gender roles that have occurred in a postindustrial Sheffield. There women invaded the world that had formerly been occupied exclusively by working men, they cheered on and objectified the Chippendale's Dancers, and most importantly, where the notion of the literal Phallus made its appearance: Jean's friend using the urinal. As a matter of fact, it is only within the club that the literal Phallus, or suggestion of the Phallus, is present. Never while Hot Metal is rehearsing do they expose or even suggest that they expose their penises. It is at the Millthorpe where the men of Hot Metal finally display their literal phallus. When they finally go for the full monty, or strip completely, it is not an act of sexuality, nor is it a submissive act in service of the females in the audience, as the Chippendales show was. Actually, in this last performance, the audience, unlike the audience earlier in the film, is a mixed audience. There are women, but also men: fellow former co-workers, local police, the Millthorpe Steel Mill's brass band, Dave's wife, Gaz's ex-wife and Nathan backstage. The striptease is not a sexualized public act, but rather a performance where the protagonists of film display their recentered Phalluses. Phalluses that no longer depend upon a male/female binary, but ones that have been molded and forged from a combination of gendered activities.

The final striptease is not one of a sexual nature, nor is it really a reassertion of masculinity on behalf of these men. The fact that *The Full Monty* is a light comedy is no reason to dismiss the depth of the complexity of its analysis of gender and society. By challenging the roles of men and women, this film shows potential for what could be if traditional gendered activities are confronted and contested. By the end of the film, Dave

has come to an understanding of who he is with his wife and learned to appreciate himself as such, Gerald has found a job which he hopes to use to help the others get work, and Gaz has rebuilt his relationship with his son, a relationship that his ex-wife supports, as indicated when she brings Nathan to their show. Like the dancers of Hot Metal, by performing without shame, a spectrum of gendered activities that allow these men, who are trapped and immobilized by their traditional roles, to regain freedom and reassert their agency while displaying their newly recentered gender role, here signified by the Phallus.

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