Public Humanities (2026), 2, e130, 1–6
doi:10.1017/pub.2026.10262

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS PUBLIC HUMANITIES

ARTICLE

He-Man's Masculinity

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(Received 09 June 2026 UTC; revised 06 August 2026 UTC; accepted 13 August 2026 UTC)

Abstract

Debates about toxic masculinity often become trapped within a false dichotomy where masculinity is either under attack or inherently harmful. This article challenges that binary by reflecting on one of popular culture's most exaggerated masculine icons, He-Man. Across toys, cartoons, and later sequel series, Masters of the Universe repeatedly offers masculinity as a spectrum, staging a connection between strength and emotional vulnerability. Reading the franchise through its commercial origins, moral lessons, father-son relationships, and images of uncontrolled male rage, I argue that He-Man offers an unexpectedly useful model for thinking about masculinity. "He who holds the power is the master of the universe." The central question concerns how that power is defined and exercised: through brute strength, or through empathy and understanding. The franchise's significance lies in demonstrating how children's media teaches boys to claim agency and exercise authority responsibly.

Keywords: children's television; He-Man; masculinity; non-conformist; nostalgia

When the 2026 *Masters of the Universe* film arrived, it quickly became the most-watched film on Prime Video worldwide, confirming the franchise's continuing cultural reach.[1] Its most debated theme centres on a seemingly straightforward question: what is a man? Some welcome the film's interrogation of masculinity, while others view it as betraying iconic male strength. This debate places the film within contemporary culture wars, where definitions of "man" have become categorised through disputes over sex, gender, and social authority. *Masters of the Universe* has long engaged with internet debates, acknowledged through the film's inclusion of "What's Going On?," a nod to He-Man's digital prominence. Online critics nevertheless argue that the franchise has only recently become interested in questions of masculinity: "Now they're making a *Masters of the Universe* and giving He-Man pronouns."[2] This reaction misunderstands the franchise's history.

The American Psychological Association states traditional masculinity is "marked by stoicism, competitiveness, dominance and aggression," an accessible definition identifying signature behaviours with damaging social consequences.[3] Contemporary debate frequently turns masculinity into a false dichotomy: it must either be defended alongside its harmful

[1] Meta 2026.
[2] @jondelarroz 2026.
[3] Pappas 2019.

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behaviours or rejected entirely as inherently toxic. This binary is politically convenient but culturally inadequate, rejecting maleness as a spectrum. Sociologist R.W. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as an archetype maintained through its authority over alternative identities.[4] Public figures have intensified this restriction, with James May arguing "men are getting a bit of a bad rap recently" and Jordan Peterson warning, "The West has lost faith in the idea of masculinity."[5] Such comments resonate because they frame maleness as something under attack, which must be wholly protected. In an era when populist strongman influencers dominate social media and public perceptions of maleness, *Masters of the Universe* carries prominence, complicating this narrative.

To understand He-Man's contemporary relevance, we must return to the 1982 toy aisle. After their earlier line *Big Jim* failed to match Barbie's financial impact, Mattel sought a product to dominate the boys' market, unapologetically embracing the dictionary definition image of a "He-man" as "well-built [and] muscular."[6] This aesthetic drew upon earlier ideals popularised by near-mythic strongman Charles Atlas, whose widespread advertisements in 1940s tween comics promised to transform "weaklings into He-men."[7] The original toy line gave every male character the same exaggerated muscular physique, making physical strength its defining visual language. Festinger's theory of social comparison explains the appeal; idealised bodies invite emulation.[8] He-Man entered American popular culture alongside *Rambo* and *Conan the Barbarian*, during a conservative backlash against feminism and renewed investment in physically dominant male heroes. Susan Jeffords situates such figures within post-Vietnam "remasculinisation" where the hyper-muscular heroic body restored fantasies of masculine authority after a period of perceived national weakness.[9] He-Man carried cultural weight, condensing hopes for restored male strength into a tangible figure. His body promised absolute power, and to own the toy was to hold that fantasy in your hand.

He-Man emerged not from myth alone, but from market research concluding that boys, "tired of their moms [and] teachers telling them what to do," wanted the pleasure of command.[10] He-Man's proclamation, "I have the power," is therefore more than a catchphrase. It is a declaration of masculine autonomy. Mattel's branding targeted boys through dreams of empowerment, prioritising financial success over social consequence. Christine Skelton's study observes that boys' adoption of the "hard man" image has "particularly negative implications for women," normalising the mistreatment of those deemed weaker.[11] The expansion of *Masters of the Universe* across toys, television, and comics left the franchise suspended between two forces: the commercial appeal of masculine power and the ethics of its implementation.

Despite looking like the ultimate patriarchal fantasy, He-Man consistently refuses this identity. Although he carries the Sword of Power, television regulations ensured it was never used to stab or slash, creating an accidental pacifism where violence rarely resolves conflict. When challenged by the Stone King in 1985's episode *"Journey to Stone City,"* He-Man simply asks if they might "talk things out." He apologises for standing in the way and defeats the antagonist without landing a blow.[12] The result is a muscle-bound contradiction; power

[4] Connell 1995/2005.
[5] "James May Claims Older, White Men Are Being 'Written off as Unworthy'" 2024; Mental Toughness 2020.
[6] Sydney and Deuter 2015.
[7] Charles Atlas, Ltd 1947.
[8] Festinger 1954.
[9] Jeffords 1991.
[10] Volk-Weiss 2018.
[11] Skelton 1997.
[12] Friedman 1984.

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that repeatedly models restraint. Ellen Jordan found that boys often appropriated heroic play into violent warrior narratives, while those who rejected these expectations were positioned as "not female" rather than securely masculine.[13] He-Man's pacifism disrupts this logic. It might conventionally be coded as weakness or feminisation, yet he remains unmistakably "the strongest man in the universe."

Meanwhile, Skeletor embodies a psychologically complex form of patriarchal entitlement, representing an endless hunger for control, recognition, and domination; power without responsibility. His authority depends upon intimidation as much as physical force, reflecting an increasingly expressed form of hegemonic masculinity. In 2021's sequel *Masters of the Universe: Revelation*, the symbolism becomes clear as Skeletor comes closer than ever to ruling Eternia, only to be surpassed by Evil-Lyn, his subordinate. In the original series, female characters frequently occupied supporting positions within narratives organised around He-Man's actions. Their function sustains the "pattern of practice" through which male dominance continues as the governing masculine hierarchy.[14] *Revelation* revises this structure by displacing He-Man and Skeletor, granting Teela and Evil-Lyn narrative centrality. Skeletor cannot tolerate this loss of attention or imagine a world where their rivalry no longer occupies the principal focus: "It has to end this way, He-Man and Skeletor."[15] He constantly demands, "I'm not going to be ignored," until He-Man finally hurls him away, shouting, "It's not about us!" This declaration rejects Skeletor's assertion that masculine rivalry must remain central, gaining significance from He-Man's position as the franchise's lead figure.[16] His decision to relinquish narrative priority presents support for female leadership as an ethical use of masculine authority.

The 2026 film extends the franchise's illustration of toxic masculinity, revealing how it functions within its heroes as well as villains. Duncan initially defines male worth through bodily strength, combat skill, and the celebration of victory, emphasised through continuously announcing himself by his title, Man-At-Arms. Balswick and Peek argue that boys are taught to value masculinity through "physical courage, toughness, competitiveness, and aggressiveness," while emotional communication is limited.[17] Man-At-Arms' failure to vanquish Trap Jaw destroys the basis upon which he has constructed his sense of self, his response reflecting an inability to express and subsequently process shame and perceived inadequacy. His withdrawal from society and reliance on alcohol transforms psychological distress into physical self-harm, exposing the fragility of a masculine role organised entirely around violence and achievement.

His decline illustrates the price of reducing masculine value to martial achievement. He-Man redirects this understanding of strength by urging Man-At-Arms to discuss his feelings and "stand tall." He frames resilience as the capability to confront failure and recover a sense of purpose, linking physical and psychological fortitude through the acknowledgement of pain and capacity to continue.[18] Man-At-Arms regains his heroic role through perseverance and self-recognition. The sequence displays emotional recovery as an essential form of masculine courage, demonstrating how expectations of invulnerability leave men without a stable sense of worth when physical power fails. Ultimately detaching long-standing attributes

[13] Jordan 1995.
[14] Connell and Messerschmidt 2005.
[15] (Conarroe and Stannard 2021a)
[16] Ibid.
[17] Balswick and Peek 1971.
[18] Knight 2026.

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from sex and physical strength, Man-At-Arms tells Teela she is "the man" he wishes he could be, defining maleness as a sum of positive qualities.[19]

Privileging physical dominance over emotional expression also carries significant real-world consequences. Sam de Boise's contention that some view the existence of the term *toxic masculinity* as evidence "men are being victimised and masculinity devalued," emphasises the importance of He-Man's example.[20] The franchise does not present maleness itself as the problem; only certain associated behaviours that are damaging but optional. The original cartoon made this explicit through closing moral lessons in which He-Man addressed young viewers directly, offering advice on humility, responsibility, and self-improvement. In a culture where "boys don't cry" remains a powerful instruction, such lessons matter. Branney and White explain that emotional repression contributes to under-diagnosed depression among men, who accounted for 73.9 percent of UK suicides recorded between 2022 and 2024.[21] Challenging media, which promotes such conventions, becomes not an attack on men, but a necessary intervention on their behalf.

Similar concerns with masculine performance appear through Prince Adam, He-Man's frequently underestimated alter ego. Like Clark Kent or Peter Parker, Adam hides a heroic identity behind a socially diminished exterior. However, unlike classic superheroes, his performance is neither incompetent nor morally inferior to his transformed self. His personality remains fundamentally unchanged; only his body differs. The behaviour of his father, King Randor, is especially revealing, as he praises He-Man's courage and pacifism while condemning the same qualities in Adam: "That's parental pride, Adam. Something I hope I can feel one day as your father."[22] The irony is painful because Adam and He-Man are the same person, with this contradiction exposing a fickle attitude towards masculine ideals judged on appearance rather than principle. Randor recognises his son's courage, loyalty and selflessness only when embodied within a hyper-masculine physique. Adam's double identity demonstrates how bodies are read before character is recognised, a bias reinforced in later adaptations that render Adam smaller and more youthful while illustrating He-Man with increasingly exaggerated muscles. The contrast reflects a cultural tendency to recognise masculine authority through physical aesthetics, despite Adam's qualities sustaining He-Man's heroism.

This is also a failure of fatherhood. Tabitha Freeman argues that although the patriarchal family unit has traditionally been built around the father's authority, there remains a "long-standing cultural silence shrouding men's parental roles," producing a patriarchal paradox.[23] Fathers are empowered yet undefined. Randor embodies this paradox, ruling with authority and physical confidence, yet struggling to offer intimacy. Rolling up his sleeve to reveal his biceps, Randor boasts, "I never told Adam... but I used to be quite a rowdy in my youth."[24] The comic display of masculine bravado also exposes an emotional distance; Adam does not know his father's younger self. Their relationship is structured by expectation rather than connection. Masculinity here is not simply power; it is masking, self-denial, and the pain of not being recognised in one's authentic form.

Revelation develops this theme after Adam's death, when he enters Preternia, a heroic afterlife where champions of Grayskull choose their ideal form. Significantly, Adam chooses

[19] Ibid.
[20] de Boise 2019.
[21] Branney and White 2008; Gov.uk 2024.
[22] Conarroe and Stannard 2021b.
[23] Freeman 2008.
[24] Dini 1983.

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not He-Man's hypermasculine physique but his smaller, authentic self. Yet this brief liberation ends on return to the mortal world. Without the Sword of Power, Adam calls down the unfettered power directly, transforming into Savage He-Man, a monstrous version of himself stripped of armour, speech, and emotional restraint. He becomes the man patriarchal society expected him to be. Savage He-Man reveals the instability of the heroic hard body, the controlled muscular exterior becoming frenzied when its promise of mastery collapses into nothing but bodily excess and violence. His transformation exposes the social consequences of defining masculine legitimacy through physical dominance; the body intended to protect becomes a threat to his allies and the woman he loves. Bell hooks writes that "real men get mad and their madness no matter how violent or violating is deemed natural, a positive expression of patriarchal masculinity."[25] Savage He-Man literalises this warning. He cannot speak, reason, or care. He can only rage. The franchise turned the fantasy of absolute masculine power into a nightmare.

The consequences are sweeping but nevertheless intimate. Savage He-Man destroys his surroundings, and harms his closest ally Teela, visualising how romanticised male aggression becomes dangerous within intimate relationships. He is not merely an angry superhero, but the product of inherited expectations; a son shaped by a father's disappointment, a culture's worship of strength, and a world that repeatedly mistakes anger for authenticity. The resolution is therefore crucial as Savage He-Man is not defeated by a stronger warrior. Instead, King Randor approaches his son, abandoning the model of fatherhood that helped create the crisis; facing the monstrous body, finally seeing Adam and confessing: "For years, I looked at you and only saw the man I thought you should be. And I was blind to the man you already are … I am so so sorry, I haven't told you, I love you, and I never told you, I'm proud of you."[26] As he embraces not He-Man, but Adam his son, Savage He-Man disappears. Randor's apology presents emotional vulnerability and sensitivity as forms of masculine courage. Bell hooks writes, "To know love men must let go of the will to dominate. They must be able to choose life over death. They must be willing to change."[27]

Who are the Masters of the Universe? Those who control the power. The more important question is how to wield that power. Across its various incarnations, *Masters of the Universe* repeatedly questions the masculine ideals embodied by its own imagery, locating male authority in restraint, emotional responsibility and ethical use of strength. It presents aggression, domination, and repression as learned practices that men can reject. The franchise directs young audiences towards empathy, accountability, and relinquishing authority when others should lead. Its cultural significance lies in presenting strength and vulnerability as connected forms of masculine responsibility. As the franchise itself declares, "It takes incredible strength to wield power, yet it takes even more might to let the power return."[28]

William Muir-Kirk is a PhD researcher in the School of Arts and Creative Industries at Edinburgh Napier University, where he is completing doctoral research on children's television, gender, and identity. His thesis focuses on how popular media communicates ideas about gender, non-conformity, and social identity to young audiences across changing cultural and historical contexts. His doctorate examines long-running franchises: *Masters of the Universe, She-Ra*, *The Transformers*, and *The Muppets*, with particular attention to nostalgia, adaptation, and adult responses. He works across children's media, film and television studies, popular culture, and gender studies, and has taught sociological theory, literature and adaptation, children's stories, and fantasy at Edinburgh Napier University.

[25] hooks 2004.
[26] Conarroe and Stannard 2021c.
[27] hooks 2004.
[28] Conarroe and Stannard 2021b.

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Author contribution. Conceptualization: W.M.; Formal analysis: W.M.; Methodology: W.M.; Project administration: W.M.; Writing - original draft: W.M.; Writing - review & editing: W.M.

Financial support. No specific funding was received for this article.

Conflicts of interests. The author declares no competing interests.

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Cite this article: Muir-Kirk, William. 2026. "He-Man's Masculinity." *Public Humanities*, 2, e130, 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10262

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