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TRANSCENDING MASCULINITY

(RE)READING ROCKY ...THIRTY YEARS LATER

by Heather Collette-VanDeraa

NOTIONS OF MASCULINITY have been discussed in film scholarship for decades, with the genre of action films, particularly that of the boxing film, providing a most fertile ground for discourse. While *Rocky* (1976) did not inaugurate the genre, it remains one of the seminal films of not only the boxing genre, but of all American films, providing an archetype of masculinity that spawned a franchise. Many of these films repeat a theme of triumph against all odds that relies on a negotiation and assertion of masculinity in its most physical (and often violent) forms. Jurgen Reeder (1995) asserts that “these films seem to be a kind of ritual where a seemingly identical dramatic structure is reiterated many times over...such ritual repetition of dramatic themes express[es]

an epoch’s need to explore an experience that as yet has not been adequately formulated and thematized” (131). The ‘experience’ that has yet to be adequately formulated in *Rocky* is a construction of masculinity that must adapt to, and reflect, the changing cultural climate of working- and middle-class values in light of civil rights and gender equality. In his struggle to achieve champion status, Rocky Balboa navigates a new cultural terrain marked by a disruption of traditional gender roles. While the hard-body/ action genre of films has presented an arguably homogenous class of masculine iconography, *Rocky* can be deconstructed today in light of an historical re-reading to demonstrate a nuanced representation of masculinity simultaneously embodied in the character’s physical strength



and emotional development, both of which are achieved through his interpersonal relationships. Rocky Balboa’s masculinity is marked by a personal catharsis of emotional self-actualization that transcends his raw physicality and role as an underdog boxer. As any athlete will tell you, physical strength is enhanced by a mental and emotional fortitude, which develops in *Rocky* primarily though the titular character’s

interpersonal relationships. Rocky's development both physically and emotionally is enhanced through his relationships with principle love interest, Adrian (Talia Shire), and boxing rival Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers) as well as the other men, most notably the father-figure trainer, Mickey (Bergess Meredith), and Adrian's brother Paulie (Burt Young). In contrast to views expressed in other studies of the film, *Rocky* presents a nuanced, if somewhat sentimental, archetype of a man who must negotiate his masculinity through complex emotional relationships with others, while simultaneously developing his physical strength. It is these relationships that frame the central plot of *Rocky's* physical training and ultimate match in the boxing ring, which, unlike the interpersonal relationships, ends in ambivalent defeat.

FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT

Rocky follows from a long tradition of boxing themes in films. One particularly poignant example, *From Here to Eternity* (1953), was another prominent American film with a central plotline devoted to a boxing match between the protagonist, Private Pruett (Montgomery Clift), and another soldier at an army base. Pruett's boxing match is one he explicitly does not want to fight and much of the film traces his circumvention of the match. His masculinity

is still caught up in boxing and fighting, but he is attempting to prove himself as a man who will not fight, in part due to the fact that he had blinded his last opponent, something he feels strong remorse for. Therefore, his masculinity is, like Rocky Balboa's, at least partly defined by his humanity toward others. Although, like Rocky, both men must fight at some point to demonstrate that masculinity is only partly defined by humanity; it is subtextually implicit in each of the fighting scenes in *From Here to Eternity* and *Rocky* that regardless of their own self-definition of manhood or personhood, it is the fight that will define them within the larger world they must inhabit. Pruett's philosophy of masculinity is revealed when he states, "A man should be what he can do," punctuating the fact that masculinity is a function of action and behavior—not how he feels, what he wants, how he thinks, but what he does. Just as Pruett defines himself, and his masculinity, through his humanity and his role as a career soldier, Rocky defines himself and his masculinity through his identification as a boxer and his relationships with others.

In both films, contextualized fighting is an acceptable form of masculine expression—*From Here to Eternity* takes place in the military setting at a camp in Hawaii in 1941 prior to the US involvement in WWII. The film shows the brutal barbarism of a military bully habitually beating up a sympathetic character, Maggio

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(Frank Sinatra), who is ultimately killed. Pruett then avenges his friend's murder by engaging the perpetrator in a back alley knife fight, killing him. In the end, it is WWII—the penultimate fight—that provides the context for the most sanctioned form of fighting. Fighting therefore must be contextualized in the spectacle of formalized boxing or war in order for it to be a redeemable masculine characteristic. Brute force or violent tactics without justification are punished or frowned upon. Pruett's fate is to die at the gun of one of his own men on the evening of Pearl Harbor, whereas Rocky Balboa is scorned by Mickey early in the film, who admonishes him for his brutish career choices: "You could have been a fighter but instead you became a cheap leg-breaker to a second-rate loan shark. It's a wasted life." The commentary suggests that to fight in the ring—the formal, controlled, contextualized fight—is

legitimized over the street fight—the informal, unsanctioned, uncontained fight.

BINARY OPPOSITIONS

Much of *Rocky*'s thematic structure is explored through binary pairings that function in a dyadic structure of cooperation or competition. Rocky-as-boxer is situated in direct opposition to Apollo Creed, but Rocky-as-man is contextualized in both his opposition to Creed and in his relation to Adrian, especially, and among the other men in his life. Rocky's masculinity is situated in a binary opposition to every other principle male character in the film, including Mickey—the aging father figure/trainer, Paulie, the alcoholic but aspiring manager (who are also positioned in opposition to each other). The exception is the only principle female character, Adrian. Rocky's masculinity and Adrian's femininity are expressed in relation, not opposition, to each other. In Rocky's own words, their relationship with one another is about "filling gaps." He tells Paulie in the meat locker, "I don't know...she's got gaps, I've got gaps; together we fill gaps." While the language Rocky employs to express this parity is simple, it is by no means simplistic. The gaps he refers to, in both himself and Adrian, reflect an understanding of the flawed nature of individual existence -- that in isolation

we are never self-actualized. And while they "fill gaps" together, it is also important to note that filling of gaps does not mean they complete each other, only together forming a whole person; rather, through their relation to each other, each becomes a whole self.

In an exchange between Rocky and Adrian at the ice rink, Rocky reveals that his motivation for becoming a boxer was stimulated by something his father said to him, "You weren't born with much of a brain so better start usin' your body." To which Adrian replies that her mother informed her, "You weren't born with much of a body so better start developin' your brain." This early scene in the film's narrative demonstrates (and not without a bit of campy humor) that Adrian and Rocky complement each other in the most basic way, a way that never denigrates Adrian's status as his female counterpart, but rather provides a foundation for a relationship based in mutual regard, balance, and equality between them.

Feminist scholars may be quick to argue this point with me, as evidenced in claims made as recently as 2005 by V. Elmwood that "Rocky offers masculine status and national citizenship to a previously rejected group in exchange for their allegiance in a quest for the remasculinization of white men...as well as offering a bond of solidarity in rolling back the



Rocky & Adrian's Thanksgiving date at the rink, discovering their complementarity.

advances made by feminism" (49). Elmwood claims that the oppositional pairing of Rocky and Apollo Creed somehow advances the fight against the feminist movement through the 'remasculinization' of (white) men, though it is unclear what content of the film squarely supports this claim. She states, "It is clear that the moral universe of the film relies squarely on her [Adrian's] efforts to fulfill a properly feminine role by serving the champ and humanizing him" (pp 57-58). As I will illustrate below, it is not a subservient role that Adrian plays to Rocky, but that of a loving partner who has discovered her own agency through the relationship they forge together, not least of which is sparked by Rocky's ability to see Adrian as a real, whole person.

This ability to see is signified in the first scene of the film. Rocky opens with the camera pulling away from a mosaic of Jesus (the epitome of non-violent masculinity) above a small-time boxing ring. Rocky Balboa, the “Italian Stallion,” wins his fight in a minor pay-for-play situation. He wins the match, but his appearance is that of a defeated man. (It is also interesting to note the bookending of the film: it opens with Rocky winning in a small time ring but looking and feeling defeated, and ends with him losing in a big-time ring but feeling triumphant. This simple inversion is not as simple as it may seem when we examine the course of Rocky’s emotional transcendence from a small-time hoodlum to a self-actualized man.) His left eye was injured during the fight and in the following scenes Rocky strolls through his working-class neighborhood in his role as a thug (and presumably not a very good one because he has sympathy for those who owe the money) for a “second-rate loan shark.” The eye injury is significant in that it symbolically represents a shift in his perspective. He goes through the motions of his job, but his outlook on his world and himself has been affected; he does not see things the same as before, or soon won’t. The eye injury is a painful foreshadowing of his change of perspective and eventual catharsis that takes him off the streets as a lone thug into the ring—and into a loving relationship with Adrian.

The romance between Adrian and Rocky

provides the context with which oppositional notions of masculinity come to light in the film. Most notably, their relationship makes Paulie increasingly jealous until it culminates in an alcoholic rage on Christmas Eve. A moment of catharsis for both Adrian and Rocky takes place during this scene when Paulie challenges Rocky’s worthiness of his sister’s love. Adrian lives with Paulie, and as he sees it, he is her ‘caretaker,’ but it is really she who takes care of him—and in the most backward, anti-feminist role. Paulie interrupts Rocky and Adrian’s serene holiday scene by shouting, “You owe me!” A visibly angry Adrian defends herself: “I don’t owe you nothing! I take care of YOU Paulie, I don’t owe you nothing,” to which she reflects and adds, “and you made me feel like a loser!” The binary of winners and losers is evoked repeatedly as a central theme in the film, as Adrian and Rocky together become ‘winners’ through overcoming individual and shared obstacles. In this scene, Paulie is the principle obstacle to be overcome, but it is significant to note that Rocky does not attempt to fight what is ultimately Adrian’s fight. He stays calmly seated in a chair while she confronts Paulie alone, and on her own terms. Rocky’s serene masculinity contrasts sharply to Paulie’s brutishly violent, domineering role. Adrian does not exchange one form of



Rocky with the loan shark: the eye injury signifies Rocky’s shift in perspective

oppressive domination (that of her alcoholic brother) for another; she makes the choice to enter into a relationship of equals with a man she admires and loves. When she asks him, “want a roommate?,” we know that Rocky is deserving of both her love and companionship; he could have played the defending figure, a potentially violent interlocuter in Adrian’s confrontation with Paulie, but he chose instead to remain seated. That the scene could have been staged with Rocky defending Adrian and not have affected the greater plot of the film, nor the outcome, is significant to the pro-feminist reading I am encouraging here. While the scene is problematized by the almost voyeuristic nature

of the seated Rocky watching Adrian fight, it provides an important inversion of the later scene where Adrian will decide not to stay seated in order to watch Rocky in the championship fight against Apollo Creed. Once again, a balance is articulated between Adrian and Rocky that transcends simple oppositional binary to establish them on equal footing.

Rocky and Adrian must also negotiate conflicts within their relationship and one significant scene that illustrates their conflict resolution is when he tells her to “just make the meat,” a brute statement that disregards Adrian’s personhood, and recalls the derogatory way that Paulie had treated her. She begrudgingly goes into the kitchen, but the camera stays on Rocky, who silently contemplates his hostile order. Rocky then walks toward the kitchen and apologizes saying, “I’m sorry.” This is a sharp contrast to dominant expressions of masculinity, especially those embodied in the hard-body boxer or blue-collar worker, which seldom represent strong men apologizing to women for their wrongful actions. While providing a tender and sentimental moment on screen, the off-screen narrative constructed between Rocky and Adrian is that of mutual regard and respect. It is only after Rocky apologizes that Adrian emerges from the kitchen—the penultimate signifier that this is a relationship of equals: Adrian won’t be stuck in the ‘kitchen’ of pre-feminist gender roles. Rocky infers from the moment a

silent understanding that conflict resolution requires responsibility for wrongful, hurtful actions. He owes her an apology and offers it to her freely. Rocky’s manhood is punctuated by this exchange, demonstrating the power of contrition and forgiveness, which, rather than making him weak, actually serves to make him stronger emotionally and psychologically.

MASCULINITY AND SEXUALITY: “WOMEN WEAKEN LEGS”

Rocky and Adrian’s relationship is compromised when she initiates sexual activity after Mickey tells him not to ‘fool around.’ Rocky says that he really likes her and Mickey replies, “so let her train ya!” The phrase next uttered by Mickey, “Women weaken legs,” is an overt commentary on how femininity in any form, but especially female sexuality, threatens male virility and masculinity. In the next scene Adrian is waiting on Rocky’s doorstep, increasing in her feminine expression, movement, and personal empowerment; “looking good,” as Rocky tells her. It’s clear from his response that Mickey’s ‘advice’ will go unheeded, but more importantly that the sexual relationship inferred from the diegetic interaction is a source of strength for both Adrian and Rocky. In Bill Conti’s iconic theme song, the lyrics “getting strong now” apply not



Adrian arrives at Rocky’s doorstep with a new look and a new dog.

just to Rocky, but to Adrian as well; she is truly getting strong now. Free from the repressive restraints of archaic notions of sexuality and sex, intimated by Mickey (the father-figure), Rocky and Adrian fortify their relationship with an open and mutual sexuality that enhances, rather than diminishes, each’s individual strength.

In the same scene, Adrian brings Rocky a dog “to keep you company when you run” and expresses humorously that the dog eats little turtles. She knows how much Rocky loves his little turtles, and she makes a light-hearted joke of it, again illustrating the compassion and integrity of their relationship. That she is able to light-heartedly poke fun at Rocky’s ‘sympathetic side’ only serves to demonstrate the facility of his masculinity that transcends brute strength.

The sexual relationship notwithstanding, Adrian's support of Rocky's training, both emotionally and in the companionship offered by the dog, overtly contradicts Mickey's myth that 'women weaken legs' because it is clear her encouragement is helping to strengthen Rocky's personal fortitude.

In the final scene of *Rocky*, the champion fight against Apollo Creed, Adrian emerges from the locker room to see the fight during the roth round. The fight, contrary to the assertion by Elmwood (2005), is not yet over, and Adrian struggles to see Rocky in the ring. Whatever personal obstacle had held her back in the locker-room (which takes place off-screen) has been overcome as she enters the arena to witness the end of the fight. Rocky's eye is bleeding again, but this time his perspective has already shifted; his catharsis is complete in his transformation from 'just another bum from the neighborhood' to a prizefighting boxer (though not yet a champion). He tells Mickey to "cut me," to release the blood preventing him from being able to see: he won't allow himself to be blinded by self-doubt again. He can see clearly and the next scene illustrates the nuanced nature of Rocky's sight.

The final utterances in the film are particularly poignant in light of the context of the scene. As the fight has reached an anti-climatic end for Rocky, each of the characters shouts for the other—the famous "Adrian!/Rocky!" dyadic—

Rocky amongst the press in the ring and Adrian in the crowd. When he sees her, the first thing he says is, "Where's your hat?" Is this the line to be uttered by a pulverized man who can barely see anything out of two swollen and bleeding eyes—where's your hat? It is almost comical upon reflection, considering the gravity of the scene and what Rocky has just been through. But it is precisely because from the beginning Rocky was able to see Adrian, see the nuances of who she is as a person. It is appropriate in the culmination of everything he has worked for, in the less than subtle dénouement of the love story, that Rocky sees the detail of her missing hat, demonstrating his ability to see clearly the one thing that matters most to him: her.

The moment is punctuated by closing music, which is triumphant even though Rocky has not won the fight. The implication is that he has gained something more valuable, a strong emotional bond with a woman whom he has not had to fight for, together creating a relationship of equals based on complementary characteristics and reciprocal affection and support. The very last lines are each of them embracing each other saying, "I love you" in a triumphant embrace in the boxing ring. Rocky is at its core a love story that problematizes unilateral assumptions about



The denouement: "Where's your hat?"

masculinity as being defined through violent physicality and brute strength alone. Rocky's triumph is signified by his personal catharsis of meeting an insurmountable challenge espoused by meaningful emotional and psychological bonds within his interpersonal relationships. Rocky offers a complex representation of masculinity that warrants reconsideration amongst scholars and film buffs alike.

I am hesitant to attribute this construction of masculinity in *Rocky* to either the director, John G. Avildsen, or the writer/actor, Sylvester Stallone, alone. Rather, I posit it as a representation culled from the collective shifting ideologies of dominant gender roles as well as

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social norms, values, and mores of the 1970s. From an historical perspective, *Rocky* came to the screen during an era that Cagin and Dray call "Political Hollywood, the time when Hollywood made movies for a growing youth counter-culture that wanted to see challenges to the political system" (Jeffords, 1994: 16). While many subtextual themes in the film indirectly confront the political and economic issues of the day, the social dynamics of the struggle for racial and gender equality clearly frame the dramatic interpersonal narrative of the film; a response to the civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s and early 1970s that played out in public and political spheres. The feminist movement sparked the interest in studies of masculinity, which *Rocky*, holding the cultural capital in male iconography that it does, is imbued

with. In light of the quickness to implicate all genre films exploiting male physicality as being anti-feminist, I am interested in a more contextualized analysis of the interpersonal relationships in the film's narrative to demonstrate the complexity of Rocky Balboa's polyvalent and transcendent masculinity.

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