



**Feasey, R. (2023) 'Fop, bounder and post-feminist father: Hugh Grant and the changing face of modern masculinity', *Celebrity Studies*, 14 (1), pp. 66-82.**

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Group in '*Celebrity Studies*' on 03/01/23 available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2022.2159673>

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## **Fop, bounder and post-feminist father: Hugh Grant and the changing face of modern masculinity**

### **Abstract**

Extant research on Hugh Grant's star image routinely combines issues of masculinity, sexuality and national identity. Such work concludes that the stumbling, stammering English gent that he mastered for the character of Charles Thacker in *Four Wedding and a Funeral* (1994) or the dishonorable bounder and morally reprehensible cad that he played so brilliantly in *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) is a perfect fit with the man himself. Either way, this article will consider the ways in which commentators have read and responded to Grant's on-screen performances and off-screen persona in order to open up a dialogue about shifting iterations of masculinity. Grant is routinely at the forefront of changing definitions of modern manhood, shifting from New Man to New Lad before being constructed and circulated as a figure-head of post-feminist fatherhood. In short, Grant stands as a testament to the very fluid, flexible and shifting nature of the hegemonic hierarchy.

**Key Words: Hugh Grant; Post-Millennial Masculinity; Post-Feminist Fatherhood; New Man; New Lad; Hegemonic Hierarchy; Film Stardom**

## Introduction

Hugh John Mungo Grant had made a number of films of various genres, budgets and successes prior to playing Charles Thacker in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), wherein the actor was catapulted to global recognition via his performance as the stuttering singleton of the British romantic comedy. Grant's depiction was so convincing that Hollywood was keen to sign and re-sign Grant in a slew of similarly stammering roles, with a myriad of A-list leading ladies. In these productions Grant routinely played an updated 'British fop - the kind of man who would walk into a room and stumble' but would ultimately 'make at least one person in that room fall in love with him thanks to his sincerity and charm' (Coates 2019).

In his early career, Grant routinely re-played to a stumbling romcom archetype and these screen outings appeared effortless, indeed, they were said to be indistinguishable from his own off-screen persona. There was a tendency in review media to not simply cement Grant's status as an actor capable of *playing* the leading man of the contemporary romantic genre, but to entice interested and invested audiences with the promise that Grant *was* the anxious, inept, bumbling, bungling and insecure figure on and off-screen (Krizanovich 2003, Logan 1999). This long-standing association with the romantic comedy genre left Grant struggling for both screen legitimacy and masculine authority (Benedict 2003, Krizanovich 2003).

Although Grant's name was synonymous with the romantic comedy, his roles transitioned from 'self-effacing, shy, stuttering, apologetic and hapless chap[s]' (Ebert 1995) to bounders and cads in need of redemption in a number of 'cold-hearted redemption plots' (Rubinfeld 2001). In romantic comedies such as *Two Weeks Notice* (2002), *About a Boy* (2002) and *The Rewrite* (2015), we find Grant playing the selfish, hedonistic bachelor before finding a 'good' woman whose love transforms unreconstructed figures into 'complete' men, capable of love (Rubinfeld 2001). We are told that 'the key ingredient in these romantic characters is the implication that these men, through true love, will unleash their tender emotions' (Ritrosky-Winslow 2004). This new iteration of Grant's manhood as a reformed playboy bachelor shifted again as the actor has more recently taken on character roles away from the genre that made him famous, embodying darker characters while committing to a paternal role off-screen. Each shift of energy and emphasis here can be read in relation to changing preferences of modern manhood. With this in

mind, this article will consider the ways in which commentators have read and responded to Grant's on-screen performances and off-screen persona in order to open up a dialogue about shifting iterations of masculinity, paying particular attention to the changing status of commitment, nurturance and domesticity in the hegemonic hierarchy from the 1990s to the present day.

Career longevity is not guaranteed for an A-list performer, nor is critical and/or commercial success in your sixth decade, and as such, Grant's biography makes him rare amongst his contemporaries. What makes him unique, moreover, is his ability to transform his star image across a number of phases at a time when mainstream entertainment media remains keen to cement fixed and narrow star images as a guarantee against loss for big-budget productions. Although fascinating work exists to account for the relationship between film stars and society (Dyer 1986/2004, Klinger 1994, Moseley 2002), much of this work is retrospective, written after both period and performer have passed. Grant offers a potentially unique opportunity to consider the ways in which a contemporary star preempts or exploits cultural trends, with specific reference to the changing face, traits and mannerisms of masculinity. Grant's evolving star persona from the mid-1990s and the height of the post-feminist movement to his present day performances amidst a more recent fourth wave reminds us that stars are 'never a mere celebrity, but a bundle of media constructed traits that reflect cultural preoccupations' (Klinger 1994, 97-98). Despite the obvious dangers of reading the meaning of stars in such a direct way, there seems to exist a relationship between 'a star's popular meaning and the social function this meaning serves' (Klinger 1994, 97). While stars can be held up as 'social barometres' of specific social and sexual periods, Grant makes visible the construction and circulation of masculinity and helps to disavow the notion of a fixed, stable hegemonic hierarchy.

Grant is a white, Oxbridge educated, heterosexual cis male, and as such, his privileged position in patriarchal society was relatively assured. And yet, it is important that we understand the different iterations of masculinity that Grant, and by extension, men in society, have embodied in order to make sense of and find mastery over their environment. Grant played to the floppy haired fop, seemingly picking up on iterations of sensitive New Men throughout the 1990s, in films such as *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), *Nine Months*

(1995) and *Notting Hill* (1999). The shift from fop to cad, shirking emotional connectedness and the connotations of the New Man in favour of the New Lad, is evident from the turn of the millennium in films such as *Bridget Jones' Diary* (2001), *About a Boy* (2002), *Two Weeks Notice*, *Edge of Reason* (2004), *American Dreamz* (2006), *Music and Lyrics* (2007) and *The Rewrite* (2014). This spikier cold-hearted phase crossed over with off-screen fatherhood, although? new paternal role did little to initially distract Grant from playing the cad about town. In 2009, two years before becoming a father, Grant informed *Parade* magazine that 'I have so many nephews and nieces and cousins and godchildren, I like the thought (of kids), but that's on the basis that I can leave after 10 minutes' (Green 2009). Even after the birth of his daughter in 2012, he admitted that her arrival did little to change his life. Michelle Andrews of *Mamamia* commented that the actor bought the mother of his first born a 'million-dollar home, and quietly nestled back into his warm, well-carved out shell' (2020). In 2015, after the birth of three additional offsprings, we were told that while 'he is enjoying being a family man, Grant admitted to *Us* that he does not see himself taking on the title of husband any time soon' (Jim McKenzie 2015). It was not until 2018, around the time that Grant was reciting his marriage vows, the He For She campaign was gaining attention, the hashtag #MeToo had gone viral and the Gillette brand had released its corporate social responsibility advertising campaign asking men to be the best they could be, that a softer and more nurturing and indeed selfless Grant appeared in our news feeds. By championing the role of father and husband, friend and ally, Grant successfully quashed any earlier negativity surrounding the domestic arena (Barr 2019). By stating that becoming a father 'was the nicest thing that's ever happened to me ... Suddenly you love someone more than yourself. It's unheard of in my case and they love you and it's all enchanting' (Hargrave 2020, Laudadio 2019), Grant looks to be exploiting the 'sensitive, emotionally aware ...' New Man (Gill 2003, p. 37).

### **Stuck on/stuck with a star image: bemused fop, romantic comedy and the new man**

Richard Dyer's (1979) foundational work on film stardom made the point that a star image is not merely made up of a set of film roles, even those that play to genre and type, but rather that a star image is constructed through a potentially conflating and conflicting set of images, voices and appearances that span film roles, publicity, promotion and broader criticisms and commentaries (Dyer 1979/2004, Dyer 1986/2004, McLean 2004). Indeed, a consideration of extra textual

materials that surround a media text, or what Martin Barker refers to as ‘ancillary materials’ (Klinger 1994, Barker 2004, Austin 2002, Gray 2010), is an important part of any film star image due to the fact that media texts are not experienced in isolation from cultural commentaries or popular debates. Rather, they are consumed amongst a myriad of wider entertainment titles, information channels and networks.

Since the mid-1990s, and on the back of Grant’s international success as the foppish Charles Thacker, news, reviews and other ancillary materials have encouraged audiences to read and respond to Grant as if he himself rather than his performances were situated as hapless, apologetic romantic leads. We are asked to believe that Grant was not merely playing to type, but was, in the manner of personification (King 1998), playing himself in the genre and role that secured his Hollywood credentials. *Empire* echoed a myriad of criticisms and commentaries when the magazine reduced Grant’s craft to portraying de-sexualised characters that, ‘girls would like to take home to meet their mum’ (cited Feasey 2004). Grant was being presented to an adoring audience as the ‘perfect fit’ between not just role and star (Dyer 1979/2004), but in this instance, role, actor and foppish archetype (Feasey 2004). Since the outset of his stint in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, media discourses have looked to intertwine Grant’s on and off-screen identity, making reference to the character and/or mannerisms and traits of the bumbling Thacker, irrespective of role or off-screen appearance. Even in relation to Grant’s biography, commentators are heard asking the actor to keep the ‘bumbling, cod-roué screen shtick going for a little longer’ (Langley 2014). The entertainment arena and accompanying audiences have sought to narrowcast Grant in the role of the dithering romantic comedy hero. *Vogue* magazine refers to a stammering Thacker as the ‘prototype for every single notable role’ that Grant performed since *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Maitland 2020), while the actor acknowledges that he ‘repeated’ the Thacker role ‘about 17 times in a row’ (Osifo 2019). Irrespective of whether audiences warmed to the commitment-shy comedic hero as he awaited his romantic destiny or viewed Grant’s ‘flaccid locks’ to be a ‘grotesque metaphor for the virility of English manhood’ (Goldfarb 2013), the star image remained intertwined with the foppish role and romcom genre.<sup>1</sup>

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In her work on the representation of masculinity in contemporary chick texts, Amy Burns makes the point that romantic comedies tend to construct a very specific iteration of modern masculinity, one that includes attractiveness, broken-heartedness, domesticity and being hopelessly devoted to the heroine. Such traits and mannerisms can be used to align Grant with the New Man, romantic comedy lead and ‘what contemporary women “want”’ (Burns 2011, p. 1). The actor is said to have a ‘monopoly on hapless masculinity’ (Krizanovich 2003) or what Sheila Johnston refers to as ‘wimp power’ (cited Spicer 2004, p. 80), and this particular iteration of manhood was presented in opposition to the hard bodied muscular action heroes that dominate contemporary American action, irrespective of the age of the herculean performers in question (Tasker 1995, Jeffords 2018, Feasey forthcoming). We are reminded that even though screen portrayals of masculinity have routinely ‘been tied up with issues of power [...] that power has not always been represented in bodily terms’ (Luhr cited Rehling 2009, p. 87). From this perspective, John Powers comments that ‘Grant is one of the more feminine [...] leading men of our time’ (2003) concluding that there is a ‘softness [...] that works for him’ (Powers in *Brits Go To Hollywood* 2003). The actor is routinely held up as the nice guy, the sensitive boy next door; the New Man standing in opposition to the unreconstituted male of earlier decades and alternative genres. If as Kimmel suggests, hegemonic masculinity refers to ‘a man in power, a man *with* power, and a man of power’ (Kimmel 2004, p. 184), then Grant’s on and off-screen persona can be seen to negotiate if not outright disavow such machismo.

Grant is said to be possessed of a ‘feminine charm [...] almost innocently attractive to the opposite sex, not least because of his apparent lack of guile, his feminine passivity’ (Potter cited Honess Roe 2009, p. 137), or what Karen Krizanovich refers to as vulnerability (2003). Grant’s long-standing romantic roles are said to have encouraged ‘a generation of emotionally expressive teenagers with floppy long hair and a penchant for grand romantic gestures [...] [t]he type of man who is unafraid to express how he feels, no matter how foolish he might make himself look in the process’, with screenwriter Kumail Nanjiani as just one self-professed example here (Barrishi 2020; MacDonald 2017). Such ‘emotional openness’ we are told was ‘refreshing in an era defined by bullish masculinity’ (Barrishi 2020). Grant then could be read here as the ‘riposte to vilified “old man”, his father, and a refugee from the hardline masculinity epitomized by the paranoid, macho men with stifled emotions’ (Beynon, 2001, p. 100).

At a time when popular commentators were starting to read big star/big screen hegemonic hard bodies as hysterical rather than heroic (Creed 1987), gender roles were in flux and job security in the industrial sector were in decline, the construction and circulation of the New Man, a man framed by ‘vulnerability and emotional sincerity’, was a way of negotiating the charges and challenges of male crisis discourses (Malin 2013, p. 613). The figure in question, constructed through fashion, advertising, retail, style magazines and market research, offered an orchestrated and highly commodified alternative to traditional masculinities and the hegemonic hierarchy (Malin 2013). In order to keep pace and save face within this changing landscape, the New Man, as evidenced in figures ranging from David Beckham on the pitch to Neil Morrissey on the small screen moved away from the industrial sector and the stoic masculinities that informed earlier generations, looking instead to embrace ‘domestic responsibilities and childcare’ (Castella 2014). These emotionally intelligent men were capable of consideration, commitment and consumerism, becoming ‘a new target for fashion companies’ (Gill et al 2003, p. 99). Grant’s long-standing romantic roles can be seen to pick up on broader discourses around the New Man that were circulating during the period. Andrew Rutherford (cited Spicer 2004, p. 83) reads Grant’s New Man as a positive turn away from earlier generations of stoic, physical and competitive masculinity as he was seen to take on a more liberal response to the growing empowerment of contemporary feminists/feminisms, feeling secure that decency and sensitivity will ensure that the nice guy finishes first (Spicer 2004, p. 80; Watson 2001).

### **Sex, scandal and the transformation of a star image**

Although explicit sex has rarely been a component of the Hollywood romantic comedy (Gehring 2002), such sequences are even less likely in a Grant star vehicle because unlike the ‘spectacular’ (Neale 1983/94) and ‘impossible’ (Holmes 2002) bodies of musclebound action figures, Grant’s physique has been described as both ‘unremarkable’ and ‘unthreatening’ (Fouz-Hernández 2005, p. 135). A common anecdote, which has appeared in numerous interviews and articles about the star, speaks about a nude scene that was canceled from *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. The story goes that the director had planned for ‘an explicit showing of Grant flesh’ (Sweeney 2001), that is, until the actor arrived on set and disrobed. When the make-up artist asked if the director wanted definition painted on Grant’s body, the scene was canceled (Kemp 1999). Nancy Miller,



the celebrity correspondent for *Entertainment Weekly*, said it eloquently when she commented that ‘Hugh is probably the most attractive third button actor [...] leave it from the neck up’ (Miller in *Brits Go to Hollywood* 2003). Or, rather less eloquently, film critic John Powers told us that Grant is ‘the sort of actor who might say fuck [...] but not the sort of actor you could ever imagine doing it’ (2003). On those rare occasions when the typical Grant hero did appear in an explicit sequence, the character was seen to be under ‘sexual stress’ (Sweeney 2001) rather than in any state of arousal during the scene in question. In short, Grant was never an action figure or a figure of action, his body did not adhere to stereotypical hard-bodied muscularity, and his foppish fumbling defied the more monosyllabic A-listers of the period. Andrew Spicer (2004, p. 80) remarks that Grant is ‘slightly fey without being gay’ and Ted Allen went as far as to note that Grant was ‘a bit too slight, too proper, to endorse publicity’ (Allen 2007). Indeed, it was his high-profile long-term relationship with Elizabeth Hurley that elevated his off-screen masculinity from the ‘self-satisfied fop’ (Davis 2008) to the acceptable face of modern manhood for men in the audience. Dating one of *FHM*’s top ten sexiest women of the era was a ‘test of status and virility ... a test as old as time’ for men within and beyond the entertainment arena (Allen 2007).

Joshua Gamson (2021, p. 193) makes the point that ‘[r]elationships in the entertainment business are performances’, and Grant and Hurley as no exception here. Irrespective of the authenticity of the *performance*, audience interest in the couple turned to disbelief when Grant paid for oral sex with Divine Brown, revealing a dark underbelly to the ostensibly ‘Mr Nice Guy’ persona. A myriad of news outlets were heard asking, and trying to answer the question ‘why did he do it?’ with explanations ranging from sexual compulsion to questions around innocence, the pressures of fame and male chauvinism (Gamson 2021, p. 192). However, it is that he did it at all that is relevant here. Grant’s now infamous drive down Sunset Strip and subsequent arrest for engaging in an ‘act of lewd conduct’ with Brown (White 2020) during the press junket for *Nine Months* (1995) could have ended many a career, especially that of a male film star routinely cast as the foppish boy next door. However, Gael Sweeney (2001) suggested that the arrest and aftermath merely reaffirmed Grant’s screen image and his off-screen personality as one, due to the fact that his persona was then based on discomfort, humiliation, fear of commitment and sexual awkwardness around strong, sexually assertive women. Although work exists to suggest that Grant’s arrest and the subsequent ancillary materials confounded his socially bumbling and

sexually fumbling on and off-screen persona, there are broader questions raised about the difficulty of maintaining a 'perfect fit' between 'nice' role and 'naughty' star (Gamson 2001, pp. 191-192). I have argued elsewhere (Feasey 2004) that the notorious curb crawling episode transformed Grant's star image from the foppish gent to the sleazy bounder as the incident created an opportunity for the actor to add 'extra depth' to his persona (Spicer 2004, p. 80) and in so doing, establish 'a rhetoric of authenticity' between his on and off-screen image (Dyer 1998).

To suggest that the 'real' and 'reel' Grant were one and the same would demand that the actor himself offered review media a series of extra filmic anecdotes and biographical tidbits that went towards stabilizing an on and off-screen identity. And with this in mind, commentators (cited Spicer 2004, p. 85) drew attention to the ways in which Grant played to the stereotype of the eternal bachelor, with a self-deprecating nod to becoming 'the oldest swinger in town' (source?). Indeed, Grant has stated that the cad that he played in *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) is much closer to his own character than the bumbling fop that he played in the earlier *Four Weddings*. And although one might challenge Grant's self-proclaimed status as a brilliantly sleazy bounder, it is relevant to note that in line with Dyer's comment concerning star images being made up of film roles and extra filmic discourses, a range of cast, crew, friends and admirers routinely refer to Grant's off-screen playboy persona. While old school friends refer to Grant as a 'one-dimensional cad' (Halliwell 2002, p. 63), Sharon Maguire said that she wanted Grant 'to play a sexy bastard' in *Bridget Jones's Diary* because 'that's exactly what he is in real life' (cited Puchko 2016). Likewise, Nick Hornby (cited Haflidason 2002), writer of *About a Boy*, stated that 'Hugh is every bit as morally suspect as the character he plays' in that film. Remembering that review media referred to Grant's fumbling, stumbling persona as someone girls would love to take home to introduce to their mum, one curb crawl later and entertainment titles such as *Empire* magazine were highlighting the ways in which Grant transformed his reputation from that of 'England's most eligible bachelor' to 'a grinning satyr of sexual depravity, the sort of bloke who, if you took him home, would get dad legless and shag mum, before he'd taken his coat off' (Naughton cited in Feasey 2004).

There are routinely ambiguities that underlie the readings of star texts, but drawing on Dyer's seminal thesis surrounding the building of star images, it could be argued that Grant was looking

to reinvent his star image, starting with a blurring of the on and off-screen cad as both star and role respectively. Richard Corliss (1995, p. 58-59) refers to scandal as a potentially useful ‘career move’, so too, Joshua Gamson (2001, p. 193) makes the point that ‘scandal, managed properly as a publicity tool, is good show business.’ In the case of Grant, scandal, when followed by Jay Leno’s (White 2020) ‘what the hell were you thinking?’ line of questioning and subsequent promotional press junkets could be seen to reinvent the Grant persona on and off-screen. At the same time as Grant was redefining his star image from foppish English gent to playboy via a myriad of film choices and extra textual promotions and publicity, broader shifts were evident in the social construction of masculinity.

### **No more Mr Nice Guy ... make way for the New Lad**

The New Man gave way to the New Lad, in part because of male challenges to sentimentality and sensitivity, as his commitment to gender equality and shared domesticity were deemed in some corners to be at the expense of his masculinity. Tom De Castella (2014) made the point that the New Man became a ‘cartoon-like figure of fun’ ridiculed for offering to change a nappy rather than being someone women would want to sleep with. This overview is reminiscent of the ways in which some reviewers responded to Grant’s early star image, based as it was so firmly on a vulnerable romantic comedy role. One hostile reviewer noted that the persona was ‘the most simperingly deferential man in the history of the species’ (Goldfarb 2013), while another referred to it as a ‘credible amalgamation of flustered faux pas, timid lust, embarrassed ineptitude and confused sexual awakenings’ (Andrews cited Spicer 2004, p.79). Nicola Rehling affirms that the popularity of Grant’s ‘neurosis, commitment-phobia, self-effacing awkwardness, and verbal incontinence’ in romantic comedies of the era was in part because his depictions of white, middle-class masculinity ‘tapped into the heated debates about alleged male failings and disempowerment that consumed both sides of the Atlantic’(2009, p. 41).

A number of Grant’s commercially successful performances were said to be taking ‘submissiveness to almost fetishistic levels’ (Goldfarb 2013), with both star and society soon to deem the New Man a ‘relic of gender history’ (De Castella 2014) in favour of the New Lad, a figure not too dissimilar to Grant’s transformed on and off-screen image as epitomised in the *Bridget Jones* franchise. Grant, his embodiment of Daniel Cleaver, and the New Lad can all be

read as an ‘amalgam of various cultural trends, evident from TV shows *Men Behaving Badly* and *Fantasy Football*, lad mags like *Loaded* and *FHM*, and celebrities like Chris Evans and Liam Gallagher’ (De Dastella 2014). New Lads were more hedonistic than heartfelt, more interested in beer than babysitting, anti-aspirational rather than driven by consumer culture. In short, these were, much like Grant’s turn as the ostensibly eternal bachelor in *About a Boy* who seeks out single mums for sex without commitment, shying away from family ties in favour of ephemeral pleasures and instant gratification. As Grant’s character says in that film ‘I’m the guy who is really good at choosing trainers or records’ rather than ‘real things’. This figure was both a reaction against the New Man and ‘a backlash against the feminism that gave birth to him’ (Gill 2003, p. 37).

When *GQ* announces that ‘the New Man has officially been laid to rest’ in favour of a New Lad who ‘knows who he is, what he wants and where he’s going’, the publication could be speaking for both the media construction and movie star as Grant could be found presenting his off-screen image in line with the playboy charmer. Both on and off-screen personas offered a ‘refuge from the constraints and demands of marriage and nuclear family. He opened up a space of fun, consumption and sexual freedom for men, unfettered by traditional adult male responsibilities’ (Gill cited Brabon 2013, p. 122). Across a range of interviews and commentaries Grant was heard noting that he resembles ‘the heartless, sophisticated seducer’ of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *Edge of Reason* (Boshoff 2003), unable to resist the occasional boast about his bachelor ways’ (Boshoff 2003).

At a time when other leading men in the entertainment industry were settling down, making commitments and looking to put their wild days/decades behind them off-screen, Grant remained something of an outlier of aging masculinity in the entertainment arena, upholding ‘his playboy rep [...] in his 50s’ (Singh 2021). Even the *ostensibly* eternal bachelor George Clooney was heard speaking of a happy marriage and fatherhood as he entered his fifth decade (Rutter 2015). When Grant was asked if he thought people should commit to ‘faithful relationships’ and he answered with a resounding ‘No’ (Guglielmi 2020), men in the audience bemoaned his ‘commitment phobia’ for reflecting poorly on the average male (Davis 2008).

### **Monogamy, marriage and the aging bachelor**

After distancing himself from the sexually awkward English gent, Grant played a succession of charismatic playboys. And yet his admission that he was getting ‘too old, ugly and fat’ (Frishberg 2019) to remain the romantic lead or depraved ‘prick foil’ bouncer (Rubinfeld 2001) saw him make a number of diverse character choices in action (*The Man From UNCLE* [2015], *The Gentlemen* [2019]), fantasy (*Cloud Atlas* [2012]), thriller (*The Undoing* [2020]) and family (*Paddington 2* [2017]) genres. Around this time and irrespective of a single or specific film, role or genre, the commitment-phobe became a father (Moscrop 2018). A complicated path to paternity might one day make for a fascinating screenplay, but it is unlikely to make for predictable romantic-comedy fare because the then-bachelor had three children in the span of 15 months with two women (Andrews 2020). The year after his first daughter with Tinglang Hong, Grant welcomed a second child with his now wife Anna Eberstein. Three months after Eberstein gave birth, Hong gave birth to the couple’s second child, Grant’s third - meaning that Grant’s second and third children were in utero at the same time, to different mothers. Since that time, Grant and Eberstein have gone on to have two more children, making Grant a ‘Low-Key Father of Five’ (Distractify 2020).

This is to say that Grant does not knowingly or deliberately put his children in the media spotlight via social media or broader celebrity, entertainment or reality fare, but is nonetheless noticeable in that Grant is visible not just as a father, but as an ideal image of post-millennial masculinity. While Grant’s visible and vocal activism against phone hacking and broader challenges to privacy have put him in dispute with the British tabloids (BBC 2011), Hannah Hamad’s (2010, p. 154-155) work on the tabloid, reality and scandal discourses of celebrity fatherhood make it clear that Grant’s newfound paternal role was deemed an ‘attractive and desirable facet of contemporary masculinity’ by the selfsame popular press. The post-feminist father is said to have the potential to ‘resolve tensions and inconsistencies in a public persona that might otherwise trouble a postfeminist conceptualisation of ideal masculinity’ (Hamad 2010, p. 154-155). In this way, male stars such as Jude Law, Patrick Dempsey and, I would add, Hugh Grant, can be read as ideal iterations of involved and committed fatherhood in line with a feminist agenda, irrespective of broader events and exploits. Such nurturing roles and responsibilities are said to be ‘a prerequisite for the attainment of a credibly mature masculine

identity, and as a boon to a man's sexual desirability' (Hamad 2010, p. 154), having the power to dramatically transform star images from less progressive or retro-sexist to post-feminist (Hamad 2013, p. 71).

From the postwar to the present day, fathers have provided financially for their families on and off screen, but more recently they have also been seen to provide emotional sensitivity and connectedness. The importance of fathers being involved in the lives of their babies, toddlers, tweens, and adolescents is not just evident in fictional texts, but can be seen as a contemporary mainstay of the broader entertainment arena and celebrity culture spanning *dadoirs* and *daddyblogs*, best-selling nonfiction, stand-up comedy routines, advertisements, newspaper articles, parenting guidebooks, and video games (Podnieks 2016, Feasey 2020). Today, fathers as individuals, fathers in community groups, and broader educational and campaigning positions are encouraging men to balance work and family commitments, and in so doing, remodel the contemporary family unit (Kaufman 2013).

Hamad's reading of the post-feminist father is relevant here in relation to the construction, circulation and reception of Grant's star image as he transitions beyond his bachelor life stage. Hamad (2013, p. 1) notes that fatherhood has become the mainstay of contemporary male representations on the big screen, a move that is 'in tandem with the cultural normalization of postfeminist discourse'. Speaking more recently of his paternal role, Grant positions himself as a hands-on and dedicated father, a man who pulls silly faces and makes funny voices for the amusement or bemusement of his children (I.A.N.S 2020). Seemingly candid snaps of the star with his growing offspring showcase an older but thoughtful, careful and considered image of contemporary fatherhood and by extension, manhood. The hegemonic male is a stoic, self-contained, tough and assertive man with little interest in public displays of sensitivity or emotional intelligence, and as such, 'Hollywood's Hot Dads' can be presented as the very antithesis of such figures, their very presence reminding us of the dangers of 'hyper-masculine toughness and emotional control' (Malin 2013, p. 610).

Donna Peberdy (2011, p. 102-203) makes the point that 'what constitutes "being a man" continually changes according to the particular social or cultural moment'. Grant stands as a

testament to the very fluid, flexible and shifting nature of hegemonic masculinity. After all, post-feminist fathers are not so much dismantling the hegemonic hierarchy, as redefining the potent and powerful ideal of mature masculinity for the post-feminist period. The fact that the tabloid, gossip and entertainment media routinely present Grant and his contemporaries as both ‘hands on’ and ‘hot’ renders them desirable and thus powerful (Hamad 2010, Mikasabb 2021). Figures such as Grant are happy to challenge existing norms and mores around stoic and distant masculinity, in order to reposition themselves in line with the new archetype of hegemonic potency.

Grant’s recent shift from romantic lead to bounder, and cad to father must be considered not just in relation to his marketable persona, but in relation to wider debates and lived experiences of contemporary masculinity. Men are getting married and having children later than in previous decades (ONS 2020). And although the average age of a father is a little shy of 34 years and that of a husband 38 years, outside of the entertainment arena Grant might be understood as something of an outlier having conceived his first child in his early 50s and married for the first time as he neared his sixth decade. And yet, although his most recent addition makes him some 25 years older than the average father in England and Wales, Grant is not alone in embracing older fatherhood. Indeed, it is deemed *de rigueur* in the entertainment arena to embark on fatherhood at a time when most men would be looking at or forward to retirement (Gallagher 2013, Tigar 2015, Feasey 2019, pp.87-142, Lakritz 2021).

Recognisable faces from the entertainment industry in general and film stars in particular can be understood as idols, including parenting, family and lifestyle role models to relate to, admire and emulate during specific historical periods (Dyer 1986/2004, Klinger 1994, Stacey 1994, Moseley 2003, Mondello 2014, Feasey 2016). Indeed, Dyer begins his foundational volume by drawing on the ways in which stars can be understood as ‘the direct or indirect reflection of the needs, drives and dreams of [...] society’ (Walker cited Dyer 1979/2004, p. 6). Dyer is here echoing Durgant’s work on films and feelings, asserting that ‘the social history of a nation can be written in terms of its film stars’ (cited Dyer 1979/2004, p. 6). And if, as noted previously, a film star image is made up of on and off-screen roles and responsibilities including marital and paternal choices, then the shift from romantic lead through playboy and paternal role and marriage might

be able to tell us something about the hegemonic hierarchy and the changing boundaries of masculinity. While existing work on the actor picks up on the intersection between masculinity and national identity, such work predates Grant's marital role, paternal responsibilities, post-feminist reception and on screen transformations (Spicer 2004, Honess Roe 2009, Higson 2011).

### **Men and/or masculinity in crisis**

Stephanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon talk about the ways in which the media has 'bombarded' audiences with changing iterations of masculinity from soft lads and new boys to modern romantics and new fathers, new men and new lads; the effect being an acknowledgement if not actual acceptance of masculinity as 'unstable, readily contestable, increasingly transferable [...] and constantly in motion'. From this perspective, Nicola Rehling affirms that unmasking screen depictions of straight white men is an important task since such work 'can shatter the illusion that normative masculinity is a seamless identity, revealing it instead to be a volatile category that can only be stabilized through reiteration' (2009, p. 3). There has been a dialogue circulating around male crisis since the 1960s with Sally Robinson (2000, p. 5) suggesting that 'white men have become marked men' due to changes in the labour market and shifting gender roles. Indeed 'the critiques provided by second-wave feminists created an especially selfconscious conversation about the troubles of traditional manhood' (Malin 2013, p. 610). Although a number of theorists have challenged the usefulness of this crisis discourse, Robinson suggests that it remains 'the best way to understand the contemporary condition of white masculinity' (2000, p. 9). The crisis afforded different responses whereby men took to reclaiming earlier forms of traditional, physical masculinity as a show of strength and defensiveness or responding by repositioning as sensitive New Men. Either way, the crisis discourse does not necessarily mean that 'the hegemony of a particular construction of masculinity, or the hegemony of masculinity per se, is in danger' (Robinson 2000, p. 9). Rather 'we need to consider the extent to which male power is actually consolidated through cycles of crisis and resolution' (Modleski cited Robinson 2000, p. 9) because there is 'no evidence that most turn-of-the century men ever lost confidence in the belief that people with male bodies naturally possessed both a man's identity and a man's right to wield power' (Bederman cited Robinson 2013, p. 10). In this way, crisis need not signify a loss of belief in male power or privilege (Robinson 2013, p. 10). For those writing on masculinity, celebrity and the media looking to negotiate earlier crisis debates,



they can be seen to favor a more nuanced consideration of the ways in which men are seen to be “grappling” with their roles and responsibilities as both men and fathers (Falkof, 2012; Shary, 2012). Indeed, cultural studies, cultural history, and sociological research have looked to fatherhood across generations as a complex discursive site in wider debates relating to the representation and reinvention of the family (Tincknell, 2005).

## **Conclusion**

This article has considered the way in which Hugh Grant was routinely narrowcast as the bumbling romantic lead before cementing a ‘perfect’ fit between the sleazy bounder and cad on and off-screen, prior to a more recent personal and professional transition by way of character acting, paternity and marriage. Each shifting iteration of contemporary masculinity echoed broader debates around the New Man, New Lad and post-feminist father. The dialogue between role, star image and performer speaks to the various ways in which Grant can be held up as both a challenge to rigid hegemonic hierarchies and a reworking of hegemonic power. There have been myriad and multiple changes to Western masculinity and each iteration can be seen to both usurp and uphold ‘traditional’ masculinities. Indeed, it has been suggested that there is little distinction between the New Man and New Lad due to the fact that ‘with the exception of his alleged emotional expressiveness, the new man reiterated most of the dominant categories of traditional, hegemonic masculinity’ (Malin 2013, p. 612). There exists then what John Beynon (2001, p. 6) terms ‘a more fluid, bricolage masculinity’ which has the potential to re-invent alternative iterations of manhood for contemporary audiences as they transition through a period that spans post-feminist individualism to the more collective and inclusive fourth wave. Indeed, film stars and celebrity figures can help to construct and circulate social, sexual and familial norms. Grant championing a paternal role could instill a different iteration of sensitive masculinity as a new ‘normal’ for a generation of men otherwise considered on the edge of family life in the traditional nuclear family unit or disavowing the importance of male compassion and paternal sensitivity. If the erstwhile Grant is seen ‘eschewing the London party circuit for cosy evenings in with the Mothercare catalogue’ (Watson 2001), then audiences and fans alike are given permission to follow his post-feminist lead.

Grant has skillfully transitioned from a nostalgic figure of white, upper class British masculinity to a new, albeit aging face of post-feminist fatherhood in the fourth wave. My point here is that although his early screen roles were imbued with sensitivity and emotional connectedness, it is this earlier on-screen demeanor which now informs his off-screen identity. The actor's ability to shift and flex his masculine credentials, to perform and play with changing iterations of masculinity are possible in part because of his class and race privilege which in turn feeds into opportunity, interest and investment. Indeed, even a cursory glance at the contemporary film industry makes it clear that white middle class males dominate the screen space (The Acting Class 2017). Grant can quite literally, and more symbolically, *buy* into various guises and performances with a focus on appearance and lifestyle choices over substance here. If one considers that contemporary feminism is deemed inclusive and accessible because of its relation to consumption (Brunsdon 1997 149), so too is Grant's ability to play with and work through the new man, new lad and post-feminist father.

## Notes

Irrespective of the longevity of his career, Grant has until recently received limited critical acclaim and little in the way of plaudits for his craft, due in part to the roles and genre that made him famous. After all, romantic comedy is routinely ridiculed and dismissed as a trivial, superficial and ephemeral women's genre, seldom held up as a pinnacle of acting credibility (Abbott and Jermyn 2008; Brickman, Jermyn and Trost 2021 and Guilluy 2021).

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