

ABSTRACT

Literary Models of Manhood: Forming a Foundational Understanding of Healthy Masculinity

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How are we to understand healthy masculinity? My thesis attempts to answer this question and redirect the current debate about masculinity in our culture from its focus on toxic masculinity to the more productive topic of healthy masculinity by analyzing literary models of manhood. I begin with Tom Wolfe's novel *A Man in Full*, which provides an accurate depiction of toxic masculinity, and highlight the significance of moral formation for the production of healthy men. In C. S. Lewis' *The Abolition of Man* and J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, I find healthy masculinity requires men to pursue moral formation through virtue, specifically, the virtues of honesty, humility, courage, and prudence. In turn, I discover that these virtues promote emotional vulnerability, the formation of true friendship, and the acceptance of responsibility, which each prove essential for healthy masculinity. In this way, my thesis seeks to offer a fundamental framework for men's moral formation that will guard men against toxic masculinity and allow them to flourish under a renewed masculinity

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LITERARY MODELS OF MANHOOD: FORMING A FOUNDATIONAL
UNDERSTANDING OF HEALTHY MASCULINITY

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To Rob Shelton

A wise, passionate, and sacrificial man

Proverbs 9:10

INTRODUCTION

Today, a dichotomy appears to exist between those who attempt to warn the world of the ills of men and boys and those who feel attacked and demeaned by these movements. A conversation between “men are the issue” and “boys will be boys” serves no purpose. We cannot simply cite and complain about the various forms of toxic masculinity, nor can we revert to incomplete and potentially harmful views of masculinity. Instead, we must find a path forward. We must construct a better framework for understanding and fostering healthy masculinity, which requires, at least in part, remembering what we have forgotten. In other words, we must reform and enliven masculinity. In our age, where the belief that newer is better dominates, we have forgotten that many of the same ugly issues present in our cultural moment have existed for millennia. What has changed, however, is western culture’s continually fading memory of how to train, educate, and form young men. Western culture has forgotten the necessity of moral formation, which serves to teach young men how to express themselves in a healthy manner and, consequently, benefits society as whole. Instead of simply lamenting the various aspects of toxic masculinity, or promoting recourse to flawed understandings of manhood from the mid-twentieth-century, I hope to construct a foundational framework for understanding healthy masculinity that will bring light to this current conversation. I should also note that while I am a Christian, I am writing here not just for my fellow Christians but for everyone in our society concerned about the lack of healthy masculinity. For this reason, I do not include theological arguments in this thesis.

Over the past few decades there has been a growing debate about masculinity in our culture. While some initially viewed certain aspects of “traditional masculinity” as positive, the cultural understanding of masculinity began to change during the second half of the twentieth century. In this vein, George Mosse claims that masculinity during the twentieth century “helped to determine, and was in turn influenced by, what were considered normative patterns of morality and behavior” and helped to form “ideas of nationhood, respectability, and war.”¹ For example, the idea of the gentleman during the twentieth century included a set of socially acceptable, respectable, and praiseworthy behaviors for men such as opening doors for women, removing hats at the table, and initiating a firm handshake. In addition to behavioral aspects, the cultural conception of the gentleman was formed by standards of morality as well, which is evidenced by the inclusion of certain virtues, such as courage and honesty, in its common description. Society valued men whose word was their bond or those who volunteered for military service. Additionally, the mandatory draft in the United States that was instituted during World War I, and continued through the Vietnam War, exemplifies a cultural understanding that protection of women and children was a distinctively masculine responsibility.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, however, masculinity became increasingly viewed as something detrimental to society that should be opposed, rather than something that contributed to its further success. This aversion to masculinity that arose was accompanied by “what to many seemed a decline of morals: discarding of

¹George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York: Oxford University Press USA, 1998), 4.

clearly defined traditional virtues that manliness and society as a whole”² had required, in exchange for values defined by individuals themselves. For some, this male crisis became almost a “defining characteristic of Western societies at the turn of the millennium.”³

This conversation focused on the negative or harmful acts of men, such as sexual assault, mass shootings, and other lower profile acts of violence that were then generalized and asserted as effects of patriarchy or the aggressive, power-hungry disposition of men. This resulted in what Jordan Peterson refers to as a current cultural backlash against masculinity.⁴ Peterson points toward a western exaltation of women and feminine qualities, partly due to a sense of past injustice, which is now being over-corrected with harmful methodology: characterizing everything masculine as harmful and destructive.

Despite these prevalent conversations surrounding men and masculinity, the issues men face persist. Is this the case because the current conversation, in its present state, proves futile? A significant portion of the current debate still focuses on the harmful actions of some men. Often, these debates put forward toxic masculinity as the primary cause of heinous male behavior. Even though discussing toxic masculinity is pertinent and logical in the wake of horrible, shocking events perpetrated by men, we must seek to understand these isolated events on a case by case basis, evaluating the particular event and the perpetrator’s motives as well. On a large scale, however, discussing masculinity in terms of particular travesties, or even toxic masculinity as a

²Mosse, *The Image of Man*, 189.

³Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank Barrett, eds., “The Sociology of Masculinity,” in *The Masculinities Reader*, 1 edition (Cambridge, UK : Polity; Malden, MA: Polity, 2002), 6.

⁴“There Is ‘a Backlash against Masculinity’ - BBC News,” accessed April 15, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-45084954/jordan-peterson-on-the-backlash-against-masculinity>.

whole, seems counterproductive. Instead, we should examine the various aspects of toxic masculinity in an attempt to determine what constitutes healthy masculinity, or what we, as a society, desire in men. When I refer to “toxic masculinity” I mean the harmful, rigid conception of manhood that requires physical aggression, sexual conquest, monetary success, and the subjugation of others, as well as excludes close friendships and emotional vulnerability. *The Mask You Live In*, a documentary released in 2015, focuses on toxic masculinity’s harmful effects on young men in America.⁵ This documentary describes the difficulties young men face interacting with an understanding of masculinity that “encourages them to disconnect from their emotions, devalue authentic friendships, objectify and degrade women, and resolve conflicts through violence.”⁶ While what is now termed toxic masculinity is real, it is nothing new. Depending on its cultural context, it might manifest differently, but it is important to note that we must not mistake toxic masculinity for masculinity in general. In other words, all masculinity is not toxic, but toxic masculinity exists and represents a network of conceptions of manhood that produces various consequences for men as well as others. Further, understanding what constitutes toxic or unhealthy masculinity and its impetus only serves as one part of the necessary work in this area. Thus, I am partially concerned with identifying those traits and characteristics in men that lead to unhealthy forms of masculinity, but primarily with a viable solution to the various interconnected issues men

⁵“The Issue,” The Representation Project, accessed March 21, 2020, <http://therepresentationproject.org/film/miss-representation-film/the-issue/>.

⁶Jennifer Siebel Newsom, “About Miss Representation,” The Representation Project, accessed March 21, 2020, <http://therepresentationproject.org/film/miss-representation-film/about-the-film/>.

face that will both mitigate unhealthy forms of masculinity and foster healthy masculinity.

Now, I must outline several issues men face as a result of toxic masculinity before constructing a framework for healthy masculinity so that we understand what work this framework must accomplish. According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and the National Institute of Mental Health, along with increasing depression rates, the age-adjusted suicide rate for men is nearly four times that of women⁷ and has continually increased since 2001.⁸ Considering this trend, Henry Montero explains how the emotional repression encouraged by the social dynamics of toxic masculinity can lead to depression. Specifically, he argues that men deal with depression differently, and usually more negatively, than women due to the pervasive presence of toxic masculinity in our culture.⁹ While these issues do not result from toxic masculinity alone, certain aspects of toxic masculinity contribute to these trends. For example, toxic masculinity tells young men they must achieve monetary success to be considered a man. In part, Western culture's narrowed perception of success, which underwent a significant change during and after the industrial revolution, contributed to this skewed perspective. Work became something done for money instead of something done for the betterment of the home and family.

⁷"Suicide Statistics," AFSP, February 16, 2016, <https://afsp.org/about-suicide/suicide-statistics/>.

⁸"NIMH » Suicide," accessed March 21, 2020, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide.shtml>.

⁹Story by Henry A. Montero, "Depression in Men: The Cycle of Toxic Masculinity," *Psycom.Net - Mental Health Treatment Resource Since 1986* (blog), accessed March 21, 2020, <https://www.psycom.net/depression-in-men/depression-in-men-toxic-masculinity/>.

In the industrial and post-industrial eras, human success and value began to be associated with monetary success and value. For men, their success became associated with the money they acquired in the market, when previously their work and success were directly connected to the health of their families and the value they created in their home. Many men “seek to validate their masculinity in the public world of work rather [than] the private world of family and relationships.”¹⁰ Wendell Berry explains that the relationship between modern men and the industrial economy is such that modern men will “do whatever they are told” for money.¹¹ Further, this kind of economy subjects “love, friendship, neighborliness, compassion, duty” to money and contractual relationships based on the same.¹² Berry elucidates that while work done in the home is valuable, both to the household and economy, people now frequently view this work contemptuously. And, even though this is now the view of many feminists, he claims “men in general were the first to hold [household work] in contempt as they departed from it for the sake of the professional salary or the hourly wage.”¹³ Today, when people in western culture hear the word value, or valuable, they almost certainly think of money. Although this was not always the case, unfortunately, it is now a reality in Western culture as well as other cultures. Consequently, the primary value of human beings presumably stems from their capacity to create capital in the market. Just look to the

¹⁰Whitehead and Barrett, “The Sociology of Masculinity,” 7.

¹¹Wendell Berry, “Feminism, the Body, and the Machine,” in *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Washington, D.C: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2002), 65–80.

¹²Ibid, 68.

¹³Ibid.

progression of feminism over the past century. The feminist movement originally sought equal voting rights, then equal pay, and now pushes for equal representation in executive positions. By no means do I think this initial progression was harmful. In fact, I applaud the tremendous efforts of women to overcome various difficulties and achieve what should have been rightfully theirs. I do think, however, a harmful belief underlies an aspect of some forms of feminism: the belief that women must have a specific job placement or pay in order to achieve the same level of value as men. Should women have the opportunity to hold the same positions and receive the same pay as men? Absolutely. However, neither women's, nor men's, true value is determined monetarily, even if they think it is. Given this shift in the cultural understanding of success, it is not difficult to see that the combination of this view and toxic masculinity significantly harms both men and women. While not minimizing the harm done to women by this view of success and toxic masculinity, my focus in this thesis is specifically on the harm done to men. This issue is something I will discuss further in Chapter 1.

In addition to men suffering from the skewed meaning of success propagated by toxic masculinity and modern culture, men also face cultural hostility regarding emotional vulnerability and close friendships. Men desire community and meaningful friendships, but many of the groups that claim to offer such things to young men pose a greater threat to their healthy formation in reality. Due to the pervasive isolation of individuals in our society, many young men prove susceptible to harmful ideologies, such as those the alt-right expresses. Yet, given the evidently detrimental, sometimes fascist beliefs of this group, what attracts these young men to this and other similar groups? Well, Angela Nagle explains that “while everyone else was telling these young men to

check their privilege, the alt-right was speaking powerfully to their Millennial woes—their diminished place in society, their dwindling economic prospects, their growing alienation.”¹⁴ While some might not see these as reasons for taking up provenly disastrous beliefs, we must understand that all people, especially many young men, do not see their predicament or the consequences in the same terms. Initially, these young men likely seek belonging and a group of other men who understand them, but unfortunately, too many wind up in similar groups instead of circles of healthy men. Speaking to this phenomenon, Nagle says “A common path to the worst sorts of extremism begins with a search for camaraderie and tribe; the adoption and hardening of truly extreme ideological views come later.”¹⁵

Considering this search for significant relationships, in her article titled “The Miseducation of the American Boy,” Peggy Orenstein claims that the #MeToo movement has initiated a conversation that involves “young men in authentic, long-overdue conversations about gender and intimacy.”¹⁶ I think a better understanding of male intimacy proves crucial to our conception of healthy masculinity. Men often struggle with vulnerability, close friendships, and intimacy not because they are naturally opposed to these things, but because they are formed, at least in part, by our sexualized society and toxic masculinity. For example, some people in Western culture might label a male friendship “homosexual” simply because the friendship is intimate, regardless of whether

¹⁴Story by Angela Nagle, “The Lost Boys,” *The Atlantic*, accessed March 21, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/12/brotherhood-of-losers/544158/>.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Story by Peggy Orenstein, “The Miseducation of the American Boy,” *The Atlantic*, accessed March 21, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/01/the-miseducation-of-the-american-boy/603046/>.

this is actually the case. This characterization harms boys' perceptions of close male friendships by creating concern that if they have close male friends, they will be perceived as gay. This avoidance of intimate male friendships does not necessarily mean these men are homophobic, but rather that they might simply not wish to be mischaracterized. Alternatively, toxic masculinity might encourage young men to avoid close friendships and intimacy because such relationships do not increase one's "strength," or because of the belief that the strongest men are solitary. Regardless, we must find a way to encourage close friendships among men that foster vulnerability and mental health. Contrary to tenants of toxic masculinity, vulnerability does not negate strength, but rather, fosters greater emotional strength and stability. By encouraging genuine non-sexualized intimacy between men, we create spaces in which men are more likely to express vulnerability and deal with shame in a healthy manner. For this reason, healthy male friendships and community prove crucial for healthy masculinity. By encouraging relationships such as these, we not only mitigate the pervasive isolation of men in Western culture, but also counteract harmful male communities with healthy male communities.

Because of the issues men face related to toxic masculinity, some people want to eliminate masculinity or, too often, adhere to harmful pictures of manhood. While not all masculinity is toxic, as some believe, toxic masculinity does exist as an incomplete, harmful understanding of manhood. For this reason, Rebel Wisdom points out that this form of toxic masculinity and its behaviors, highlighted by the #MeToo movement, are "manifestations of immature and unintegrated masculinity—boys pretending to be

men.”¹⁷ Addressing such unhealthy forms of masculinity, one sociologist says “many men need some form of help, but not to lead them back to essentialist retreats...and damaging ways of being a man, exemplified by various anti-feminist men’s movements.”¹⁸ However, Rebel Wisdom, along with Jordan Peterson, and The Good Men Project, also criticize the cultural idea that a positive expression of masculinity requires the feminization of men. Similarly, Psychologist Mark Sherman says it is “unwise to feminize our sons while we encourage independence, self-confidence, and competitiveness in our daughters.”¹⁹ When people speak of the feminization of men, they are often referring, as I am now, to an attempt to create more passive or docile men for the sake of mitigating aggression and violence. Even though eliminating unnecessary aggression is required when forming healthy men, attempting to feminize young men by instilling passivity in them proves detrimental and accomplishes nothing. Neither passive, bad men, nor passive, good men serve anyone. Now, if some people call for the feminization of men and mean increased emotional vulnerability, then this sentiment and objective have value. However, their use of the term “feminization” in this context lacks specificity, misleads, and proves counterproductive. Thus, we should neither seek to revive harmful understandings of masculinity, nor attempt to feminize young men, but rather, renew masculinity.

¹⁷Story by David Fuller, “‘Masculinity Is Not Toxic’ — The Guardian and the New Men’s Movement,” Medium, March 11, 2018, <https://medium.com/rebel-wisdom/masculinity-is-not-toxic-the-guardian-and-the-new-men-s-movement-991291ddb4af>.

¹⁸Whitehead and Barrett, “The Sociology of Masculinity,” 9.

¹⁹Story by Mark Sherman Ph.D., “Feminizing Boys as We Masculinize Girls,” *Psychology Today*, accessed March 21, 2020, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/real-men-dont-write-blogs/201803/feminizing-boys-we-masculinize-girls>.

In light of these cultural issues and the inappropriateness of feminization as a solution, we must seek to gain a better understanding of what constitutes healthy masculinity and how men experience the kind of formation that enables this healthy expression. After interviewing over 100 young men, either college-bound or in college, Orenstein explains her findings and claims that “it is time we rethink assumptions about how we raise boys.”²⁰ Even though Orenstein says most of the boys she interviewed “held relatively egalitarian views about girls” as well as demonstrated an understanding and awareness of “toxic masculinity,” their picture of the ideal man often reflected the masculine ideals of the mid-twentieth-century. In spite of gaining a healthier understanding of women, these young men did not exhibit a deeper conception of manhood. In fact, due to the responses of boys in her interviews, Orenstein thinks masculinity is contracting because these boys’ articulations of the “ideal man” often lacked strong character or leadership qualities. In her view, the effort to raise healthy, mature boys requires “models of manhood that are neither ashamed nor regressive, and that emphasize emotional flexibility,” which means that we cannot simply say “what we don’t want from boys but what we do want.” Thus, Orenstein takes a more moderate approach to addressing the issues that surround masculinity. She does not lambast masculinity, but rather, cites and discourages certain behaviors and mindsets that contribute to unhealthy masculinity. On the other hand, she upholds certain behaviors associated with traditional forms of masculinity as healthy, given that these behaviors are properly directed.

²⁰Orenstein, “The Miseducation of the American Boy.”

Similarly, Peterson and others believe the correct type of response is “not to demonize masculinity or for men to retreat into shame around their gender—but to do the inner work.”²¹ This “inner work” requires identifying the things that can manifest as “anger, aggression, or domination and to integrate [them] into a healthy, competent and confident personality.”²² In short, this group calls for the implementation of virtues and moral formation previously separated from masculinity. Young men must be taught how to direct their natural desires and propensities toward productive ends. For example, a young man must be taught that while physicality and aggression are often beneficial in the realm of sports, these propensities must be restrained when a young man experiences frustration in a classroom setting or during an argument. Unfortunately, the lack of such instruction yields men who are physically mature, but do not possess the characteristics of healthy adults.

Martha Nussbaum, an American philosopher and the current Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago, cites the lack of virtue as one of the greatest issues we face currently in our society. She says younger generations in America “are all too lacking in a sense of responsibility.”²³ For example, a 2017 PerryUndem survey revealed that only 2% of the boys questioned said honesty and morality were characteristics society valued in boys. This reality combined with the general lack of positive, realistic solutions for controlling toxic masculinity suggest Western culture has forgotten that the virtues have historically stood as a

²¹Fuller, “Masculinity Is Not Toxic.”

²²Ibid.

²³Martha Nussbaum, “Man Overboard,” *The New Republic*, June 21, 2006, <https://newrepublic.com/article/64199/man-overboard>.

valuable method for forming young men and controlling unhealthy masculine tendencies. For this reason, Nussbaum says “we need to follow Aristotle’s lead” in this area and regain the kind of virtue that enables us to “reflect on what risks are worth running, on what deals are noble and what goals are trivial or even base.”²⁴ Aristotle explains that virtues enable us to experience our emotions “at the right time, toward the right objects, toward the right people, for the right reason[s], and in the right manner.”²⁵ Echoing Nussbaum’s thoughts, Jordan Peterson affirms that our society no longer looks to the past to gain wisdom, but rather worships expediency and individual freedom demonstrated in a pervasive apathy and lack of responsibility among individuals, especially men. Peterson claims personal responsibility is the solution to this current cultural issue and responds to this issue by setting out simple rules in the form of maxims in order to provide some of the instruction so many men never received. He offers these rules in an effort to re-imbue our culture with pieces of seemingly-forgotten, ancient wisdom. Additionally, Peterson claims that fundamentally, “masculine aspiration should be directed toward responsibility.”²⁶ Peterson goes on to say that responsibility, like many qualities required for maturation, must be modeled for young men.

However, as I previously mentioned, many young men in Western culture lack men in their lives who model healthy masculinity, so how can they understand and imitate these healthy models of manhood they need? In spite of absent fathers, young

²⁴Martha Nussbaum, “Man Overboard.”

²⁵Aristotle, *Aristotle: The Nichomachean Ethics*, Trans. Martin Ostwald, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1999), 43.

²⁶Jordan Peterson - “Masculinity Is Not Toxic” - Part 2 of Interview, accessed March 21, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szBKI9Eg0fE>.

men often look to other older men in their lives, such as teachers or coaches, who serve as valuable exemplars and role models even when fathers are present. Yet a portion of young men will remain that lacks adequate access to these healthy models of manhood. Now, some people might claim that women can model virtues such as responsibility for young men, which is true. Berry argues that “children need an ordinary daily association with both parents...need to see their parents at work,” and further, that “they need to work with their parents.”²⁷ This is the case because men and women often exemplify different kinds of responsibility. For example, while a mother’s care for her children communicates unique aspects of responsibility to young men, fathers also convey alternate dimensions of responsibility to young men by fulfilling their responsibilities. Because the roles of responsibility men often fill, such as protecting their families and friends, look different from those of women, both models prove necessary for the complete formation of young men. Now, I am not saying that masculine demonstrations of certain virtues are more valuable than feminine examples, but rather, I am emphasizing the importance of masculine models for young men because our culture appears to have lost sight of the value of these masculine roles. This is especially the case when men model virtues that are traditionally more closely associated with men.

Ultimately, the models of manhood for which Orenstein calls must come from men. Boys will be boys and remain boys, if they are formed by boys. Unfortunately, this is often the case and many young men grow to adulthood without fully maturing. Michael Gurian describes this resulting predicament as “adult males who grow male bodies but do

²⁷Berry, “Feminism, the Body, and the Machine,” 68.

not become fully loving, wise, and successful men.”²⁸ Boys will only become men if they are formed by men and, in this vein, only healthy men if they are formed by healthy men. This is not to say that some boys cannot end up becoming healthy men if they have a single mother, but rather that boys have the best chance of developing into healthy men if they are formed by healthy men as well. Consequently, we must identify the marks of healthy men and what exactly they need to model for younger men.

Thus, I aim to renew our understanding of masculinity by underscoring the importance of moral formation and virtue for young men. We need good, well-formed men in our culture. Attempting to create passive men will not ensure that they are good. We need good men because goodness is the only thing that will make men more resilient to the harmful mindset and actions that result from toxic masculinity. Consequently, we must remember and reintroduce virtue in the formation of young men to create this resilience and renew our conception of healthy masculinity. For example, we must reinvigorate the protecting role of masculine responsibility. While women and men both possess the potential to exemplify responsibility well, each uniquely conveys aspects of responsibility essential for the healthy formation of young men. The idea of a protector is not essentially masculine, but serves as one of the roles of responsibility through which men can contribute to the formation of boys. Women also serve as protectors of their children and others, but again, this is an area in which both examples are necessary. Further, mutual protection is always better than an individual attempting to fulfill this role alone. Soldiers, for example, cannot provide full protection by themselves, so they work together to protect each other and others. Thus, we need various facets of protection

²⁸Michael Gurian, *The Purpose of Boys: Helping Our Sons Find Meaning, Significance, and Direction in Their Lives*, 1st ed (San Francisco, Calif: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 155.

that can only be formed in and fulfilled by community. Protection and responsibility are not necessarily zero-sum games: if one person provides protection, the other is not merely the protected. Young men need a variety of models in community for a complete, healthy formation, but they also require close friends. Young men need models, but also friends with whom they can practice virtue. C.S. Lewis, in *The Four Loves*, explains that “to the Ancients, Friendship seemed the happiest and most fully human of all loves; the crown of life and the school of virtue,”²⁹ but the modern world places significantly less emphasis on friendship, especially male friendship. While masculine responsibility and friendship prove crucial in the formation of healthy men, they are not all that is required. I will articulate other virtues necessary for such a formation in Chapter 1, but primarily in Chapter 3.

Now, to renew our understanding of healthy masculinity and the value of these roles, I will look to literature to further discern key issues men face and identify which virtues best serve in the moral formation of men. I think literature proves especially useful in this endeavor for several reasons. First, literature provides readers additional perspectives by removing them from their typical context and immersing them in a completely new, literary context that helps mitigate personal biases. Literature also allows readers access to the thoughts of characters, which facilitates a deeper, more complex analysis of characters’ experiences. Readers can understand the motives and reasons behind a character’s actions when they also know a character’s thoughts and decisions. Further, when literature depicts large spans of a character’s life, readers are able to understand the immediate causes of that character’s actions in light of past events.

²⁹C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, First edition (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017), 74.

One of the most evident advantages, however, is that literature allows readers to return to the same scene or scenario repeatedly for further analysis.

I will first analyze Tom Wolfe's *A Man in Full*, which portrays the lives of several complex male characters. Wolfe's novel provides an accurate depiction of several social pressures men face, but primarily illustrates toxic masculinity and its harmful effects on men. His novel also highlights more modern conceptions of manhood, such as the one exemplified by Wismer Strook. By analyzing these characters' responses to specific situations, I hope to elucidate what makes men susceptible to and perpetuate toxic masculinity. Further, given the manner in which Wolfe's novel progresses, I will highlight a potential means of guarding against these weaknesses. In my second chapter, I will analyze *The Abolition of Man* by C. S. Lewis in an effort to convey the importance of objective moral value, but specifically, the necessity of the virtues in the moral formation of young men. I will then turn to *The Lord of the Rings* in my third chapter. In one respect, Tolkien's novel provides valuable insight because its unique setting enables readers to view perennial issues in a new light. But this text also conveys the complexity of male moral formation and highlights certain virtues necessary for a foundational understanding of healthy masculinity through the actions of particular characters, specifically, Boromir, Faramir, and Aragorn. Thus, because the portrayals of manhood in these three books enlighten the particular struggles men face and virtues men need, they should inform our understanding of healthy masculinity and the appropriate formation of men.

CHAPTER ONE

Toxic Masculinity and Moral Formation in *A Man in Full*

In order to construct a foundational understanding of healthy masculinity, I must first outline the issues I seek to resolve by analyzing a manifestation of unhealthy or toxic masculinity. In his novel, *A Man in Full*, Tom Wolfe depicts various male stereotypes in southern American culture. However, Wolfe principally focuses on the personalities and lives of Charlie Croker and Conrad Hensley, who will serve as my primary subjects of analysis. I do not intend to provide a comprehensive analysis—my goal is not to identify every factor that contributes to unhealthy masculinity. I will, however, through my analysis of these characters, highlight some of the key issues men face that I discussed in the introduction, primarily, the skewed understanding of success toxic masculinity entails. I will refer to this skewed understanding of success simply as *mastery*, which I mean as power, control, and domination. In this vein, I will identify some behaviors that hinder or prevent the beneficial contrary of mastery: *self-mastery*, which is pursued through moral formation. Wolfe's characters, Croker and Hensley, both exemplify how a man's responses to internal and external conflict cultivate either unhealthy or healthy masculinity. Charlie Croker's progress toward healthy masculinity only commences after he focusses on his own moral formation and begins to pursue self-mastery. Additionally, if not for Conrad Hensley's moral revelation and his desire to share this knowledge with someone, Charlie would have remained stagnate.

Charlie Croker's story unfolds at the turn of the 20th Century, which, as I explained in the introduction, was partially marked by a shift in the Western conception

of masculinity. Croker represents many aspects of what is now referred to as ‘traditional masculinity,’ which Wolfe highlights by juxtaposing Croker with other key male characters, such as Wismer Strook and Conrad Hensley, who exemplify modern conceptions of masculinity. Croker is a sixty-year-old real estate tycoon in Atlanta, Georgia, who now faces financial ruin late in his career. He is financially successful, self-made, physically looming, strong, confident, a former college athlete, and a passionate outdoorsman. Croker also proves somewhat anachronistic; he finds himself in a culture that no longer reflects his core values or principles. He sees the essence of manhood as “earthy, down-home, [and] elemental” and a man’s rightful role as a “hunter, provider, and protector.”¹ Now, Croker’s understanding of masculinity here is not altogether wrong. As I stated in the introduction, some of the masculine roles Croker lists here prove valuable, but Croker thinks this description encapsulates masculinity. The culture in which Croker lives, however, values a disparate form of masculinity. Wismer Strook, for example, represents one manifestation of this modernized conception of masculinity: “young and fit,” but “neither manly or unmanly.”² This dichotomy, between Croker’s reality and the reality of modern Western culture, becomes increasingly apparent as the novel progresses. His awareness of this disparity only compounds his angst in social situations and his shame concerning his current financial predicament. Due to his rigid conception of masculinity, he is incapable of retaining the positive aspects of traditional masculinity, such as some of the aforementioned roles, and equally incapable of adopting new, beneficial dimensions, such as healthy emotional vulnerability. Now, while Croker

¹Tom Wolfe, *A Man in Full* (New York: Dial Press, 2005), 14.

²Ibid, 61-62.

is heir to the various stereotypical conceptions of masculinity formed during the 20th Century, these conceptions do not necessarily dictate his character. In other words, even though his preconceived notions of manhood likely limit Croker and affect his decision-making in some respects, they are not solely responsible for either the flawed, or laudable, aspects of his character.

We must first understand what behaviors, or character flaws, contribute to Croker's manifestation of unhealthy masculinity. Even though he is now in his sixties, Croker still views himself as a thirty-year-old unstoppable force of nature. In this vein, on several occasions, Croker identifies himself with a fabled ship captain who bore the same name: "Charlie Croker was a man in full, He had a back like a Jersey Bull."³ Croker's self-perception reveals his pride, which significantly affects his method of handling situations. For example, even after his first workout meeting with PlannersBanc, where he is forced to negotiate how he will service the debt on his loan, Croker does not fully grasp the reality of his financial situation. Croker feels humiliated by the bankers, specifically, Harry Zale, PlannersBanc's lead workout "artiste."⁴ He focuses on the actions of the PlannersBanc workout team during the meeting, rather than his responsibilities and predicament. Croker initially responds to the humiliation and shame he feels by imagining the death of Harry Zale at his own hand, creating mental scenarios in which he kills Zale "until he [runs] out of ideas for committing homicide with his bare hands."⁵ Croker's second instinct is to escape the situation by traveling to his twenty-

³Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 6.

⁴Ibid, 43.

⁵Ibid, 56.

nine-thousand-acre quail plantation, Turpmtine, on his G5 private jet.⁶ Neither of these responses to his meeting with PlannersBanc, however, proves as telling about Croker's character as his third response. After due consideration, Croker decides to layoff fifteen percent of the "food division" at Croker Global Foods to ameliorate PlannersBanc, rather than satisfy the bank's request and sell his G5 and Turpmtine.⁷ Croker clearly chooses to sacrifice the livelihoods of almost one thousand of his employees rather than sacrifice his own comfort. Further, he does not feel guilty after making this decision; Croker feels "almost whole again."⁸ Thus, in the aftermath of his meeting with PlannersBanc, Croker demonstrates intense anger, a desire to escape reality, and selfishness in an attempt to uphold a sense of his successful manhood.

Later in the novel, Croker is yet again confronted with the reality of his financial situation when PlannersBanc repossesses his G5. In this scene, Croker not only lies to his guests to maintain appearances, but even goes so far as to sabotage his own plane, after attempting to pressure and bribe an employee to damage the G5. When Croker and his guests return from a short trip to Turpmtine, they are met on the airport tarmac by representatives from the bank, who clearly state: "the Croker Global Corporation is no longer the owner of this aircraft. It is now the property of PlannersBanc."⁹ After hearing this news in the presence of his guests, Croker attempts to "keep from looking like a

⁶Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 54.

⁷Ibid, 70.

⁸Ibid, 82.

⁹Ibid, 290.

hapless bankrupt fool” by claiming the situation is a misunderstanding.¹⁰ Further, to prevent the repo team from experiencing the satisfaction of taking off in his airplane, and subjecting himself to additional humiliation, Croker decides to sabotage one of the two five-hundred-thousand-dollar engines on his G5. This choice evidences the irrational extreme to which Croker is willing to go to maintain his self-perceived control and self-image. At first, Croker tries to coerce his long-time plane mechanic, Lunnie, into destroying the engine, but soon relents and takes the task upon himself.¹¹ Yet again, in this instance, Croker demonstrates a disregard for the wellbeing of others: he does not take the mechanic’s situation into consideration, when Lunnie could lose his job for helping, but only thinks of his own status as a “man in full.” When faced with the repossession of his G5 and the resulting humiliation, Croker exhibits denial, deceit, and a disregard for other’s interests.

As Croker grows increasingly anxious about his rapidly deteriorating financial situation, a potential solution emerges. Roger White, a lawyer in Atlanta and friend of the mayor, presents Croker with an opportunity that will simultaneously solve his debt issue with PlannersBanc and likely ruin his relationship with one of his closest friends, Inman Armholster. To fulfill his end of this deal, Croker must first meet with, and then support, a Georgia Tech football star named Fareek Fannon, who is currently embroiled in a rape scandal that involves Inman Armholster’s daughter. If Croker speaks on behalf of Fannon in this situation and urges the public not to jump to any conclusions, then White claims

¹⁰Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 292.

¹¹Ibid, 298.

he and the mayor will relieve the financial pressure from PlannersBanc.¹² This situation places Croker amid significant social pressures and proves central to the remainder of the novel. Croker must choose either to support one of his closest friends and refuse to speak on Fannon's behalf, or, choose to support Fannon and solve his own financial issues. On one hand, Croker's support of Fannon would alleviate his financial distress and place him in good standing with the mayor, but it would also alienate him from Inman, who remains one of Croker's best friends and holds significant power in Atlanta's business and social sectors. However, if Croker chooses to support Armholster and his daughter by not speaking for Fannon, then his financial ruin is immanent. This situation only adds to Croker's distress and he responds by avoiding the decision altogether. This dilemma might appear simple to some, but for Croker in his current state, it proves insurmountable. Croker's rigid conception of masculinity causes him to overvalue his financial status, which, in turn, makes him devalue friendship. His entire life centers on the pursuit of social and financial success; he is not equipped to confront the possibility of losing these things, even if their loss would mean he preserves a friendship and his character.

Croker's response to his initial meeting with PlannersBanc and to the repossession of his G5 highlight his selfishness and unwillingness to accept personal responsibility for his actions. However, Croker's negative responses to these situations have their root in something deeper. His responses in these situations stem from his shame, but the depth of his shame and his inability to escape its hold are consequences of his primary focus. Croker's evidently poor handling of these situations emphasizes Henry

¹²Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 516, 548-49.

Montero's point about toxic masculinity's negative effects on men's ability to deal with shame in a healthy manner.¹³ Croker imagines killing Zale and childishly destroys one of the G5's engines because both acts, imaginative and physical, give Croker a personal sense of retained control and self-determination.¹⁴ In turn, Croker's disregard for the wellbeing and situations of others demonstrates his willingness to regain control of his situation at all costs.¹⁵ Yet, this consuming desire to regain control of his situation can only be understood after considering what Croker sees as his life's purpose and where he finds meaning.

Croker experienced significant monetary and social success for years because he pursued mastery in these areas above all else. To attain and maintain this economic and social mastery, Croker sacrificed his relationship with his first wife, Martha, and his relationship with his son, Wally, and assumed the burdens associated with being married to someone half his age. While he occasionally feels remorse for having an affair with Serena, which led to his divorce from Martha, he considers his relationship with his first wife beneficial because it established his social standing in Atlanta. Further, he values his relationship with Serena because it initially reinvigorated his virility, which he sees as essential to his economic and social success, as well as something without which he cannot be a "man in full." However, when this aspect of their relationship fades for Croker, he longs for the intimacy he once shared with Martha. In other words, Croker has

¹³Story by Henry A. Montero, "Depression in Men: The Cycle of Toxic Masculinity," *Psycom.Net - Mental Health Treatment Resource Since 1986* (blog), accessed March 21, 2020, <https://www.psycom.net/depression-in-men/depression-in-men-toxic-masculinity/>.

¹⁴Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 56, 298.

¹⁵Ibid, 70, 298.

sacrificed intimacy with others for the sake of his image and has used others as a means of furthering his financial and social success. In this respect, Croker embodies what Wendell Berry disparages, because Croker values money over friendship and sees other people as transactions.¹⁶ Croker determines the value of an individual by the extent to which they serve his social and economic objective of mastery. In Croker's mind, people either contribute to his success, or restrain his potential. These examples evidence the extent to which Croker desires and pursues social and financial success. At this point in his life, the tangible symbols of these kinds of success are all that remain; they define him. Further, for Croker, economic and social success are inextricably linked to masculinity. In other words, mastery in these areas is what it means to be a man. Croker refuses to part with Turpentine or his G5, not only because they signify his financial success, but also because he believes these possessions constitute his very manhood. In Croker's mind, "you have to be man enough to deserve a quail plantation...and deal with man and beast in every form they [come] in, with your wits, your bare hands, and your gun."¹⁷ Because Croker's successes and conception of masculinity define him, when confronted with the loss of these symbols of his success and masculinity, Croker experiences extreme shame. To lose these possessions would be akin to losing parts of himself. Thus, Croker's rigid conceptions of masculinity and success contribute to his shame and, therefore, his deplorable responses to his situation. Because Croker's rigid conception of masculinity causes him to associate his manhood with financial and social

¹⁶Wendell Berry, "Feminism, the Body, and the Machine," in *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Washington, D.C: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2002), 68.

¹⁷Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 8.

mastery, he will do almost anything to maintain the symbols of his success, or regain what mastery he has lost.

Further, Croker cannot appreciate an expression of masculinity that lies outside of his rigid conception, which detrimentally impacts his relationship with his son. Even though Wally bears a striking resemblance to his father at a younger age, Croker's main characterization of his son is that he is not "Charlie Croker," nor close to becoming "Charlie Croker."¹⁸ Wally appears "wilted, thin, [and] gawky," which Croker sees as incurable, physical shortcomings.¹⁹ Croker also cannot overlook the fact that Wally neither appreciates nor is interested in the activities Croker deems essential to manhood. Wolfe informs the reader that this sentiment is "what crossed Charlie's mind the first time he saw [his son] on any given day."²⁰ Croker views Wally in a negative light partly because of the shame he feels for not having taken time to develop their relationship, but also because Wally does not fit his unrealistic, rigid conception of manhood. Later on, Croker expresses his opinion of a new kind of "scion of the elite," which appears as a reference to his view of Wally. He describes these "scions" as boys who are "inept at sports, averse to hunting and fishing and riding horses or handling animals in any way, a boy embarrassed by his advantages," in short, boys "without balls."²¹ Croker's disappointment in his son does not necessarily result from any inherent flaw in Wally, but from his own unyielding view of what it means to be a man. He associates his manhood

¹⁸Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 136.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid, 137.

²¹Ibid.

with his social status in the world and his material possessions, instead of with what kind of man he is: the character he possesses.

Croker's rigid conception of masculinity causes him to overvalue his financial and social status, which explains his desperation to regain control of his situation and the enticing aspects of Roger White's proposal. Croker's conflict between safeguarding his own financial success and prizing the intangible value of loyalty to his friend, Inman Armholster, proves insurmountable because supporting Fannon would also alienate him socially. While speaking publicly on behalf of Fannon would result in the mayor's good favor, Inman's group of powerful business socialites would likely shun him afterward. Thus, Croker does not only face losing his friendship with Armholster, but also the social status he holds so dear. In his current state, Croker proves ill equipped to handle the pressures of his situation and he, yet again, seeks to escape his situation by having knee surgery. If he undergoes knee surgery, Charlie reasons, he will be on medical leave and will not be forced to confront Roger White or his lenders at PlannersBanc. Thus, rather than face his situation, Croker attempts to postpone these inevitable conversations.

In the wake of Croker's surgery and in the midst of his persisting moral dilemma, Wolfe reveals Conrad Hensley as Croker's guide to restoration. Conrad Hensley is a twenty-three-year-old factory worker who originally contemplated attending the University of California, Berkeley, but now is a father of two experiencing the financial burden of providing for a family on an industrial wage. Hensley serves as an interesting counter point to Charlie Croker, but also proves similar in several regards. In one scene, Conrad thinks that he looks "almost too pretty," so he grows out a mustache to appear

“older and graver and, well, tougher.”²² Like Croker, Hensley associates masculinity with a certain physical appearance. He believes his natural visage is too feminine, so he attempts to alter his appearance to look more masculine. At the same time, and in contrast to Croker, Hensley sees the strength of his upper body as an obstacle to his own success. His perception of himself as he is, versus how he feels he ought to be, impacts his responses to certain situations.

At first, Conrad thinks of his job at Croker Global Foods as temporary. He attempts to save money for a down payment on an apartment for his family and plans to switch jobs after this goal is accomplished.”²³ Unfortunately, Croker Global Foods fires Hensley from his position at the food warehouse as a result of Croker’s decision to layoff fifteen percent of the “food division.”²⁴ This unexpected turn of events places significant financial pressure on Hensley, which causes him distress and shame.²⁵ Hensley experiences these emotions for many of the same reasons as Croker, but Hensley represents the opposite end of the social spectrum. He sees the size and strength of his hands and arms as an impediment during his job search and believes they are signifiers of his fate to remain an industrial worker.²⁶ Following his failed pursuit of employment, Hensley’s car is towed for a parking violation, which only adds to his distress, frustration, and shame. Acting from these emotions and out of desperation, Hensley attempts to steal

²²Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 100.

²³Ibid, 106.

²⁴Ibid, 120, 82.

²⁵Ibid, 151.

²⁶Ibid, 233-34.

his car from the impound lot, but does not make it past the front gate.²⁷ In the course of Hensley's attempted repossession, one of the lot's employees confronts him and their ensuing conflict ends with the other man wheezing on the ground. When a security guard arrives, bystanders tell him that Hensley attempted to steal the car and assaulted the employee, which results in the police bringing him up on charges of assault and attempted theft.²⁸ This chain of events and Hensley's responses eventually end with him in jail at the Santa Rita Correctional Facility, where he undergoes a personal transformation that not only affects himself, but everyone with whom he comes into contact.

Hensley decides to serve time at Santa Rita instead of accepting a plea deal because he refuses to admit personal responsibility for his actions. Even though he is sentenced to Santa Rita for an assault he did not commit, he denies guilt for both his attempted theft and the assault, on principle. When speaking to his wife, Hensley claims that he will not be able to face his children if he formally admits wrongdoing for a crime he did not commit.²⁹ In spite of Hensley's conflicting decision, his time at Santa Rita proves transformational. During this time, Hensley discovers stoic philosophy through the work of Epictetus, which marks the beginning of his moral growth and personal transformation.³⁰ Reading the works of Epictetus help form Hensley into a man who chooses to do the right thing in precarious situations. In turn, Hensley risks his life for

²⁷Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 253.

²⁸Ibid, 253-54.

²⁹Ibid, 324-25.

³⁰Ibid, 334.

others twice in jail: once to help a boy who has just been raped, in spite of the physical abuse he could suffer as a result, and a second time when, during an earthquake, he remains inside the unstable jail to save his cell mate, 50.³¹ While the reader has no way of knowing whether or not Hensley would have made the same decisions if he were not exposed to the work of Epictetus, the words of the philosopher flash clearly in his mind during both of these scenes, which suggests Stoic philosophy guided his decisions. Later on in the story, Hensley laments the situation of a group of unformed, lost young men, referred to as Mai's Army, who resemble him in his previous state. When Hensley's reckless, immature friend, Kenny, introduces him to this rag-tag assembly of underground criminals that Kenny romanticizes as a "lethal foreign legion of the night, of young men hardened into a brotherhood of violence," Hensley sees "seven pitiable creatures."³² This "brotherhood of violence," in some respects, reflects Angela Nagle's characterization of the alt-right.³³ Some of these young men might find this group attractive and thrilling because of its criminal nature, however, given men's desire and need for community, it is more likely that these young men primarily seek the "brotherhood" aspect of this group. Regardless of the rationale that motivated these young men to join Mai's Army, Hensley proves unaffected and sees this group for what it is, an assemble of unhealthy young men. In this scene, Hensley recognizes the state of these young men and their need for the kind of purpose and meaning he has found by

³¹Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 418, 438.

³²Ibid, 451.

³³Story by Angela Nagle, "The Lost Boys," *The Atlantic*, accessed March 21, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/12/brotherhood-of-losers/544158/>.

reading Epictetus. This purpose, his desire to live nobly and share his newfound knowledge, eventually leads Hensley to the house of Charlie Croker.

Still bedridden and healing from his knee surgery, Croker hires a new nurse's aide, who turns out to be Conrad Hensley. Their relationship quickly blossoms, and its focus shifts from Croker's physical infirmity to his moral infirmity and his dilemma about supporting Fannon. Here, we begin to see the kind of healthy male intimacy and friendship Peggy Orenstein emphasizes in her article.³⁴ Hensley introduces Croker to the work of Epictetus, and, in the course of their various conversations, Croker realizes the necessity of moral formation.³⁵ Whereas Croker was previously blind to his moral immaturity, due to his consuming pursuit of economic and moral mastery, the work of Epictetus and his conversations with Hensley reveal his need for self-mastery and facilitate his moral formation. With a renewed, but alternate, sense of purpose, Croker accepts Roger White's offer to speak at the press conference regarding Fannon. Rather than speaking in support of Fannon, however, Croker enlightens the public about White and the mayor's plan and unburdens his conscience by telling the truth.³⁶ In this final act, Croker relinquishes his pride and desire to regain mastery over his financial situation and, instead, chooses to take responsibility for his actions and tell the truth.

Additionally, in this scene, Croker accepts responsibility for his previous actions and faces the public, rather than seeking to escape. Further, just as Conrad felt a

³⁴Story by Peggy Orenstein, "The Miseducation of the American Boy," *The Atlantic*, accessed March 21, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/01/the-miseducation-of-the-american-boy/603046/>.

³⁵Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 619.

³⁶Ibid, 668-70.

responsibility to teach Croker about the work of Epictetus and self-mastery through moral formation, Croker also goes on to impart this wisdom to others. This detail in the final scene points to the nature of self-mastery through moral formation. This process begets personal and communal responsibility. The pursuit of self-mastery through moral formation leads to the mitigation of pride and its harmful effects because it entails both personal and communal responsibility. On one hand, this kind of moral formation requires a man to take personal responsibility for his own character and actions. As a result, self-mastery through moral formation helps men function correctly in their environment and place, which includes a responsibility to help others achieve the same. Thus, self-mastery enables a man to interact healthily with the world and people around him. If self-mastery only served a single man, then it would prove an inward manifestation of, and bear similar consequences to, Croker's original pursuit of economic and social mastery. In other words, this kind of moral formation cannot be self-serving.

So, through Wolfe's characters, Charlie Croker and Conrad Hensley, we are able to more clearly see how rigid conceptions of masculinity and success entailed in toxic masculinity create significant issues for men. In addition to his pride, Croker's rigid understandings of these things prevent him from forming healthy friendships. Further, because Croker finds his purpose and meaning in his financial and social success, he experiences extreme shame when he begins to lose these achievements. In turn, Croker's inability to deal with his feelings of shame properly, cause him to act selfishly, lie, attempt to escape his situation, and abdicate responsibility. To a lesser extent, we also see this same progression in Conrad Hensley. However, Wolfe suggests the importance of self-mastery through moral formation as a remedy for Croker's and Hensley's unhealthy

manifestations of masculinity with his inclusion of Epictetus's works. Further, Wolfe's description of Hensley's and Croker's relationship highlights the significance of healthy male friendships in this process of moral formation. Thus, we can see the importance of moral formation as a means of combatting toxic masculinity, but, specifically, what kind of moral formation is needed for this process?

CHAPTER TWO

The Necessity of Moral Formation Through Virtue in *The Abolition of Man*

In *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis speaks to the importance of moral formation and explains the issues that arise in its absence.¹ Specifically, he argues that objective moral value proves necessary for man to maintain rationality and the ability to make any value judgement whatsoever. This line of reasoning is crucial to my current argument because I claim that there is a certain foundational criteria for healthy masculinity, or the way men live and express themselves healthily. Further, he approaches this topic from a broad, reasonable point of view, avoiding appeals to a specific set of values. Instead, Lewis uses and refers to the entire “doctrine of objective value,” which he terms the *Tao*.² His primary concern is not to explain or defend the Christian religion, as it is in some of his other works, but to combat the increasingly popular notion that all value judgments are subjective and, therefore, contrary to reason. First, Lewis makes clear that “Men without Chests” are the problematic product of this philosophy.³ Here, he emphasizes the importance of moral formation through virtue. Then, over the course of the following two essays, Lewis illustrates the logical terminus, absurdity, and inevitable consequences of a philosophy that rejects the *Tao*.

¹C. S. Lewis, “The Abolition of Man,” in *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics* (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 689–738.

²Ibid, 701.

³Ibid, 704.

To adequately articulate the dilemma Lewis presents in *The Abolition of Man*, I must briefly sketch his argument and detail the factors that contribute to the making of “Men without Chests”. Lewis begins by discussing an idea two authors convey in their elementary English textbook, the “Green Book.”⁴ These authors, Lewis explains, provide an example in which they comment on two individuals’ statements concerning a waterfall. They claim that while these statements initially appear to reference the waterfall, they are actually statements that describe the feelings of the observers.⁵ Lewis denounces their assertion because it implies “all sentences containing predicates of value” describe the “emotional state of the speaker” and communicates, intentionally or unintentionally, that “all values are subjective and trivial.”⁶ If all statements concerning value are subjective and contrary to reason, as the authors of the “Green Book” suggest, objective moral value cannot exist. In the absence of objective moral value, no metric exists to aid in differentiating what is good from what is bad.”⁷ Consequently, the vacancy of objective moral value becomes problematic, because “without the aid of trained emotions the intellect is powerless against” man’s appetitive nature.⁸ While man’s desires are separate from and do not depend on objective moral value, reason requires a set of values to function properly. In other words, objective moral value proves necessary

⁴Lewis, “The Abolition of Man,” 694.

⁵Ibid, 694.

⁶Ibid, 694-95.

⁷Ibid, 696.

⁸Ibid, 703.

because it is the foundation on which objective moral virtue rests; it properly orients moral formation. Then, in this vein, virtue enables reason to practically govern desire, emotion, and action. In C.S. Lewis's words, "the head rules the belly through the chest."⁹ In the absence of virtue, the appetites remain, unconstrained, seeking their own fulfillment. While the appetites are neither inherently bad, nor inherently good, they possess the potential to both harm and benefit man, so they must be guided. This is the task of the virtues as implemented through reason. Thus, we cannot "remove the organ and demand the function."¹⁰ If we wish men to act virtuously, we must first acknowledge that objective moral value and virtue are necessary for moral formation, and then strive to inculcate virtue in men.

Tom Wolfe's character, Charlie Croker, struggles with the same issues Lewis claims result from a lack of moral formation and virtue. At first, Croker does not recognize his need for self-mastery through moral formation. Instead, Croker seeks to solve the problems he faces by regaining control and mastery of the external factors contributing to his situation: he tries to escape to Turpentine, lays off fifteen percent of the food division at Croker Global, destroys one of his plane engines, and undergoes knee surgery.¹¹ In these instances, Croker's base desires drive his actions. He desires to escape humiliation and personal responsibility, ensure his own comfort above that of others, and enact revenge on the PlannersBanc repo team. In this sense, Croker partially exemplifies

⁹Lewis, "The Abolition of Man," 704.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Tom Wolfe, *A Man in Full* (New York: Dial Press, 2005), 54, 70, 298, 604.

man in the absence of virtue. He demonstrates “atrophy of the chest”: his reasoning capacity functions improperly due to his lack of virtue, which, in turn, makes him a slave to desire.¹² He cannot pursue self-mastery through moral formation without first recognizing his shortcomings and need for virtue. However, Conrad Hensley’s arrival enables Croker to recognize his need for self-mastery and their subsequent interactions furnish him with the moral knowledge necessary to begin his new pursuit. In this way, Hensley takes on the responsibility “to train in the pupil those responses which are in themselves appropriate,” given Croker’s situation.¹³ Croker’s initial blindness to his need for moral formation and objective moral value reflects the “Green Book” authors’ assumption that objective moral value is irrelevant. Further, Croker’s actions throughout the majority of the novel illustrate the issues that result from the lack of moral formation Lewis cites. Primarily, he is neither capable of controlling his desires, nor managing and directing his emotions properly.

In these respects, Charlie Croker represents the literary microcosm of a broader cultural phenomena: lack of moral formation. Croker’s poor moral constitution leads him to prioritize his status as a man. Additionally, he does not take responsibility for himself, or his actions. His unwillingness to bear these responsibilities not only detrimentally impacts himself, but others as well. For example, Croker’s refusal to bear his paternal responsibilities, which include spending time with his son, harms Wally.¹⁴ Similarly, he

¹²Lewis, “The Abolition of Man,” 704.

¹³Ibid, 702.

¹⁴Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 137.

does not take personal responsibility for his financial situation and shifts the consequences of his decisions onto the warehouse workers at Croker Global Foods.¹⁵ Inevitably, Croker's repeated attempts to shirk responsibility yield personal consequences that cause him significant anxiety, shame, and despair. These consequences place Croker in a predicament that he is not equipped to escape. However, Croker's meager moral state and unwillingness to bear responsibility are not unique. Both Hensley and the young men of Mai's army exhibit poor moral formation as well. Hensley, for instance, attempts to steal his car back from an impound lot after experiencing extreme frustration.¹⁶ In this scene, patience and reason do not dictate his conduct, rather, his inability to accept fault and his desire to exercise his will drive his actions. The young men of Mai's army, on the other hand, demonstrate a lack of moral formation as they prize their own desires, to act and live in a certain manner, above the law. In these respects, both Hensley and the young men of Mai's army exhibit aspects of toxic masculinity. They feel a need to appear powerful, dominant, and in control. Hensley seeks to regain a sense of these things by attempting to prove the city cannot take what he owns, his car. Similarly, the young men of Mai's army demonstrate a need to appear strong and in control through the sense of self-determination they gain from living "outside" the law. These men are all, in a sense, lost: they do not recognize their need for moral formation. While men who act contrary to virtue are not always victims of this blindness, in modern culture, they often are. This blindness, at least in part, results from the lack of cultural emphasis on the importance of

¹⁵Ibid, 70.

¹⁶Lewis, "The Abolition of Man," 253.

moral formation and virtue that Martha Nussbaum notes.¹⁷ However, even in the face of this cultural deficiency, men are not exempt from responsibility for their actions. Even men that exhibit a lack of moral formation maintain a cognizance, however slight, of objective moral value, which signifies their obligation to take responsibility for their actions. While the lack of cultural emphasis on virtue leaves a dim path to moral formation, a path nonetheless remains.

I must make a crucial distinction between a lack of moral formation or virtue, and a conscious rejection of moral objectivity, or moral formation. The one proves remediable, while the other represents a much larger issue. Croker lacks a healthy moral formation, but he does not reject moral formation, he simply does not recognize his need for it. While he does not initially attempt to acquire virtue, Croker is aware of objective moral values. His awareness of these values, however subtle it might be, is seen when he discusses the layoff at Croker Global Food with the Wiz. At one point in their conversation, the Wiz gives Croker the layoff percentage in terms of the number of workers it will affect, versus the amount of cost this reduction will cut, which makes Croker uneasy and causes him to reevaluate his decision.¹⁸ After he adjusts the layoff percentage from twenty percent to fifteen percent, he voices the figure in terms of workers, using the new figure to support his self-perceived reasonability and console himself. Croker's revised layoff percentage in this scene evidences his guilt, which results from his cognizance that his decision does not adhere favorably to an objective standard of morality. Additionally, the moral dilemma Croker faces when considering

¹⁷Martha Nussbaum, "Man Overboard," *The New Republic*, June 21, 2006, <https://newrepublic.com/article/64199/man-overboard>.

¹⁸Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 70.

whether he should support Fannon suggests his awareness of objective morality. This decision proves difficult for Croker because he knows that speaking on Fannon's behalf would serve as an act of betrayal against Armholster, but, at the same time, his desire to resolve his financial situation is formidable. Croker's moral dilemma here represents a conflict between his desires and a recognized objective moral standard. Thus, even though men are often blind to their need for self-mastery, a lack of moral formation proves remediable through virtue. A conscious rejection of moral objectivity and formation, on the other hand, presents greater issues. While an absence of healthy, morally well-formed men signifies modern culture's lack of emphasis on virtue, this deficiency is remediable. However, as Lewis makes clear, the conscious rejection of objective moral value represents a potential product of this deficiency and can lead to further harm.

This shift, from a lack of moral formation to a rejection of this concept, is the primary subject of Lewis's final chapter in *The Abolition of Man*. Lewis warns us against a complete rejection of objective moral value by illustrating the logical end and subsequent consequences of this conscious choice in the "Conditioners."¹⁹ A lack of moral formation and virtue does not characterize this group of individuals as it did previous generations. Instead, the "Conditioners," Lewis explains, represent a generation that completely rejects any notion of value and, subsequently, all moral value and virtue.²⁰ This generation seeks complete mastery of the material world, or "nature," and

¹⁹Lewis, "The Abolition of Man," 717.

²⁰Ibid, 721-22.

their final conquest is man himself.²¹ The “Conditioners” understand the concept of value not as something to be obeyed, but as a “mere natural phenomenon”: something to be controlled.²² However, their pursuit and conception of value ends in absurdity. By rejecting the *Tao*, the entire “doctrine of objective value,”²³ they reject that thing by which reason functions and are henceforth incapable of choosing one course of action over another because they no longer possess a standard of conscious prioritization. In this state, having rejected the *Tao* in an effort to achieve total mastery over “nature,” the motive force of their choices and actions can only be “mere appetite.”²⁴ Thus, the “Conditioners” become beings “of wholly irrational behavior,” slaves to appetite alone.²⁵ In an ironic twist, man’s quest for total control and mastery ends in his complete subjugation to the whims of desire. This perverted pursuit of mastery results in man losing his humanity: without either his reason or his sense of value, man is no longer man.

We must, therefore, heed Lewis’s warning against rejecting objective moral value, or potentially risk the absurd fate of the “Conditioners.” The generation of the “Conditioners” is a product of previous generations that did not understand or adequately emphasize the importance of moral formation through virtue. In other words, morally deficient men beget morally deficient men. However, a lack of adequate moral formation

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid, 721.

²³Lewis, “The Abolition of Man,” 701.

²⁴Ibid, 726.

²⁵Ibid, 724.

is remediable through virtue. After understanding the necessity of objective moral value, recognizing men's need for moral formation stands as the first step toward healthy masculinity. Further, moral formation requires the inculcation of virtue because practicing virtue is what drives moral growth and helps regulate emotion and desire. Training men in virtue not only makes them more resilient to those things that contribute to unhealthy masculinity, such as pride, selfishness, irresponsibility, and the desire to seek mastery, but also more likely to exhibit traits of healthy masculinity. Thus, virtuous inculcation facilitates moral formation and enables men to pursue self-mastery, which represents a progression toward healthy masculinity. In other words, this process serves as the only solution to the dilemma articulated by Lewis's "Men without Chests" and exemplified by Wolfe's character, Charlie Croker. However, as I stated in the introduction, men need models of this kind of moral formation through virtue, which they can, at least in part, source from literature. Just as Wolfe's characters allowed us to clearly see the aspects of toxic masculinity that obstruct moral formation and healthy male expression, these literary models of healthy masculinity should enable us to determine which particular virtues are necessary for this kind of moral formation.

CHAPTER THREE

Male Models of Virtue in *The Lord of the Rings*

J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* takes place in the land of Middle-Earth, an elaborate, imagined earlier stage of our own world. While some might see Tolkien's work in this novel as inapplicable to the current conversation due to its fantastical nature, this is not the case. Great works of fantasy, such as *The Lord of the Rings*, cast reality in a new light, enabling readers to clearly comprehend fundamental truths. In this sense, Tolkien's work resonates deeply with the lives of modern men in that it illustrates specific qualities that contribute to healthy masculinity and evidences traits that can contribute to unhealthy masculinity. Additionally, others might view Tolkien's novel as morally simplistic, but this understanding results from a shallow, cursory, and less-than-critical reading of *The Lord of the Rings*. The context in which Tolkien portrays his characters lends a complexity to their lives and actions that reflects the complexity of our own lives. In this vein, his work enables a deeper understanding of morality and a clearer understanding of reality. For these reasons, Tolkien's work contributes to our current conversation. Specifically, the way in which he illustrates the lives and character of men sheds light on certain character qualities essential for healthy masculinity, as well as those vices that inhibit a healthy expression of masculinity. Among various other characters, both human and fantastical, Tolkien portrays the lives and actions of three men: Boromir, Faramir, and Aragorn. I will primarily analyze the character arcs of these three men in an effort to further elucidate particular virtues necessary for the moral formation that constitutes healthy masculinity.

First, I will begin by discussing Boromir because his actions and character provide a context conducive to understanding the qualities of Faramir and Aragorn. When the reader first meets Boromir in the *Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien describes him as “a tall man with a fair and noble face, dark-haired and grey-eyed, proud and stern of glance.”¹ In addition to Boromir’s noble appearance, he demonstrates several admirable character traits: he is both honest and courageous. However, his pride, vanity, desire to protect Gondor, and his desire for his own glory, warp his perspective and behavior. In this vein, Boromir demonstrates that a man can possess virtue and yet still lack the moral formation necessary for healthy masculinity. In other words, Boromir is not virtue-less, but rather exhibits some key virtues and lacks others. Thus, the character arc of Boromir reveals moral formation as a perpetual process and highlights the importance of humility and the significance of sacrifice for healthy masculinity.

The Council of Elrond serves as one of the first scenes on which Boromir reveals his complex character and motivations. First, Boromir’s mere presence at this council evidences his bravery. Tolkien says that while Faramir, Boromir’s brother, was eager to aid Gondor in the search for Rivendell, because “the way was full of doubt and danger, [Boromir] took the journey upon [himself].”² Boromir also stands and tells the deeds of Gondor, as well as his role in those deeds: how he stood among the strongest warriors and defended a bridge against the forces of Mordor.”³ So, Boromir demonstrates courage, but he is also vain, which his retelling of his feats in battle suggests. Yet, in this scene, his

¹J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 50th anniversary 1 vol. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 240.

²Ibid, 246.

³Ibid, 245.

vanity remains somewhat cloaked by his desire for the glory and protection of Gondor and Minas Tirith. Further, even though Boromir is noble and valiant, he primarily associates feats in battle with courage and manhood. Consequently, he demonstrates a shallow, rigid understanding of strength when he laughs at Bilbo's proposition to bear the Ring to Mordor himself. Despite the fact that Bilbo's age would almost certainly prevent him from being able to complete the journey, the others present at the council take Bilbo's offer seriously because they rightly respect him. Boromir, on the other hand, is surprised by Bilbo's suggestion and finds it amusing, likely because he sees Bilbo as small and weak; Boromir lets his perception of Bilbo's physical presence dictate what he believes about his strength of character and resilience."⁴ This kind of derisive attitude toward others' capabilities reveals Boromir's rigid view of manhood, as well as his vanity, which make him foolish and susceptible to the power of the Ring. In this sense, Boromir's rigid view of what constitutes manhood is reminiscent of Charlie Croker's rigid conception of masculinity. Both Boromir's and Croker's limited understandings of masculinity make them susceptible to pride and shame, as well as prevent them from valuing others rightly. In Croker's case, he is unable to see and value Wally and others for who they are. For similar reasons, Boromir is unable to correctly value Bilbo.

I must now clarify what I mean by vanity and pride before continuing. Vanity, in my consideration, is an over-estimation of one's own standing with respect to others, or an inaccurate placing of oneself before or above others. Pride, on the other hand, appears more closely related to a desire for control or mastery. For example, pride makes a person obstinately want and pursue something beyond their capabilities. Boromir's inaccurate

⁴Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 269.

self-perception betrays his vanity, but his pride causes him act foolishly. Initially, Boromir dismisses Aragorn's offer for the "house of Elendil to return to the Land of Gondor," meaning Aragorn's own return.⁵ Even though Boromir later admits Gondor's need for assistance, at first, he wants to portray his own strength and prowess, as well as that of his city. Further, Boromir's demonstrated vanity makes him susceptible to the enticing nature of the Ring and, initially, to think he can use the Ring's power for the good of Gondor, without being consumed by it. When Boromir first hears that Frodo has the Ring, he breaks into the conversation, exclaiming "so that is what became of the Ring!" as if he had been waiting for such a revelation.⁶ Tolkien says that "Boromir's eyes glinted as he gazed at the golden thing."⁷ Afterward, he advocates for the Ring to be taken to Gondor in spite of the opposing counsel of others. Boromir believes, foolishly, that he will be able to use the Ring for good and continues to hold this belief even after Elrond explains that no man can use the Ring for good.⁸ In this respect, Boromir's belief that he can use the Ring to help Gondor proves rigid: no matter the wisdom others offer contrary to his belief, he is not persuaded. Subsequently, he believes he will succeed where others know they will fail, stating that "these elves and half-elves and wizards, they would come to grief perhaps."⁹ As Boromir's thoughts move from thinking he can master the Ring, to wanting to master the Ring, his vanity begins to manifest as pride.

⁵Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 247.

⁶Ibid, 243.

⁷Ibid, 247.

⁸Ibid, 398.

⁹Ibid, 398.

Boromir thinks that the advice of others at the council stems from their timidity, whereas, men such as himself, “true-hearted Men, they will not be corrupted.”¹⁰ However, Boromir’s arrogance and pride make him susceptible to the Ring’s power and cause him to act foolishly, even though he desires to use the Ring for good. Again, Boromir’s sentiments here reveal his pride and misguided self-perception, which reflect Croker’s similar pridefulness. Vanity prevents both characters from accurately perceiving themselves and their pride, subsequently, causes them to seek mastery, instead of moral formation and virtue. However, Boromir seeks this mastery with seemingly good intentions, whereas Croker only intends to serve himself. While Boromir’s intentions will not alter the inevitably self-serving, harmful results of this kind of mastery, they do signal healthy aspects of his character and set him apart from Croker.

Yet, Boromir’s sentiments in the previous passage do suggest he and Croker are on a similar moral trajectory. In the end, Boromir would no longer desire to do good with the Ring, but would only seek his own power and glory. Now, when I speak of mastery, I mean one’s harmful desire to exert one’s own will over the will of others in an attempt to control them, or the desire to control or dominate things or situations by force. This desire for mastery stems from pride. A person seeking mastery of this kind proves prideful because the object of this form of mastery is either the subjugation of others’ wills, or actions, to one’s own will, which entails an understanding of others as less than the subjugator. Further, this form of mastery can only be self-serving: a person cannot seek mastery of this kind and at the same time serve others. Mastery of this kind is, in a sense, represented by the One Ring. While the Ring illustrates an even darker form of

¹⁰Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 398.

mastery, one that intends the ultimate diminishment or destruction of everything it subjugates, not all forms of mastery reflect the purposes of the Ring and the intentions of its master. In other words, the purpose of mastery, as I mean it, like the purpose of the Ring, is to serve the master alone.

Later on, Boromir's pride and desire for the Ring are fully revealed when he speaks about the Ring to Frodo. While he explains that his intentions are just: defending Gondor and defeating Sauron, his plans for the Ring end with him becoming a "mighty king, benevolent and wise."¹¹ Boromir's machinations here not only show his pride through his desire to become king and rule, but also his blind foolishness. He cannot rule wisely or benevolently if he retains the Ring because the Ring dominates and corrupts, or, in Frodo's words, "what is done with it turns to evil."¹² Boromir's love for his city, which remains an admirable trait, and his desire for his own glory skew his understanding of the Ring. Faramir says, speaking of his brother later in the book, that he understands the enticing nature of the Ring to Boromir, who is "proud and fearless, often rash, ever anxious for the victory of Minas Tirith (and his own glory therein)."¹³ Faramir's explanation of his brother's disposition in this scene reveals Boromir's desires for the glory and protection of his city, but also his proud nature and propensity for rashness. Again, Boromir differs from Croker because he does not intend to only serve himself. While his intentions to protect Gondor may be good, however, he seeks to accomplish his objective through the power of the Ring. Consequently, the means by which Boromir

¹¹Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 398.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid, 671.

seeks to accomplish his end, reflect Croker's desire for financial and social mastery. True to this characterization, during his conversation with Frodo, Boromir is overcome by his desire to possess the Ring. After he realizes he cannot persuade Frodo to give the ring to him, he attempts to take it from Frodo. Thus, Boromir's pride makes him morally weak, leads to his own inaccurate perception of himself, and causes him to place his own desires over the needs of many.

Yet, in spite of his vanity and pride, Boromir proves honest, courageous, and noble. After attempting to take the Ring from Frodo, Boromir quickly recognizes his failure and, when he returns to the rest of the fellowship, he does not lie about his interaction with Frodo.¹⁴ For, in spite of his character flaws, Boromir possesses the virtue of honesty, which Sam emphasizes by saying: "Boromir isn't lying, that's not his way."¹⁵ Boromir further evidences his noble nature and an aspect of humility when he treats Aragorn with honor after realizing that Aragorn is the rightful king of Gondor, even though, as a child, it always "displeased [Boromir] that his father was not king."¹⁶ Ultimately, Boromir redeems himself by defending Merry and Pippin to his death and admitting he wronged Frodo. He sacrifices himself for the two hobbits to save their lives and, in so doing, demonstrates the most profound act of humility.¹⁷ Afterward, when Aragorn finds him lying among his fallen foes after the battle, Boromir takes

¹⁴Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 404.

¹⁵Ibid, 405.

¹⁶Ibid 670.

¹⁷Ibid, 414.

responsibility for his actions and demonstrates humility again by telling Aragorn that he “tried to take the ring from Frodo.”

Boromir reveals the complexity of moral formation because he contemporaneously exhibits some virtues while he lacks others. In the end, Boromir’s sacrifice appears to redeem him. His struggle with pride, and his subsequent redemption through his act of self-sacrifice, suggest an intimate relationship between pride and sacrifice. Now, of course, it would not be considered good if Boromir sacrificed himself for something bad, but sacrifice for something good appears to be an intuitive good. Further, sacrifice does not necessarily mean the giving of one’s life for another, but could also mean the denial of oneself: the sacrifice of self-serving desires for the sake of others. In this vein, a man is often deemed humble not only if he demonstrates a humble demeanor or if the totality of his actions proves humble, but also if particular actions of his appear to be instances of sacrifice or self-denial. This suggests a deep relationship between sacrifice and humility, which represent qualities that combat pride. Thus, in spite of Boromir’s pride leading to a sense of entitlement to the Ring and his foolish actions, his sacrifice for Merry and Pippin, who stood no chance fighting on their own, as well as his humble admission of wrongdoing, overcome his pride and redeem him.

Now, with a better understanding of Boromir, we can discuss Faramir, his brother. Even though Boromir and Faramir are brothers, they differ from one another in significant respects. When Faramir first appears, Tolkien describes his face as “stern and commanding” and says that a “keen wit lay behind his searching glance.”¹⁸ As the chapter progresses, the reader learns that Faramir is not only intelligent, as this

¹⁸Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 663.

description reveals, but also prudent, humble, and gracious. While his sheer presence communicates authority, similar to Boromir's, Faramir possesses the humility and prudence with which Boromir struggles. For example, Faramir explains to Sam and Frodo that he must "spare a brief time, in order to judge justly in a hard matter."¹⁹ In this scene, Faramir questions the two hobbits regarding who they are and their mission, refusing to release them, despite Sam's behest, while he remains ignorant of this information. Further, Faramir's orders are to kill all things on sight that do not have permission to be in Ithilien, because if they are not servants of Gondor, they are "servants of the Dark Tower."²⁰ However, he does not wish to kill anything needlessly, or at all, if it can be avoided, so he speaks to the hobbits to gain a better understanding of their character. In this respect, Faramir avoids acting rashly and exhibits prudence, which distinguishes him from Boromir. Because Faramir is prudent, he knows when and how to apply his virtue based on the situation at hand. Further, his prudence helps him know when he should not follow the instruction of others, in this case, his father's instruction to kill all trespassers. For this reason, Beregond, one of the guards of Minas Tirith, explains that Faramir is "less reckless and eager than Boromir, but not less resolute."²¹ Whereas others might blindly follow the order to kill, Faramir seeks to follow the intended purpose of the order and judge the situation rightly, as well as acts decisively once he makes a decision.

¹⁹Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 665.

²⁰Ibid, 657.

²¹Ibid, 766.

During his conversation with Sam and Frodo, Faramir intentionally shifts the subject of their conversation from the purpose of Frodo's journey to the fate of his brother, Boromir, in an effort to avoid discussing sensitive matters among the rest of the company.²² By diverting the conversation in this way, Faramir evades discussion of the Ring and demonstrates discernment. Afterward, in an act of humility, Faramir apologizes to Frodo for questioning the purpose of his errand to the extent he did, which reveals Faramir's willingness to admit fault. Further, when he realizes what Frodo carries is the Ring and that it could aid Gondor, he claims: "I would not take this thing, if it lay by the highway" because he does not desire or seek his own glory, but also because, more importantly, he understands its danger.²³ Faramir says this because, unlike his brother, he does not love the tools of war for their own sake, but only loves "that which they defend: the city of the Men of Numenor."²⁴ In this vein, Faramir possesses a broader understanding of those things that give a man's life value and meaning. This understanding contributes to his portrayal as a "Captain of Gondor." He does not see courageous acts in battle as what define a man, but he does see battle as one of men's necessary responsibilities. In other words, he does not enjoy battle for the sake of battle as Boromir does. Faramir's courage in battle, knowledge, and wisdom contribute in equal measure to his character. Beregon says that Faramir is both "wise and learned in the scrolls of lore and song," and also that he is "a man of hardihood and swift judgment in

²²Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 669.

²³Ibid, 661.

²⁴Ibid, 672.

the field.”²⁵ It is this combination of intellectual strength and courage that yields Faramir’s strong character and distinguishes him from other men. These qualities elevate Faramir beyond an ordinary man, or even an ordinary soldier, and make him an exemplar of effective masculine leadership. Pippin recognizes these qualities when he points out how Faramir’s presence reflects those “Kings of Men.”²⁶

Faramir later reemphasizes the fact that he does not desire to take the Ring from Frodo. He says that the men of Gondor are “truth-speakers” and that he previously spoke as such regarding his lack of desire to take the Ring.²⁷ This not only speaks to Faramir’s honesty, but also supports Sam’s previous statement about Boromir. No matter what other virtues or faults these brothers possess, they are honest. After their conversation, Sam tells Faramir that he possesses “the very highest” quality, referring to his character, but Faramir responds by saying “I had not lure or desire to do other than I have done.”²⁸ Faramir has been morally formed in such a way that he does not even have a desire for power. This sentiment, in addition to demonstrating Faramir’s lack of desire for the Ring’s power and his own glory, shows he understands that the Ring might affect others differently. By this tacit acknowledgment that denying the Ring might not prove as easy for others, Faramir shows that he does not consider himself better than others who struggle against their desire for the Ring. Further, Faramir’s statement implies that “the very highest” quality men are those who consciously deny their base, selfish desires.

²⁵Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 766.

²⁶Ibid, 810.

²⁷Ibid, 681.

²⁸Ibid, 682.

Thus, Faramir's humility is also evidenced through his understanding of others' weaknesses.

Faramir's consistent character is further revealed in his interaction with his father, Denethor, after he returns from Ithilien. Denethor learns of Faramir's opportunity to take the Ring and rejects his decision to leave the Ring with Frodo, saying that even if he had advised Faramir against such action, Faramir "would still have done just so."²⁹ Here, even though Denethor speaks disparagingly of Faramir's choice to not take the Ring, it can be seen that Faramir's character would not have failed, even if that meant disobeying his father's direct command. Immediately afterward, Denethor claims that gentleness and graciousness, while befitting a lord in times of peace, "may be repaid with death" in times of war, implying that Faramir should have chosen to take the Ring from Frodo, and bring it to Minas Tirith. However, Denethor's words here directly contradict Aragorn's previous observation that how men should act does not depend on the presence of war or change over time. While Faramir might alter how he demonstrates generosity or grace, depending on the context, he does not let a situation dictate whether he acts justly. In this sense, Faramir has not erred and become one of the "Middle Men" of which he speaks later, but has remained as those men of old, the Numenoreans, the "High Men."³⁰ He is a man fit for command in battle, but also learned, prudent, humble, and wise.

I now turn to discuss Aragorn: "a lord among men, the greatest that now is," in the words of Faramir.³¹ Similar to Faramir, Aragorn's attributes and behavior reveal that

²⁹Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 812.

³⁰*Ibid*, 679.

³¹*Ibid*, 964.

the highest form of character requires a combination of strength and compassion. Further, he illustrates that the outward appearance of a man does not dictate his quality or worth. When Aragorn first appears in Tolkien's novel, he introduces himself as Strider. Initially, he appears mangy and mysterious, but as the hobbits come to learn, he is the true king of Gondor. Even though Aragorn is the true king of Gondor, he lives a life of hardship, which he accepts willingly as his responsibility until the time comes for him to return to his rightful kingdom. In this respect, Aragorn exhibits unwavering patience and humility. He is not only content with waiting for his time as king, but serves Middle-Earth from the shadows, hunting and killing the agents of evil that threaten the Shire and other realms without recognition. After meeting Aragorn, the reader gets a glimpse of this solitary life when he says that "a hunted man sometimes wearies of distrust and longs for friendship. But there, I believe my looks are against me."³² He desires community, but often must sacrifice this desire to fulfill his responsibility of protection. However, even though Aragorn often must sacrifice community for his responsibility, he possesses character qualities conducive to forming healthy, lasting friendships. Further, Aragorn's comment reveals that he is aware of his appearance and has not made an effort to change his appearance for the sake of others. This suggests that the manner in which others perceive him does not drive his actions. In this respects, Aragorn significantly differs from Charlie Croker, who is almost solely motivated by others' perceptions of him. Shortly after their introduction, Frodo reads a poem about Aragorn that encapsulates much of his greatness:

"All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;

³²Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 170.

The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.”³³

During this interaction, Frodo makes an observation that aids in the explication of this poem, saying “I think you are not really as you choose to look.”³⁴ The words of this poem highlight the importance of a man’s character and virtue. Further, they emphasize the strong character that Aragorn possesses. Of course, Aragorn is not literally gold; he is noble and virtuous, but his mangy appearance does not reveal the purity of his character. Regarding the second line, people refer to Aragorn as Strider and think of him as a wanderer, but his purpose proves singular: to fight against and destroy the servants of Sauron. The following two verses have a dual meaning. In one sense, they speak of Aragorn’s ancient, noble heritage and the fact that the line of Esildur persists. Yet, in another sense, these lines also refer to Aragorn’s character, which remains stable and true in spite of time and the difficult, lonely life he leads.

Previously, Boromir evidenced that a willingness to sacrifice oneself or one’s desires for others signifies humility. In this vein, Aragorn declares his intentions to aid and serve Frodo and his three companions: “I am Aragorn, son of Arathorn; and if by life or death I can save you, I will.”³⁵ Here, Aragorn both names himself as the high king of Gondor and states his intentions to serve seemingly common hobbits. Thus, he does not see helping or protecting the hobbits as beneath him, no matter the cost, even though he is the rightful king of Gondor. In fact, Aragorn develops close friendships with the hobbits

³³Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 170.

³⁴Ibid, 166.

³⁵Ibid, 171.

as the novel progresses, which not only emphasizes his humility, but his capacity for friendship in spite of the fact that he is the king. As Merry leaves with a band of soldiers, Aragorn says to his companion: “there go three that I love, and the smallest not the least.” Aragorn’s statement here at once reveals his love for Merry and his ability to value Merry rightly. He does not love Merry simply because he finds Merry amusing, but because he sees and appreciates Merry’s character and courage, in spite of Merry’s small stature.³⁶ At their final parting, Aragorn refers to the hobbits as his “dear friends” and promises that he will visit them in the Shire.³⁷ Thus, Aragorn’s acceptance of responsibility for, and friendship with, the hobbits evidences a significant degree of humility which contributes to his effective leadership. Yet, humility is not Aragorn’s only admirable quality, he also consistently demonstrates courage, decisiveness, and an appropriately firm resolve in the right situations. For example, Aragorn’s courage can be seen in the Mines of Moria, when he remains at the end of the bridge while Gandalf fights the Balrog.³⁸ Afterward, rather than standing “rooted with horror” at Gandalf’s fate, as the rest of the band does, Aragorn and Boromir think clearly and act decisively. Aragorn, without letting the previous event impede his action or threaten the party’s objective, assumes responsibility for leading the band.³⁹ In this passage, Aragorn reveals his courage and determination to stay behind, but also acts decisively and flees in the wake of Gandalf’s fate, leading the rest of the band to safety.

³⁶Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 779.

³⁷*Ibid*, 982.

³⁸*Ibid*, 331.

³⁹*Ibid*.

Throughout Tolkien's novel, Aragorn denies his own comfort for the sake of the fellowship's mission and others. While he could rightly choose comfort and rest during their time in Lothlórien, he refuses due to his responsibility.⁴⁰ Similarly, later on, Aragorn seeks the Paths of the Dead because need and responsibility dictate his course of action, not his own comfort. Regarding this choice, Aragorn states: "I do not go gladly; only need drives me."⁴¹ However, even though Aragorn knows he must take this course of action and summon the dead to the defense of Gondor, he does not require others to accompany him on this path. He does not wish for others to endure hardship alongside him unwillingly. This scene evidences Aragorn's willingness to fulfill his duty and serve others, but also reveals his graciousness. While Aragorn could command others to follow him, he does not, desiring the freely given loyalty of his companions and their safety contemporaneously. For this reason, Aragorn encourages the young men riding with him to the Gates of Mordor, but also understands that the fear may prove too great for them, and provides another opportunity for them to demonstrate their courage and maintain their honor.⁴² In this manner, Aragorn reflects Faramir, because he is able to understand that certain challenges affect men differently. He does not act condescendingly toward others, despite his ability to withstand the effects of fear. Yet, he also exhibits a greater capacity to correctly judge the value of other. This capacity further differentiates Aragorn from Boromir and Charlie Croker, who prove incapable of correctly valuing others due to their rigid conceptions of masculinity and success. Further, Aragorn exhibits graciousness

⁴⁰Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 518.

⁴¹Ibid, 781.

⁴²Ibid, 886.

when he eases Boromir's conscience at his death.⁴³ Rather than becoming angry with Boromir's actions against Frodo, he praises Boromir for his valor and final sacrifice and does not speak of Boromir's confession afterward. Here, Aragorn judges Boromir based on his moral growth, not by his past actions, which represents a deeper understanding of other's value. Aragorn neither values men based on their ability to perform acts of valor in battle, nor does he value them on their past actions, but on their current character. Additionally, by patiently putting Boromir at ease and later refusing to speak of his actions against Frodo, Aragorn respects Boromir and preserves his honor, demonstrating unrequested grace.

Even after Aragorn accepts his rightful role as the king of Gondor, his deep rooted character remains unaffected by the power he possesses. He graciously bows to and recognizes Sam and Frodo for their sacrifice and also allows Faramir maintain his position as the steward of Gondor.⁴⁴ Though Aragorn possesses a commanding presence and an air of nobility, which are clear even without his kingly attire, his true greatness lies in his character. Aragorn is not a safe man, he is actually quite dangerous, but his character strong, consistent character makes him good. For this reason, Aragorn represents the intended goal of those who seek to "feminize" men, but he is by no means passive. He would never be able to fulfill the responsibility he assumes if he were. However, his character and virtue guard him against the emotions and desires that might otherwise cause him to cruelly abuse his strength and power. His consistent humility and graciousness distinguish him from courageous, but prideful, men such as Boromir. In

⁴³Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 414, 419.

⁴⁴Ibid, 954.

other words, Aragorn's resilient, admirable character stems from his combined strength and grace. However, while Boromir's character arc reveals the corrupting nature of pride, it also shows the power of sacrificial acts and makes clear what distinguishes men such as Faramir and Aragorn: the self-sacrifice of consistent humility. In order to be humble, one must sacrifice one's own desires for the sake of another. This fact emphasizes that moral formation must happen in community, because the virtues these characters exhibit must be directed toward others. The latter two men both exhibit consistent humility as essential to a man's character, yet, at the same time, they each offer their own, individual contributions to an understanding of healthy masculinity. On one hand, Faramir represents a more holistic understanding of what contributes to a man's worth through his knowledge of lore. Further, his actions highlight the importance of prudence, or judging rightly in various context, for healthy masculinity. On the other hand, Aragorn displays the significance of humility, which facilitates his graciousness toward others. Additionally, Aragorn demonstrates the necessity of assuming and enduring responsibility nobly. Thus, these men reflect real men in the sense that they are unique, with their individual burdens and strength, however, they each offer valuable insights for what is required in an expression of healthy masculinity.

CONCLUSION

In the introduction to this thesis I described the current state of the discussion surrounding masculinity, including two prevailing cultural responses to toxic masculinity: the feminization of men and recourse to incomplete forms of traditional masculinity. These two responses insufficiently address toxic masculinity and either create new difficulties for men, or perpetuate historical difficulties. I listed several persisting issues for men that, in part, result from and are perpetuated by toxic masculinity: emotional repression and depression, a rigid, skewed understanding of success, and a lack of male intimacy and friendship. For these reasons, I emphasized that our literary analysis should not only inform our understanding of healthy masculinity, but also counteract these specific issues and cultivate a resilience to toxic masculinity in men. Further, I explained how and why literary analysis proves valuable in this discussion. So, what have we learned from our literary dive into the hearts and lives of men; where are we now?

I believe a brief overview will aid us in answering this question. In the first chapter, Charlie Croker provided a clear picture of toxic masculinity and its harmful effects on men. Mainly, Croker evidences that toxic masculinity entails a rigid conception of manhood that obstructs introspection and the recognition of healthy masculinity, specifically, the need for moral formation. Croker's rigid understanding of masculinity skews his perception of success and causes him to pursue power, dominance, and control above all else, which can be seen in his willingness to sacrifice intimacy with others for the sake of his image. Additionally, because Croker understands his own value in terms of monetary and social success, he values others incorrectly: either as means to his own

financial ends or because they possess wealth. This misconception lies at the heart of his moral predicament. Partly, Croker does not want to alienate Armholster because Armholster is his friend, but also because Armholster could potentially destroy his social status. On the other hand, Croker does not want to lose his wealth, which originally facilitated his entrance into the elite social circles from which he now fears exclusion. So, in a sense, both sides of Croker's moral predicament center on his social status and how others perceive him because these things define him. Thus, Croker's inaccurate understanding of success not only prevents him from valuing himself correctly, but others as well. Further, because Croker allows his financial success to define him, his failure to succeed as he thinks he ought causes him to feel unnecessary shame, which is the same harmful progression we see in Conrad Hensley's case. In turn, Croker's inability to deal with this unnecessary shame results in his deception, escapism, and abdication of responsibility. So, we are able to see the complexity and interconnectedness of the issues with which Croker struggles. Wolfe's inclusion of Stoicism, initially through Hensley¹ and, later, through Croker as well,² partially reveals the importance of self-reflection and moral formation in combatting toxic masculinity and its effects on men. However, C.S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man*, emphasizes and furthers Wolfe's thought progression.

In Chapter 2, our analysis of *The Abolition of Man* clarified the importance of objective moral value and moral formation, specifically, moral formation through virtue. Additionally, Lewis explained the consequences that result when a culture ignores or rejects objective moral value and does not recognize the significance of moral formation.

¹Tom Wolfe, *A Man in Full* (New York: Dial Press, 2005), 334.

²Ibid, 660.

Similarly, as Martha Nussbaum emphasizes, we are beginning to reflect this kind of culture: we have forgotten the importance of virtue, moral formation, and their significance in the lives of men.³ So, Lewis shows us that men not only need moral formation, as Wolfe's book does, but, particularly, moral formation through virtue because virtue enables men to understand and regulate their emotions and desires. Thus, we not only see that the self-reflection and moral formation prompted by Stoicism provide a path for men out of unhealthy masculinity, but also that moral formation through virtue offers men a path toward healthy masculinity through the correct regulation of their emotions and desires. But, which particular virtues prove pertinent to the moral formation of men?

In the last chapter, Boromir, Faramir, and Aragorn provide us with a more complex understanding of moral formation and a richer picture of healthy masculinity through their portrayal of particular virtues. Boromir, in spite of his faults, demonstrates the importance of courage, honesty, and humility for healthy masculinity. Eventually, these virtues, specifically courage and humility, allow Boromir to fulfill his responsibility to protect Mary and Pippin.⁴ Additionally, because Boromir portrays these virtues inconsistently, allowing his own pride and desire for glory to drive him at certain points, he also reveals moral formation as a complex and continual process, which was not evident in Charlie Croker's rather sudden transformation.⁵ Next, Faramir's humility,

³Martha Nussbaum, "Man Overboard," (22 June 2006), <https://newrepublic.com/article/64199/man-overboard>.

⁴J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 50th anniversary 1 vol. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 414.

⁵Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 660.

honesty, and courage further emphasize those virtues demonstrated only in part by Boromir. Further, Faramir evidences the necessity of prudence in the moral formation of men. Faramir's prudence enables him to correctly apply his knowledge and other virtues in difficult situations. For example, Faramir takes his responsibility to guard Gondor and obey the king seriously, but prudence prevents him from killing Frodo and Sam without knowing more about their journey and character.⁶ Last, our analysis of Aragorn reveals that he portrays the same virtues as Faramir, but Aragorn's humility provides these virtues a unique depth not present in Faramir. Aragorn's humility not only carries greater weight than the others, because he is the high king, but also appears to give him an ability to correctly value others. Rather than valuing people as means to an end, Aragorn's humility enables him to value others for their intrinsic worth and character, which we see when he offers his soldiers a way to maintain their honor without entering battle and when he honors the hobbits for their valor.⁷ Thus, Tolkien's characters Boromir, Faramir, and Aragorn highlight the moral virtues of courage, honesty, humility, and prudence, as well as the emotional vulnerability and responsibility needed for healthy masculinity.

Now, we must see how moral formation through these virtues particularly benefits men and addresses the issues that I listed in the introduction. Recall, I explained that one facet of toxic masculinity is its rigid portrayal of manhood, which includes a skewed understanding of success as financial success, or domination, power, and control. As we saw in Charlie Croker's case, this rigid understanding of masculinity and harmful perception of success create two significant issues for men: incorrectly valuing

⁶Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 665.

⁷Ibid, 954.

themselves and incorrectly valuing others. Croker understands his own value in terms of his financial and social successes and failures, rather than finding his own value in his character and the kind of man he is. In other words, Croker's financial and social success define him, so when he fails in these areas, he feels incredible shame. Further, Croker's harmful understanding of masculinity and success cause him to only value others as means, including his son, who he sees as his failing legacy because he does not meet Croker's rigid criteria for success or masculinity. However, in the last chapter, Aragorn's depth of humility prevents pride from clouding his view of others and enables him to see others for who they actually are and value them for their character and intrinsic worth. As previously stated, Aragorn's humility equips him with the ability to rightly value and honor Sam and Frodo for their valor, but this virtue also allows him to see that the fear of death can overwhelm some men without thinking that this negates their manhood or worth. Yet, while humility appears remedial for men's incorrect valuation of others and themselves, humility alone does not provide men a sense of purpose. A desire for this sense of purpose is likely one of the reasons many men pursue financial and social success. These types of successes lend themselves to tangible quantification and therefore allow men to quantify their otherwise intangible purpose. Consequently, we must add an active, positive dimension to this reoriented understanding of success and value that offers men tangible signifiers of their purpose and meaning. I take this active, positive dimension to be men's acceptance and fulfillment of responsibility, which provides purpose to men when they take and perform a responsibility, and, recognizable results, when they fulfill that responsibility satisfactorily.

However, assuming and fulfilling a responsibility requires courage in addition to humility. Courage enables men to face the fear and potential difficulties associated with assuming and fulfilling a responsibility. Humility, on the other hand, creates the proper disposition in men needed to initially assume a responsibility. Thus, the combination of humility and courage enable men to take on and fulfill responsibility. This is evident when Aragorn pledges himself to serve the hobbits by life, or even death.⁸ These virtues also contribute to Aragorn's capacity for friendship with the hobbits. Humility allows him to befriend the hobbits and take on the responsibility of serving and protecting them, while courage helps him face the potential hardship he will suffer fulfilling the responsibility. Further, humility also prevents men from defining themselves by their successfully fulfilled responsibilities. So, through Aragorn, we see how humility and courage prove useful not only in combatting the rigid understanding of masculinity and success with which Croker struggles, but also because they facilitate responsibility, which gives men purpose.

Additionally, in the introduction, I explained that the shame that results from men's inability to meet or maintain this harmful view of success, combined with the emotional repression encouraged by toxic masculinity, contributes to male struggles with depression and suicide. Henry Montero points out that men often deal with their shame negatively due to the pervasive presence of toxic masculinity in our culture.⁹ As previously stated, toxic masculinity pushes men to repress their emotions and devalue authentic friendships, which, in turn, leads to a lack of male intimacy and true friendship.

⁸Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 171.

⁹Henry A Montero. "Depression in Men: The Cycle of Toxic Masculinity." <https://www.psychom.net/depression-in-men/depression-in-men-toxic-masculinity/>.

We learned through Croker and Hensley's relationship that healthy male friendships not only aid moral formation and the practice of virtue, which correctly address feelings of shame, but also foster healthy emotional vulnerability and male intimacy. However, healthy male friendships require virtue, specifically, honesty, humility, courage, and prudence, as well as a degree of responsibility. Humility, honesty, and courage promote healthy emotional vulnerability, which is necessary for true friendship. Humility allows a man to recognize his failures and emotions, while honesty and courage help that man convey those failures and emotions truthfully to a friend. Prudence not only balances the aforementioned virtues, but also equips men with discernment that helps them know when and with whom emotional vulnerability is appropriate and healthy.

In turn, these kinds of exchanges between friends beget healthy male intimacy and deepen friendship. For example, Croker and Hensley's relationship deepens when Croker honestly and courageously confides in Hensley about his financial failings and moral predicament.¹⁰ In exchange, Hensley tells Croker the truth about his own story and is able to accurately address and help Croker with his situation.¹¹ Similarly, Boromir confesses to Aragorn that he tried to take the Ring from Frodo and honestly expresses his feelings of shame. Boromir's humility, honesty, and courageous willingness to admit his wrongdoing allows Aragorn the opportunity to forgive Boromir, encourage him, and put him at peace before his death.¹² Thus, as these two situations demonstrate, the virtues of humility, honesty, courage, and prudence represent the makings of healthy men in true

¹⁰Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 660.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 414, 419.

community. Further, because every strong, healthy friendship or community requires each member to contribute to the health of, or serve, the other(s) in some respect, these types of relationships entail a degree of responsibility. I highlighted this idea in the introduction with my example of soldiers' mutual responsibility for and protection of one another. So, through the examples of these characters, we are able to see how these particular virtues 1) help address male struggles with depression by equipping men to deal with shame beneficially and 2) facilitate healthy male friendships, which beget greater male intimacy.

Thus, the application of these virtues appears to address Peggy Orenstein's call for greater emotional flexibility among men, because this set of virtues trains men to be honest about their emotions, which requires courage and humility. If men practice these virtues in their relationships broadly, their more complex emotions will be less likely to manifest as anger or aggression. This will allow men to express a broader spectrum of emotions. Also, when men truly feel anger, their application of these virtues will help them temper that anger and express themselves in a healthy, productive manner.

At the outset of this thesis, I argued that our literary analysis should not only inform our understanding of what constitutes healthy masculinity, but also how men acquire the type of moral formation necessary for this healthy expression. We need male models of masculinity from whom other men, and especially younger men, can learn how to express their masculinity healthily. Consequently, I emphasized Orenstein's and Peterson's calls for male models of responsibility and emotional flexibility. However, we need men who model more than these two traits. Now that we have reached a better understanding of healthy masculinity, at least in part, as moral formation through the

virtues of humility, honesty, courage, and prudence, we can more definitively say that men should model these virtues that, in turn, give rise to responsibility and healthy emotional vulnerability. From our analysis, we have seen that Boromir, Faramir, and Aragorn exemplify these virtues that not only enable them to accept the responsibility of serving and protecting others, but also allow them to fulfill these responsibilities in a masculine manner from which other men can learn. Further, these characters demonstrate the emotional vulnerability advocated by Orenstein that produces the close male friendships essential to healthy masculinity. Such healthy male friendships produce communities that represent the only models capable of combatting detrimental male groups like the alt-right, which Angela Nagle examines, because these pictures of healthy masculinity help inculcate the aforementioned virtues in young men that make them resilient to unhealthy forms of masculinity.¹³ In fact, this kind of moral formation through particular virtues perpetuates community, as it appears to entail a moral obligation to teach and form others. For example, Conrad Hensley feels obligated to share his education and formation with Charlie Croker after he learns of his predicament.¹⁴ As I mentioned previously, if Hensley chose to keep the truth of his own progress through moral formation to himself, his formation would solely serve himself, which completely contradicts the purpose of his formation. Due to this inherent obligation, moral formation through virtue causes well-formed, healthy men to share their knowledge and practice their virtues with others. As a result, this kind of moral formation

¹³Angela, Nagle. "The Lost Boys." *The Atlantic*.<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/12/brotherhood-of-losers/544158/>.

¹⁴Wolfe, *A Man in Full*, 619.

creates male friendships and communities that, in turn, produce and perpetuate models of healthy masculinity.

Thus, we have learned that healthy masculinity, at least in part, is constituted by moral formation through the virtues of humility, honesty, courage, and prudence, which facilitate male acceptance of responsibility and promote healthy male friendships. Additionally, male models of healthy masculinity are necessary for the propagation and perpetuation of this kind of moral formation. Further, as we have learned, healthy male communities prove crucial not only in combatting unhealthy forms of unhealthy masculinity, but also in deepening and preserving healthy masculinity. So, is our understanding of healthy masculinity complete? I think an affirmative answer to this question would contradict my purpose in writing this thesis. This thesis only represents a humble contribution to the greater conversation concerning masculinity that must be deepened and furthered. I only hope to redirect the current conversation from its focus on toxic masculinity to healthy masculinity in an attempt to renew our understanding of masculinity. In other words, my thesis represents an attempt to heed Orenstein's exhortation by both clarifying what is necessary for models of masculinity "that are neither ashamed nor regressive," and expressing "what we do want" from boys.¹⁵

In the interest of continuing this conversation, I will list several questions that might push the questions I have addressed in this thesis further, or challenge my own conclusions. *A Man in Full* highlighted the work of Epictetus as a possible answer to toxic masculinity and a lack of moral formation, but do we need more than stoicism in this endeavor? While the teachings of Epictetus emphasize the necessity of self-reflection

¹⁵Orenstein, Peggy. "The Miseducation of the American Boy." *The Atlantic*.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/01/the-miseducation-of-the-american-boy/603046/>.

and virtue, they remain rather self-focused. Given the importance of friendship and community for healthy masculinity, in addition to Stoic philosophy, we might need a better understanding of the self, or individual, as a member of a community. We might need to see the individual not simply as a participant in community, but shaped and formed by that community fundamentally. Epictetus also esteems the rational element of humans as ultimate and either minimizes or derides the human body, but I do not think this teaching contributes to an understanding of healthy masculinity.¹⁶ Instead, do we need a better understanding of how male embodiment affects healthy masculinity? Even though certain tenants of Stoicism prove useful in particular scenarios, Stoicism, in my opinion, does not entail everything necessary for a rich moral formation. Similarly, our investigation has only yielded a few virtues and qualities that contribute to healthy masculinity, but we have not described a full picture of healthy masculinity. Possibly, what is needed beyond this thesis are clearer inspections of masculine roles of responsibility and their contributions to healthy masculinity.

Is a more detailed rationale necessary for some men to adopt this concept of healthy masculinity through moral formation and virtue? Presumably, some men might choose to adopt this understanding of healthy masculinity because it at least describes areas in which they can improve and grow to become better men, but actually practicing the virtues I highlighted is no easy task. Given its difficulty, some might choose to believe that healthy masculinity does not require moral formation through virtue, or, alternatively, some men might ask on what foundation this need for moral formation and

¹⁶Margaret Graver, "Epictetus," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, n.d., <https://leibniz.stanford.edu/friends/members/view/epictetus/>.

virtue rests. Again, I hope at least one of these questions prompts someone to take up the mantle and carry this essential conversation forward.

In their book, *Intellectual Virtues*, Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood discuss the intellectual virtue of firmness. This virtue represents the mean between intellectual rigidity and flaccidity and allows its practitioner to hold a belief in correct proportion to that belief's supporting evidence while also allowing the person to genuinely seek further information on the subject.¹⁷ In this vein, I think it is important to note that we should hold this foundational framework of healthy masculinity firmly in our minds, but not rigidly. As we have seen, rigid conceptions of masculinity produce a host of issues; but if we firmly hold this belief that these particular virtues enrich and facilitate healthy masculinity, we will be able to accept the finish-carpentry on healthy masculinity that still remains incomplete.

¹⁷Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues* (Oxford University Press, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199283675.001.0001>.

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