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What Makes a Man?

Hegemonic Masculinity in *Arms and the Man* by G.B. Shaw

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## **Abstract**

The focus of this essay is the interaction between the male characters in the play *Arms and the Man* by George Bernard Shaw and how those characters position themselves according to R.W. Connell's theories on hegemonic masculinity. Connell's theories can be productively applied to Shaw's play, highlighting many similarities and exposing interesting patterns. The most striking example of this is the fact that Captain Bluntschli, the character that finally reaches the top of the hierarchical ladder of hegemonic masculinity, does that by repudiating conventional masculine ideals where patriotism, soldiering and violence are core ingredients. Bluntschli's ascendance within the hierarchy is built upon consent from the other male characters in the play, which is in line with what Connell argues about complicity being one of the most important factors of hegemonic masculinity. The other male characters jointly give way to Bluntschli, thus accepting his general critique of what they used to consider self-evident masculine values and ideals that they have felt compelled to live up to. For Major Sergius Saranoff the new way to look upon masculinity implies great relief. He can finally give in to his true self and let down his guard against the people around him, and he also dares follow his heart and marry below his class.

My conclusion is that Shaw, apart from satirizing love, war and heroism, wanted *Arms and the Man* to convey a message that there are alternative ways for men to gain respect and be considered highly masculine than through violence, economic power and oppression. If Shaw had been presented with Connell's theories on hegemonic masculinity he would probably have felt even more inspired in his mission to argue against destructive masculine ideals as expressed in patriotism and war.

Key words: R.W. Connell, G.B. Shaw, *Arms and the Man*, hegemonic masculinity, gender, hierarchy, war, patriotism

## Introduction

Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) was indeed a very controversial debater. His plays often deal with moral issues like religion, prostitution and corruption, and his open declaration as a socialist, teetotaler, vegetarian, pacifist and as a critic of society as a whole created a lot of disagreement and confusion among the intellectuals of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The fact that he refused to receive the money when awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1925 and also to receive the Order of Merit (Martin 484-85) corresponds with Shaw's general rebellion against the way society was constructed. Shaw was also a supporter of feminist views, and as a playwright he "created the most powerful female characters on the English stage since Shakespeare" (Peters 9, 17).

This essay, however, will neither discuss Shaw's criticism of society, nor his view of women and feminism primarily, but will concentrate on the male characters in his comedy *Arms and the Man*. One of the reasons why I chose to work with that play in the first place was the title as such. The title caught my attention since it indicates that the play might present and question manliness and ideal masculinity. What is meant by the title? How do arms change men, according to a pacifist and feminist like Shaw? Those were questions that arose before I had even opened the book. Now that I have read the play several times I have found interesting patterns concerning masculinity, male hierarchies, the interplay between nationalism, war and masculinity, and also successful attempts to challenge those patterns.

When exploring the male characters in the play, theories of hegemonic masculinity and different types of masculinity have been applied. The main source of theory is Australian professor of sociology R.W. Connell's *Masculinities*, where patterns of hegemonic masculinity and the relationship between masculinities and power are described. Other sources of theory are R.W. Connell's *Gender & Power*, and the anthology *Handbook of Studies of Men and Masculinities*, where a number of researchers contribute with various aspects of masculinity. Finding masculinity research on Shaw's work specifically has not been easy, though. The closest I got was when I found that Shaw is briefly referred to in *Modern Men - Mapping Masculinity in English and German Literature 1880-1930*. The major focus there, however, is his feminist views (Kane e.g. 97-98, 217).

Apart from the fact that the title and contents of the play are very thrilling for somebody who wants to write a literary essay on hegemonic masculinity, I also chose to connect Shaw and Connell because they seem to have a lot in common. Firstly, just like Shaw, Connell is a very controversial person, not only for having introduced a new view of men and masculinity,

but also for being a transgender woman. When Connell wrote *Masculinities* he was a man, but today he/she is a woman. Shaw defended the rights of homosexuals, and there are interesting hints as to his sexual preferences, even though there is no evidence that he was a homosexual himself. Shaw was married, but the marriage is said to have been built on pure comradeship (Drabble 893), and Sally Peters claims that Shaw himself “confided” that the marriage was never consummated, and indicates that by marrying the wealthy Charlotte Payne-Townshend, Shaw found an effective shield against pursuing women (Peters 16). Shaw admired artists such as Michelangelo, Shakespeare and Goethe, who at that time were considered homosexual geniuses (Peters 17). He is also said to have been influenced by the views of the poet Edward Carpenter, who was his friend and who believed that homosexuality was “the source of his genius” (Peters 17).

Secondly, Connell and Shaw seem to have a common view of differences and similarities between men and women. In accordance with most fields of gender science Connell claims that our notion of masculinity and femininity is mostly a social construction and that the differences between men and women are small in comparison with the differences within either sex (*Masculinities* 47). The following quote indicates that Shaw wanted to emphasize and encourage men and women to dare recognize their similarities and be more equal: “All good women are manly and all good men are womanly” (Kane 217). Peters points out that Shaw also challenged the phallogocentric notion of men having the signifying power of gender. Society does not seem to have been ready to fully take in Shaw’s gender equality view, though. This can be illustrated by the fact that one of Shaw’s most famous quotes is still often mutilated. The first half, where Shaw claims that “a woman is really only a man in petticoats” is well-known, whereas the second half that states that “a man is a woman without petticoats” is generally ignored (Peters 19-20).

Thirdly, Shaw and Connell seem to share similar views on war, nationalism and the military. Shaw wrote several pacifist articles, for which he was ostracized by every journal in London (Peters 182), and Connell has written columns and columns about the military, questioning for instance the predominant heroic image of soldiering (e.g. *Masculinities* 213-214).

When applying Connell’s theories on masculinities to the play by Shaw, some interesting patterns are exposed. In accordance with Connell’s statement that hegemonic masculinity is a mobile relation that can be challenged even though changing it is an extremely difficult task for one individual person (*Masculinities* 77, *Gender & Power* 195), I will show that the play contains examples of alternative approaches to masculine norms, some of which are also

successful.

The structure of this essay will be as follows: In the next chapter I will briefly present Connell's and other gender researchers' basic theories on hegemonic masculinities. After that an analysis of the play will follow, and finally a chapter of conclusion.

## **Hegemonic masculinity**

Before we enter further into the field of hegemonic masculinity it may be wise to start with the term "masculinity" in itself. Connell mentions a number of approaches as to how "masculinity" could be defined, e.g. essentialist, positivist and normative approaches. He seems to prefer a semiotic approach himself, which basically means defining masculinity through a system of symbolic difference (*Masculinities* 70). He points out that "masculinity" has no relevance if there is no "femininity". Only by contrasting the two terms can we give them their meaning. In other words, everything that is masculine is not feminine and vice versa. It is not enough just to differentiate between the groups "men" and "women". Most people would agree that some men seem more or less "feminine", and some women "masculine": "The terms 'masculine' and 'feminine' point beyond categorical sex difference to the ways men differ among themselves, and women differ among themselves, in matters of gender" (*Masculinities* 69).

Connell thinks that the semiotic approach has a limited scope, though, and adds that when trying to define masculinity it is important to take into account other kinds of relations as well, e.g. gendered places in production and consumption, places in institutional and natural environments, and places in social and military struggles (*Masculinities* 71).

What is considered masculine has always varied with time and place. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Englishmen of importance should wear wigs that were long, curly and powdered along with lace collars, golden belts and breeches, which is certainly not regarded as typically masculine today. The Pope and many current Arab leaders mark their status by wearing ankle-length dresses, an outfit that would seem exotic and surely not a token of masculinity in a Western boardroom. Thomas J. Gerschick gives another interesting example from Sahara of what ideal masculinity can be. Among Wodabe men physical beauty is considered extremely masculine, and Gerschick describes how adult males compete in a number of beauty pageants with the aim of winning prestigious brides and how families spend a lot of time and money on costumes and jewelry for their young males: "A young man will travel for days to find the right facepaint" (*Handbook* 371). Thus, the terms masculine and feminine are indeed rather loose and changeable. Still, each and every one of us seems to know what is meant by the

terms, and we tend to look upon them as steady and “natural”, not taking into account that our concept of masculinity is Western-oriented and fairly new, a few hundred years at the most (*Masculinities* 68).

Connell’s theory of “hegemonic masculinity” might be helpful when trying to understand why people in general seem to share a common view of the basic characteristics of “masculinity” despite the fact that the concept is apparently very changeable. The term, which has been widely spread and used among other gender researchers, derives from Antonio Gramsci’s analysis of class relations. It describes how social ascendancy is achieved through a play of social forces where the means to reach the top is not connected with force primarily but with complicity and general consent (*Gender & Power* 184). Hegemonic masculinity can be described as a general agreement in a certain society during a certain era upon the ideal masculinity. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (*Masculinities* 77). Hence, the main purpose of hegemonic masculinity seems to be to legitimize gender inequality in a system where women are inferior to men. Hegemonic masculinity has the function of a shield: it protects all men against attacks from women who fight for gender equality. In accordance with the term “masculinity”, hegemonic masculinity is by no means static, and not many men fit into the blueprint of the “ideal” man. Still, hegemonic masculinity affects all men. It works like an aim for every man to strive for, and gives him an ideal image to compare himself with and a context to fit into. Sharon R. Bird, quoted by David L. Collinson and Jeff Hearn, describes hegemonic masculinity as “the norm to which men are held accountable” (*Handbook* 299).

We can easily recognize some of the hegemonic masculinities of our society of today - athletes, businessmen, actors, even fantasy figures (*Masculinities* 77). They are men of some kind of success, which is not necessarily built upon class or economic status, and they make us regard them as examples of our agreed upon idea of what characteristics the ideal man should have. We all take part in the creation of hegemonic masculinity. According to Connell there is a general acceptance of the concept: “hegemony is likely to be established only if there is some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power, collective if not individual” (*Masculinities* 77).

Connell points to two major categories of masculinities that find themselves below the hegemonic masculinity in the hierarchy, namely subordinated men, and complicit men. The most conspicuous group of subordinated men are according to Connell homosexual men, but

he adds that there are also a number of heterosexual men and boys that are subordinated and expelled from the circle of legitimacy. He gives examples of names that these boys are often called: “wimp, milksop, nerd, turkey ... the symbolic blurring with femininity is obvious” (*Masculinities* 79).

Complicit men support the idea of hegemonic masculinity even though they do not live up to the standards of hegemonic masculinity themselves. The main reason why men might support the project is according to Connell that even the men who do not live up to the standards of hegemonic masculinity, i.e. the majority, gain from it: “since they benefit from the patriarchal dividend, the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women” (*Masculinities* 79). There are different ways in which the hegemonic project can be supported without active involvement. Connell mentions cheering football matches on TV (*Masculinities* 79), and I suppose watching action movies and the business news fit into the same slot.

Connell also mentions another important factor within the male hierarchy, and even though he is not satisfied with the label, he has chosen to call it marginalization. Marginalized men are subordinated men, but when using that concept Connell has taken into account other aspects such as class and race, and he points out that marginalization is connected to the authorization of the hegemony of the dominant group (*Masculinities* 80-81).

The hierarchy is not static. It can be challenged, changed and reconstructed, due to the fact that the bases of the dominance of a particular masculinity can be questioned by new groups that seek new solutions. On top of that, “the dominance of any group of men may be challenged by women” (*Masculinities* 77). Connell adds, though, that it is not easy for an individual man to challenge and try to redefine hegemonic masculinity. There are so many factors in play at once, and the personal cost is often high (*Gender & Power* 195). Real change requires “a gendered counter-sexist politics for men who reject hegemonic masculinity” (*Masculinities* 142). Since most men actually benefit from the gender inequality that hegemonic masculinity promotes, the incentives must be something other than collective male interest (*Gender & Power* 276). Historically there have been a small number of successful male challengers of masculine ideals whose arguments have been based upon humanitarian reasons rather than sheer egoism. Connell mentions the Spanish priest Bartolomé de las Casas, who in the 16<sup>th</sup> century revealed the atrocities committed by the conquistadors in Latin America, which according to Connell was the first extended critique of an emerging gender form (*Masculinities* 187). As mentioned above, Shaw also criticized masculinity as expressed in military warfare, and he is a clear-cut example of the personal

cost that such criticism may imply.

In the next chapter I will explore different types of masculinities in *Arms and the Man*. I will discuss the male characters in the play and try to place them within the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity, and doing that I will focus especially on the effects that nationalism and warfare have on the views of hegemonic masculinity that are displayed in the play. I will also look for attempts to challenge the masculine hierarchy and also analyze the outcome of those challenges.

## ***Arms and the Man***

### **Plot summary**

One late night at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Raina Petkoff, the daughter of Bulgarian Major Paul Petkoff, gets an unexpected visitor who climbs into her bedroom and presents himself as Captain Bluntschli. He is a Swiss mercenary soldier fighting for the Serbian army, and now he seeks refuge from the Bulgarian troops. Despite the fact that Bluntschli fights for the enemy forces Raina feels sorry for him and helps him hide in her bedroom for a couple of hours before he is off again. Raina and Bluntschli meet again when the Bulgarian-Serbian war is over, and it turns out that Major Petkoff and Raina's fiancé Sergius Saranoff have met and made friends with Captain Bluntschli during the war. It does not take long until it is obvious that Raina and Captain Bluntschli are in love with each other and that the feelings between Raina and Sergius have been built on hypocrisy and false ideals. A number of hilarious complications and vehement arguments follow, and eventually Bluntschli and Raina end up being betrothed to each other, whereas Sergius, whose main goal in life has always been to reach the top of society, finally gives in to his feelings for the servant Louka and asks her to be his wife.

### **The display of soldiering, nationalism and masculinity in the play**

As the title indicates the military is central in this comedy, and since several researchers emphasize the intimate relationship between the military, nationalism and the construction of masculine ideals, an analysis of the interaction between the male characters of the play, three of whom are also soldiers, seems highly relevant. Connell describes the connection between masculinity and the military as follows: "no arena has been more important for the definition of hegemonic masculinity in European/American culture" (*Masculinities* 213). Michael Kimmel writes: "All wars... are meditations on masculinity" (Adams and Coltrane, *Handbook* 239). Joan Nagel argues that nationalism and militarism go hand in hand, and does not think it is surprising that the culture and ideology of hegemonic masculinity correspond



with military and nationalist values since the military and most other state institutions have traditionally been dominated by men (*Handbook* 400-01). Paul Higate and John Hopton argue along similar lines, claiming that it is surprising that the masculine aspect of the military has generally been overlooked in gender studies (*Handbook* 432). They also describe a historical reciprocal relationship between militarism and masculinity, where politicians have idealized the masculinity represented by risk-taking and valiant soldiers. They explain that the idealization is necessary if a state wants to secure the recruitment of young men to the army and find public support for the use of violence against other nations (*Handbook* 434-35).

One way to idealize warfare is to give soldiers hero status. In *Arms and the Man*, however, where the idealized image of the military is a central theme, the playwright questions and mocks the whole concept of heroic soldiers. Battles are won thanks to sheer luck and not as the result of military skills; the courage of the soldiers, “the courage to rape and kill”, is described as equivalent to the courage of a bullterrier; and the ironic approach to the romantic image of the military hero is obvious, for instance in Sergius’s description of the battlefield, where the soldiers “slashed and cursed and yelled like heroes” (act II, 66).

The play also illustrates what Connell argues about the false image of “crusading heroism” in battle, according to which soldiers do everything possible in order to reduce the number of enemy combatants. Connell refers to research that claims that soldiers often operate a “live and let live” system with tacit agreements, the purpose of which is to limit violence (*Masculinities* 213-214). Such agreements between enemy forces are mentioned in the play, and that was also how Petkoff and Sergius met Captain Bluntschli. After the war Petkoff and Sergius describe how they traded horses and exchanged prisoners with the enemy in a businesslike way. Sergius even describes Bluntschli as “a commercial traveller in uniform” (act II, 36). Apparently, violence was sometimes replaced with negotiations and deals.

As mentioned above, Shaw was severely criticized and even ostracized due to the pacifist views that he published just before the outbreak of World War I, and according to Higate and Hopton many other war resisters of that time were given similar treatment (*Handbook* 434). *Arms and the Man* was written 20 years before World War I, however, which might explain the warm welcome it received, and it is difficult to establish what would have been the reaction had the play had its opening night in 1914 instead. It might have met the same fate as *O’ Flaherty: A Recruiting Pamphlet*, also that a play by Shaw that criticized war. The play, in which Shaw criticizes the English recruitment of Irish soldiers, was meant to have its first performance in 1915, but the production was withdrawn due to fear of riots (Mitchenson).

Warfare is generally considered men’s business, but in *Arms and the Man* there are several

examples that correspond with Joan Nagel's theory that women often contribute to the idolatry of men at war and also encourage them to enlist (*Handbook* 402). One example of this is when the main female character, Raina, who often refers to her fiancé, Major Sergius Saranoff, as a hero, gets to know that Sergius is really a miserable military leader, whose rash and foolish commandment almost had his whole regiment killed. Instead of changing her view of him when she hears about his stupid behaviour in battle she shows signs of wounded personal pride and kisses his portrait, thus proving that she is still supporting him (act I, 19-20). Furthermore, Raina's mother, who is also a dedicated worshipper of the military, turns a deaf ear when Sergius himself admits that he is ashamed of the way his troops won the last battle against the Russians. Instead of listening to his confession she hints that she will contribute to his promotion: "The women are on your side" (act II, 34). The image she has created of him is obviously more important than the truth. In addition, both Raina and her mother are very proud of the fact that Paul Petkoff, their father and husband respectively, is a military. They do not even seem to reflect upon the risks battle implies for their closest family member but merely focus on the glamorous side to soldiering, and the prestige connected with military status. This will be discussed more in detail below.

## **The characters**

### **Placing the four male characters within the masculine hierarchy**

There are four male characters in the play, and there seems to exist a quite clear and well-defined hierarchy for three of them, whereas the fourth character is not as easily placed. At the top of the hierarchy is Paul Petkoff, whose family is "the richest and best known in the country" (act I, 22) according to his daughter Raina, and who, due to his high status in society, has been ranked major in the Bulgarian-Serbian war. In the middle of the hierarchy we find Raina's fiancé Sergius Saranoff, also he a major, with ambitions to reach the rank of major-general. At the bottom of the hierarchy is Nicola, who does everything to be the perfect servant, and whose recipe for reaching one's goals is to "know your place" (act III, 64). Trying to place the fourth character, Captain Bluntschli, on the hierarchical ladder is not as easily done, since he seems to move rather freely within the hierarchy and refuses to depend on rituals or norms in order to prove his values as a masculine human being. Further on in this essay I will argue that even though Paul Petkoff is the most prominent and powerful man, Bluntschli finally turns out to be the representative of hegemonic masculinity of the play.

### **Paul Petkoff, not a very dedicated soldier**

Almost immediately we understand that Major Petkoff's military rank has nothing to do with him being a dedicated or heroic soldier, and he seems to look upon the war as an obligation and also as a role play in which he feels compelled to take part. The rank of major was "thrust on him as a man of consequence in his town"(act II, 29). He is described to have been pulled through the war thanks to the "plucky patriotism" that the war aroused in all the Bulgarians, but now that the war is over he is very happy to be home again (act II, 29). Major Petkoff exemplifies Joane Nagel's above-mentioned statement that nationalism/militarism and masculinity are deeply connected and that a real man is expected to defend his country and his family. Nagel uses an interesting metaphor from the Odyssey when she describes the compelling impact that patriotism has on masculinity: "Patriotism is a siren call few men can resist, particularly in the midst of a political crisis; if they do, they risk the disdain or worse of their communities and families" (*Handbook* 402).

Paul Petkoff's situation illustrates what Nagel states about women often contributing to strengthening the connection between patriotism and masculinity (*Handbook* 402). We do not know why Paul Petkoff is such an important man in his town, but it is obviously his military rank, and not his status in civil society, that makes his wife and daughter the most proud of him. Raina refers to him as "Major", and brags about him being "fighting for his country", and holding "the highest command of any Bulgarian in our army" (act II, 23). Catherine Petkoff is obviously more concerned about her husband's status and influence as a major than she is about his health and well-being. When Paul Petkoff comes home from the war she does not seem overjoyed by the fact that he is safe and sound. Instead she expresses great disappointment when he tells her that the war is over, and she seems to greatly overestimate his authorities as a major. "Have you let the Austrians force you to make peace?" is one of the first questions she asks him when he returns from the war, to which Major Petkoff replies that he was not even consulted. When he asks her what she thinks he could have done she declares that she would have annexed Serbia and made Prince Alexander Emperor of the Balkans. At this stage Major Petkoff seems to give up. He joins the role play and takes on the part of the hero. Instead of explaining how little he could have done to influence the peace process he replies: "I don't doubt it in the least, my dear. But I should have had to subdue the whole Austrian Empire first; and that would have kept me too long away from you. I missed you greatly" (act II, 30-31).

It is obvious that Paul Petkoff does not at all mind his wife interfering in his military business, and that might be a token of him feeling quite comfortable in his masculinity. When

he is off to give orders to his cavalry regiments he even asks Catherine to go with him: “They’ll be far more frightened of you than of me” (act III, 56). The fact that Paul Petkoff so willingly accepts his wife’s interference in his warfare activities could be related to what Oystein Holter argues about the connection between the amount of power that men execute over their women and the degree to which the same men feel contented about the amount of power that they have in relation to other men (*Handbook* 22-23). Major Petkoff does not seem to feel the need to control his wife, which might indicate that he feels secure in his masculine position. In the play Petkoff is described as “unambitious”, which I interpret as equivalent to comfortable with the actual situation, contented with the current amount of personal power. Major Petkoff does not seem the least worried about losing in power or status, his attitude towards masculinity seems very relaxed. This might also be the reason why he has no problem letting the orders to his cavalry regiments be formulated by his former enemy, who additionally is below him in rank, an event that will be discussed in more detail later in this essay. There is one scene that shows that there are limits even to Paul Petkoff’s willingness to let the hierarchy dissolve, however, and that has to do with his servant, Nicola. Major Petkoff notices that Nicola is suddenly acting very strangely and arbitrarily. Here he really makes it clear who is the master and who is the servant: “Scoundrel. He’s got out of hand while I was away. I’ll teach him” (act II, 50).

### **Sergius Saranoff, the compliant but frustrated climber**

Sergius Saranoff, the fiancé of Paul Petkoff’s daughter Raina, and also he a major, is the clearest example of a male character that openly, but also rather vainly, struggles to ascend within the masculine hierarchy. Apart from the servant, Nicola, he is the only male character whom the playwright consistently refers to by using his first name, which I interpret as an indication that he will never be a man of rank or importance.

At first sight Sergius seems to be the perfect hero and a clear cut example of hegemonic masculinity, but gradually that picture crackles. Our first encounter with him takes place at the very beginning of the play, where his portrait is described. Raina has a photo of him in her bedroom, and the playwright describes him as “an extremely handsome officer, whose lofty bearing and magnetic glance can be felt even from the portrait” (act I, 7). Kane points to the fact that at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century male beauty, derived from the rediscovery of the sculpture of Hellenic antiquity, had been given an important role in the national ideal (Kane 113), and Gerschick mentions body normativity as a means to reach a more privileged position in the masculine stratification order (*Handbook* 372). Sergius’s good looks seem to fit perfectly into the blueprint of hegemonic masculinity. When he appears for the first time in

person in the play, Shaw gives a long, detailed description of him. The first half of the description indicates that Sergius is an ideal exemplar of the masculine sex:

Major Sergius Saranoff, the original of the portrait in Raina's room, is a tall, romantically handsome man, with the physical hardihood, the high spirit, and the susceptible imagination of an untamed mountaineer chieftain. But his remarkable personal distinction is of a characteristically civilized type. (act II, 33)

The second half of the description, however, undercuts this image, suggesting that Sergius might not be a role model but a rather unhappy and ludicrous figure. The following excerpt illustrates this:

By his brooding on the perpetual failure, not only of others, but of himself, to live up to his imaginative ideals, his consequent cynical scorn for humanity, the jejune credulity as to the absolute validity of his ideals and the unworthiness of the world in disregarding them, his wincings and mockeries under the sting of the petty disillusion which every hour spent among men brings to his infallibly quick observation, he has acquired the half tragic, half ironic air, the mysterious moodiness, the suggestion of a strange and terrible history that has left him nothing but undying remorse (act II, 33).

The description indicates that there is a discrepancy between what Sergius is and what he wants to be. He tries hard to live up to the ideals that he has set for himself, but the result is rather tragicomic.

Sergius exemplifies what Connell refers to as complicit, or conservative, masculinity (*Gender & Power* 110), since he complies with most of the rules of male hierarchy and tries to ascend playing according to those rules. He is very opportunistic and does everything possible in order to reach the top of the hierarchical ladder, from joining the army to betrothing himself to Major Petkoff's daughter Raina. He really seems to enjoy Raina's heroic view of him, and he compares his time in battle with a tournament where he was the knight inspired by his on-looking lady. Since Raina wholeheartedly contributes to the image of heroic soldiers, she expresses her deepest admiration for him and his deeds, exclaiming, "My hero! My king!" In her eyes his actions on the battlefield make him "worthy of any woman in the world" (act II, 38).

Since neither his dedication as a soldier nor his love for Raina is sincere, Sergius is deeply frustrated when he realizes that he will not be promoted. He persistently asks Major Petkoff to contribute to his promotion, but Major Petkoff seems to have seen through his charming façade and treats him rather reservedly. Catherine Petkoff, whose admiration for heroes and soldiers is great, adores Sergius, however, and she tries to persuade her husband into promoting him: "He certainly ought to be promoted when he marries Raina". Paul Petkoff

then replies, referring to Sergius's disastrous qualities of leadership in battle: "Yes, so that he could throw away whole brigades instead of regiments. It's no use my dear: he has not the slightest chance of promotion until we are quite sure that the peace will be a lasting one" (act II, 32).

Sergius's major frustration seems to be his inability to figure out how to be successful in the social hierarchy. He tries to do everything right, but it is as if he were climbing a hill of glass. He can't get a grip, however hard he tries. Instead of being treated with the respect he strives after, he is met with derision by the other male characters. He is a victim of hegemonic masculinity, the very system that he himself advocates and tries to fit into. He reacts to this exclaiming: "Mockery, mockery everywhere: everything I think is mocked by everything I do. Coward, liar, fool. Shall I kill myself like a man, or live and pretend to laugh at myself?" (act III, 67).

Sergius's identity crisis is obvious, and he finds himself grappling with six different identities, i.e. "the apostle of the higher love", "a hero", "a buffoon", "a humbug", "a bit of a blackguard", and "a coward." He expresses that those six identities keep popping in and out of what he refers to as his "handsome figure", and that he is constantly tormented by the question of which of the six is the real man (act II, 40-41).

One reason why Sergius expresses such self-contempt is the fact that he is ashamed of the way in which he has succeeded in battle. As stated above, the victory against the Serbian troops, where Captain Bluntschli belonged to the defeated troops, was not won thanks to Sergius's strategic skills in war. On the contrary, Captain Bluntschli compares Sergius's performance in that battle to that of Don Quixote's against the windmill: "Of all the fools ever let loose on a field of battle, that man must be the very maddest" (act I, 19). The only reason why Sergius's troops won the battle was that the Serbian troops had been supplied with the wrong kind of cartridges, which left them completely without ammunition. Sergius is very well aware of the fact that he has won at least two battles on unfair grounds, and that torments him greatly.

The only character to whom Sergius dares openly express his inner frustration is the Petkoff's housemaid Louka, whom he is also flirting with behind Raina's back. The fact that Louka is below Sergius in class might be one important reason why he dares be honest to her. Louka listens patiently to his confessions, but in return Sergius treats her disrespectfully, touching her roughly and without asking permission, uttering denigrating and possessive phrases like: "you are an abominable little clod of common clay, with the soul of a servant", "I will kill the Swiss; and afterwards I will do as I please with you", and: "Remember: you

belong to me” (act II, 42, act III, 67).

Sergius’s behavior is in line with the above discussion on how the power that men execute over their women can be connected to their contentment concerning the amount of power in relation to other men. Sergius likes to imagine himself a man of high status, and the disdain he expresses for Louka may stem from fear of being dragged down into the abyss of the lower classes and become what Connell refers to as marginalized (*Masculinities* 80-81).

It is easy to dislike a character like Sergius, but as can be concluded by the above quotes concerning his identity crisis, he suffers great hardships discovering that all that is important to him, i.e. status, heroism and honor, is collapsing around him. But in the end his crisis leads to remarkable personal progress. He gradually changes his course and his ideals, to a great extent thanks to Captain Bluntschli, who will be described in more detail below. Bluntschli is an eye-opener to Sergius, and it is because of him that Sergius questions the hero-military concept as such and utters comments on soldiering such as the following: “the coward’s art of attacking mercilessly when you are strong, and keeping out of harm’s way when you are weak. That is the whole secret of successful fighting. Get your enemy at a disadvantage; and never, on any account, fight him on equal terms” (act II, 35).

One of the most important steps that Sergius finally takes is to openly recognize his love for Louka, in spite of her lower status. Since honor and heroism are important concepts to Sergius, his decision to marry Louka might very well be related to her challenging him, accusing him of lacking courage. She exclaims:

If I loved you, though you would be as far beneath me as I am beneath you, I would dare to be the equal of my inferior. Would you dare so much if you loved me? No: if you felt the beginnings of love for me you would not let it grow. You dare not; you would marry a rich man’s daughter because you would be afraid of what other people would say of you. (act III, 66)

Whether it is Louka’s speech or the fact that Sergius realizes that his fiancée Raina is in love with Bluntschli, or his general transformation as such that has the greatest impact on his decision is difficult to establish. He takes the step, however, and the “new” Sergius finds himself in a situation different from his former frustrating existence of vain efforts to ascend in the masculine hierarchy. Instead he can recognize his true feelings and is free to live a comfortable life with the woman he really loves.

### **Nicola, loyal and ambitious**

The third male character, the servant Nicola, seems very loyal at first, but his ambitions soon shine through. The purpose of his loyalty towards the class above him is to get privileges and finally have enough capital to start his own business. Nicola acts in analogy with Oystein

Holter's interpretation of the rules of patriarchy: "Submit to your master and you yourself will be a master" (*Handbook* 23).

Nicola is an example of what Connell would probably describe as subordinated, or even marginalized, masculinity. He is simply the servant; nobody ever takes interest in his wishes or asks for his opinion, his task is merely to please and attend to his masters. Nicola does not seem to mind, however. He is willing to be bullied about in order to reach his further goals and does not seem to be the least bothered by the fact that he on a number of occasions has to play the part of the fool, in order to prevent Major Petkoff from discovering what has been going on between Raina and Captain Bluntschli. On the contrary, he takes on that part with dignity, since he thinks that he will benefit from it in the end. Thus, Nicola tries to ascend within the masculine hierarchy using his servile talents instead of taking part in the nationalist/military project or using any other conventional method. One way of doing this is to take advantage of the fact that it is easy to get an extra tip from men who prove their masculinity by showing their money off: "See! A twenty leva bill! Sergius gave me that out of pure swagger. A fool and his money are soon parted" (act III, 63).

Nicola is even willing to give up his girlfriend Louka to Sergius, since he realizes that a marriage between Louka and Sergius might turn out to be highly profitable for him. As the wife of Sergius, Louka might become one of Nicola's best customers, "instead of only being my wife and costing me money" (act III, 64). We do not know whether Nicola finally reaches his goal and opens his own shop, but judging by his last line in the play he is obviously very contented with the fact that his former fiancée Louka is actually going to marry above her social position: "I look forward to her custom and recommendation should she marry into the nobility" (act III, 77).

### **Bluntschli, challenger and hegemonic masculinity incarnated**

The main cause of the changes and the progress that the three male characters mentioned above experience is the fourth character, Captain Bluntschli, who manages to reach the status of ideal masculinity and challenge the concept of hegemonic masculinity at the same time. He comes from the periphery and climbs straight to the top, and the way he does that is amazing and sometimes bewildering. He acts as if there were no obstacles in terms of conventions or social stratification and seems to be perfectly at ease while interacting with the other characters, male and female. This may also be one important factor in his successful ascendance. He does not pretend to be what he is not, and what he actually is makes the rest of the characters respect and admire him.

At first sight, Bluntschli does not seem to have the proper attributes to be put above any of



the other male characters in the play. When we first meet him he is on the run and has broken into Raina's bedroom when Raina herself has gone to bed. The Serbian army, to which Bluntschli belongs, has lost a humiliating battle against the Bulgarian troops, led by Raina's fiancé Sergius, and a number of Bulgarian soldiers are now trying to locate Bluntschli. Bluntschli is "in a deplorable plight" (act I, 12). Apart from being very dirty and dressed in a ragged uniform, he almost immediately reveals his weakness to Raina, describing himself as "as nervous as a mouse", and when she scolds him he almost starts to cry (act I, 17). His, in Raina's view, childish taste for chocolate and fear of heights (act I, 17, 21) and his vulnerability crown the picture of a man very far from the standards of normative masculinity of that time, which included characteristics such as courage, adventurousness and sangfroid (Nagel, *Handbook* 400). On top of that, it turns out that Bluntschli is not at war for patriotic reasons at all, yet another fact that speaks against his potential image as an ideal man. He is a professional soldier from Switzerland, fighting for a country that is not his own. Thus, he does not look upon soldiering as a heroic sacrifice primarily, but just as a means to earn a living. He does not try to embellish the reasons why his choice fell on the Serbian army, but explains bluntly: "because it was nearest to me" (act I, 16). It doesn't take long until Raina, who at first panicked at the armed soldier that broke into her room, feels sorry for him and starts to comfort him, giving him the not very heroic pet name "chocolate cream soldier" (act I, 21). Instead of dismissing him as an unmanly representative of the enemy forces, she asks her mother to help her hide him, and when he falls asleep on her bed and her mother tries to wake him up, Raina says, much to her mother's consternation: "the poor dear is worn out. Let him sleep" (act I, 26).

From the very beginning, however, Shaw also indicates that Bluntschli is a contradictory and interesting character that may turn out to be of great importance for the plot of the play. Firstly, despite his ragged clothes and desperate situation, small details let on that he is a man of class. He casually mentions to Raina that his father "keeps six hotels", and when he refuses to shake hands with Raina, due to the fact that he doesn't consider his hands clean enough, Raina instantly concludes that he is a gentleman (act I, 24). Secondly, the playwright has chosen to describe Bluntschli's physical appearance in a way that makes the reader understand that this is an intelligent character who is not easily subdued. He has an "obstinate looking head", "clear quick blue eyes", "energetic manner", and his "prosaic" nose is said to resemble that of a "strong-minded baby". Thirdly, even in the first scene there is a strong indication that Bluntschli will challenge the conventional masculine hierarchy, since he expresses a disdainful attitude towards the organization that is considered the crown of heroic

masculinity, the military: “Remember: nine soldiers out of ten are born fools” (act I, 14). Finally, the playwright soon makes it clear that Bluntschli actually does possess several of the traditionally masculine characteristics mentioned by Joane Nagel, Michele Adams and Scott Coltrane, for instance stoicism, discipline, dignity, independence and control (*Handbook* 233, 400). In spite of his desperate situation, he has “all his wits with him” and he is calm enough to try to estimate Raina’s age, social position, character and to get a picture of how frightened she is (act I, 12). And even though he admits to Raina that he is indeed very scared, he also tells her that he will “fight like a demon” if she lets the soldiers find him, since he will not let them get him into the street to amuse themselves with (act I, 13-14).

Further on in the play we realize that Bluntschli’s intelligence is his major asset and also the main reason why the rest of the male characters admire him and jointly make way for him to pass them in the hierarchy. Somehow he even manages to make friends with Petkoff and Sergius after having audaciously cheated them twice during the war, first in horse-dealing and then in an exchange matter. Petkoff describes how that happened: “He cheated us - humbugging us into giving him fifty able bodied men for two hundred confounded worn out chargers” (act II, 36). Sergius adds: “We were two children in the hands of that consummate soldier, Major: simply two innocent little children” (act II, 36). When Sergius and Petkoff describe how humiliatingly they were fooled by Bluntschli, they do that with obvious awe.

Captain Bluntschli does not seem to care the least for violent rituals to prove his masculinity, but the reason why is not that he lacks the ability to perform them well. One example of this is Sergius’s attempt to restore his own dignity after having understood that he is losing his fiancée Raina to the captain. He vainly challenges Bluntschli in a ceremony that was considered closely connected to masculinity during the era when the play takes place – a duel. According to the historian Robert Nye duels increased in popularity among the bourgeois men at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and had great importance as a symbolic definition of masculinity through violence (*Masculinities* 192). Bluntschli, however, effectively takes the wind out of Sergius’s attempt to avenge the humiliation he considers himself to have suffered. When Sergius says: “At six o’ clock I shall be in the drilling-ground on the Klissoura road alone, on horseback, with my sabre. Do you understand?” Bluntschli replies in a witty and disrespectful way: “Oh, thank you: that’s a cavalry man’s proposal. I’m in the artillery; and I have the choice of weapons. If I go, I shall take a machine gun. And there shall be no mistake about the cartridges this time” (act III, 68). No duel takes place, partly because Bluntschli, who reveals to Raina that he used to be a sword instructor, says that he does not want to hurt Sergius. By rejecting the duel Bluntschli shows that he strongly

disapproves of unnecessary violence, not because he is afraid but because he does not feel the need to prove his masculinity taking part in violent rituals: “I am a professional soldier. I fight when I have to, and am very glad to get out of it when I haven’t to. You’re only an amateur: you think fighting’s an amusement” (act III, 71). The message from Bluntschli to Sergius is clear: glamorizing violence is immature, and there is no connection whatsoever between masculinity and bloodshed.

A clear example of Bluntschli ascending within the hierarchical context of the play much thanks to his intellect is the scene where Petkoff and Sergius ask him to help them with a military strategic matter, which they are not able to handle themselves. They trust him completely in this business, despite the fact that they were just recently bitter enemies, and despite Major Petkoff’s statement earlier in the play, where he commented on the incidents with the horse-dealing and useless cartridges: “I’ll never trust a Swiss again” (act II, 36). It is obvious that Bluntschli’s brains are also a source of envy, and also of a sense of inferiority, at least for Sergius:

Bluntschli is hard at work, with a couple of maps before him, writing orders. At the head of it sits Sergius, who is supposed to be at work, but who is actually gnawing a feather of a pen, and contemplating Bluntschli’s quick, sure, businesslike progress with a mixture of envious irritation at his own incapacity, and awestruck wonder at an ability which seems to him almost miraculous, though its prosaic character forbids him to esteem it. (act III, 52)

Petkoff, however, does not seem to feel the least threatened by Bluntschli’s capacity, and the reason why might very well be related to him feeling secure in his position. When Bluntschli declares that one signature, Sergius’s, will be enough on the documents where Bluntschli has written orders to Petkoff’s own troops, Petkoff seems slightly envious, but without protests he accepts what Bluntschli says. When it is time for Sergius to go away and give the orders written by Bluntschli to the troops, Bluntschli says furtively to Petkoff: “Just see that he talks to them properly, Major, will you” (act III, 56). It is apparent that Bluntschli, who has just arrived at the house, who used to fight for the enemy and who certainly has no military or social ranking to lean on in order to position himself at the top of the hierarchical ladder, has turned into a leader, giving orders to the other men.

Bluntschli does possess many of the traditionally masculine characteristics, but it is obviously not by using them that he reaches the top of the ladder. He is strong, well built, an incredible soldier (act II, 36) and Sergius even describes him as “a machine” (act III, 71). On top of all that he inherits a lot of money at the end of the play, which makes him economically powerful as well. But one of the main reasons why he gains respect seems to be that he actually rejects many traditional masculine values, or at least he does not want to display

them.

Connell points out that hegemonic masculinity is constructed in interaction and that it is built upon consent, where men collaborate in agreeing on and sustaining the image of the ideal man (*Gender & Power* 185, *Masculinities* 35). The reason why Bluntschli represents the ideal male character in *Arms and the Man* is that Petkoff and Sergius agree to give him that status. They have given up their urge to compete with him, since they realize that trying to beat him would be futile. They stand in complete awe of him, and that is illustrated by Sergius's final line, which is also the closing line of the play. When Bluntschli is off to settle some private business, Sergius exclaims: "What a man! What a man!" (act III, 83).

## **Conclusion**

Applying R W Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity to this comedy by G B Shaw has been a thrilling task, and it has worked even better than I hoped. As I suspected at the outset, the playwright and the gender researcher have a lot in common, and I am quite sure that they would have had a lot to talk about, had they been contemporary. It is fascinating that Shaw, who wrote *Arms and the Man* more than a century ago, managed to create a setting where many of the traditionally masculine conventions and actions are so well displayed and also challenged and trifled with, and that the pattern thus revealed can be explained using terminology from such a new, and still controversial, field of science as masculinity research.

*Arms and the Man* is considered to be a satire on love, war and heroism, but, as I have demonstrated, it can also be considered a poignant critique of the notion of hegemonic masculinity as such. My interpretation of the play is that one of the things that Shaw wanted to convey was a message that there are alternative ways for men to gain respect and be considered highly masculine than through violence, economic power and oppression. Captain Bluntschli is the perfect example of a strong and skillful man who could have reached power and status through violent, economic and oppressive methods if he had chosen to do so, but he actively rejects such means to prove his masculinity. He manages to reach the top of the hierarchy by challenging and reconstructing the whole concept of hegemonic masculinity and displaying alternative masculine ideals.

Connell emphasizes that hegemonic masculinity is primarily built upon consent and not on force, and it is obvious that Major Petkoff, and finally also Sergius, jointly praise Captain Bluntschli's masculine abilities, and that they admire him, not because they find him strong and terrifying but because he is intelligent, genuine and frank. Despite the fact that he cheated them during the war and that he was their enemy just recently, they consider him trustworthy

enough to take full responsibility of the withdrawal of the Bulgarian troops. This proves that he has convinced them that war is a dirty game that entices men to do shameful things that they would never do in civilian life. Away from the battlefield Bluntschli is honest and reliable, and that is one of the reasons that the other male characters give him such high status.

Captain Bluntschli's alternative way to perform masculinity does not only arouse admiration and respect from the other male characters, it also leads to the liberation of Sergius's true self. During the play Sergius goes through a painful crisis, claiming that he grapples with six different identities, most of which he apparently despises. Bluntschli then comes to his rescue. He opens Sergius's eyes, making him realize what war really does to men and that violence and heroism are not interlinked. It is also thanks to Bluntschli that Sergius finally dares give in to his true feelings towards the housemaid Louka.

Connell states that individual men that try to challenge hegemonic masculinity may have to pay a high personal price, which Shaw also experienced himself, but *Arms and the Man* transmits hope for those who believe that masculine hierarchies and ideals can be successfully challenged and redefined. Captain Bluntschli is an example of a successful challenger, and during the 118 years that have passed since the opening night of the play he has hopefully inspired many men to dare reject destructive ways of expressing masculinity and recognize the true heroes within themselves.

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