The Mythos of Patriarchy in the X-Men Films

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Taking power away from a man is a dangerous thing. Someone always pays.

Glenn Close as Patty Hewes, Damages

Even though the fictional Patty Hewes does not possess any actual super-hero powers—although that could be debatable taking into consideration her legal victories, mental capacities and her uncanny ability to survive the most dangerous situation—her quote echoes exactly the state of affairs in both her basis of operations, contemporary New York City, and the filmic superhero universe: Men are here to stay and women can only be led to believe they can fill their shoes and/or act as equals. Patriarchy works in carefully calculated ways and the latest superhero cinematic narratives serve once again as the proof of its hegemony despite the filmic evidence that point to a newfound respect for the female powerful heroine. The new millennium did indeed bear witness to numerous examples of female super heroines taking center stage in both television and film; shows such as Alias (ABC, 2001–2006), Charmed (WB, 1998–2004), and Buffy the Vampire Slayer (WB, 1997–2003), and films such as Charlie’s Angels (2000), Lara Croft: Tomb Raider (2001), Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life (2003), Charlie’s Angels Full Throttle (2003), Underworld (2003), Catwoman (2004), Aeon Flux (2005), Elektra (2005) were dominated by super female strength and ingenuity, and showed that women are just as capable as men to tackle any kind of threat and any villain with a God syndrome and/or world domination plans.¹ Lara, Electra, Natalie, Dylan, and Alex among others were the protagonists in their respective fictional worlds. Super heroines also found a place in superhero teams, such as The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen (2003), the two Fantastic Four films (2005 and 2007), Avatar (2009)
and the *X-Men* franchise. The latter narratives enabled the heroines to work alongside their male partners and, in a way, proved that there is nothing a woman cannot handle.

The Contemporary Ubiquity of the Super Heroine: 
Real Progress or Clever Subterfuge?

What does this ubiquity of extraordinarily super women mean? Is one of the last male-centered fictional spaces—the superhero film—finally accepting what the three feminist waves have been striving for, for more than a century? Are these super heroines treated and/or accepted by both their creators and the audience as equal comrades of the male heroes? Is the superhero film a new step in gender articulation? A single answer cannot easily be given since there are still superhero narratives which prefer to “use” women as the lead man's object of affection and/or “damsels in distress,” such as Mary Jane (Kirsten Dunst) in *Spider-Man* (2002), Rachel (Katie Holmes) in *Batman Begins* (2005) and Lois (Kate Bosworth) in *Superman Returns* (2006). Although one could rightly argue that the new millennium Mary Jane, Lois and Rachel are nowhere near as powerless and/or dependent on male help as in their past representations, they still perpetuate the myth of the strong male and the weak female in search of love and support. Of course, a complete and thorough study of all the superhero film texts, which should also include their production side and/or a survey aiming to reveal how audiences receive, understand and interpret these sometimes subtle gender articulations, is a task which could certainly illuminate aspects not yet thoroughly examined but, nevertheless, goes beyond the goals of this chapter.

These film texts all share a common mythology. From Achilles to Wolverine and from Jason and the Argonauts to Batman it is surprising that many things have not changed in a period of thousands of years. Nevertheless, in this apparent inactivity lies the true nature of myth. “Mythology is static, we find the same mythical elements combined over and over again,” wrote Claude Lévi-Strauss (17), and despite our contemporary heroes’ sophisticated weaponry and/or powers their essence, that is, their effort to uphold the law, protect the innocent, and/or save humanity has stayed the same. Lévi-Strauss’ work along with Roland Barthes’ theory on the same subject will help us to explore the great mythos of patriarchy in the four X-Men films (*X-Men*, 2000, *X2: X-Men United*, 2003, *X-Men: The Last Stand*, 2006, and *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*, 2009). I argue that the patriarchal structure of modern society is a myth as defined by Roland Barthes, which is constructed to uphold its hegemonic interests and perpetuated via the widely popular film medium. I intend to analyze the trajectory of the main female heroines in the four films and show how those who defy patriarchal authority are subtly and progressively stripped of not only
their powers, but also their cinematic presence. The patriarchal structure of the cinematic X-Men world, defined by the paternal male figures of Xavier (Patrick Stewart) and Magneto (Ian McKellen)—who personify the poles of good and evil—may allow women to assume important positions in their world and the film narratives, but only insofar as those heroines abide by their rules and answer to them.

Jean Grey: The Unbearable Fate of the Super Heroine

In 1957, Barthes defined myth as discourse, a system of communication; a message that is not confined to oral speech but is hidden in many representations such as photography, sports, shows, and cinema. Barthes argued that although there may be ancient myths, no one can last forever, because it is only human history that can regulate and decide on the life and death of mythic language, since the messages it contains are used to resolve social conflicts. Today, film has become one of the most fecund terrains for the discussion of myth since it reflects the social status quo, while “in some instances ... takes up direct simultaneous participation in the texts of social history and even predicts the directions that social history will ultimately take” (Palmer xi).

Superheroes have been part of societal mythology for thousands of years. The ancient Greek Hercules and Achilles are among the first superheroes on earth: part mortal and part god they had human flaws but they were also almost indestructible. This dichotomy between human imperfection and fantastic strength or abilities is still what defines the superhero of the 21st century. However, with rare exceptions superheroes are male individuals who operate in a strictly patriarchal context, one of the most durable mythic environments in the western world. It is in the male-dominated universe that the women of X-Men try to act. The four films of the franchise follow a somewhat backwards trajectory. The economy of the film medium dictates that a central character should emerge as the main focus of each narrative, accompanied by secondary, albeit structurally indispensable in terms of plot evolution, characters. In addition, rarely do we learn their complete backgrounds. This may lead to a reverse “guilty until proven innocent” verdict as will be proven later on, but it also adds to the enhancement of the desired and/or anticipated emotional audience response.

The four films were written, directed, photographed, and edited by men. The only woman of the film’s main production team is Lauren Shuler Donner, one of the few powerful female Hollywood producers. It becomes clear that the film texts will be narrated by a male point of view, a practice that goes back to ancient Greek mythology and in that tradition, these modern men will be “making a statement about their own society without necessarily knowing it” since the essence of their stories still remains “the stuff of men’s lives and
fantasies” (Jane Cahill 7–9). As was noted above, contemporary cinema has long embraced female power and strength. However, the patriarchal system consistently makes sure that male supremacy will remain at the top of its hierarchy. This is accomplished through myth and its subtle and above suspicion qualities. For myth is

depoliticized speech... Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact [Barthes, Myth Today 109].

In other words, the great myth of patriarchy inventively states that no matter how many things women have accomplished, they will always be less of a “hero” than their male partners. In the X-Men franchise, the myth follows an ingenious trajectory in that it starts by bestowing enough power on the central female characters—Jean, Storm and Mystique—and then continues by stripping them little by little of all their cinematic presence and authority.

The ingenious “trap” of patriarchy is constructed in the first two films. The first X-Men film revolves around Logan/Wolverine (Hugh Jackman) and Marie/Rogue (Anna Paquin) and the path towards their integration into Professor Charles Xavier’s team of mutants. We see Logan struggle to survive as a fighter in a seedy Canadian bar with no memory of his past, and Marie, whose power is the ability to absorb another person’s life energy just by a simple touch, run away from home after realizing she cannot ever have a boyfriend without endangering his life. After Rogue and Logan’s chance encounter at the bar and the realization on her part that he is also a mutant, she hides in his trailer hoping he can help her. After they are attacked by Magneto’s right hand, Sabretooth (Tyler Mane), they are saved by Scott Summers/Cyclops (John Marsden) and Ororo Munroe/Storm (Halle Berry) and taken to Charles Xavier’s School for the Gifted where they meet Charles and Jean Grey (Famke Janssen). Meanwhile, Senator Robert Kelly (Bruce Davison), a fervent enemy of mutants, is trying to pass the “Mutant Registration Act” which will force all mutants to reveal their identities and powers while Magneto sees this as an opportunity for war and decides to abduct Rogue, use her powers and destroy all mankind. X2: X-Men United introduces new characters, such as the teleporting Kurt Wagner/Nightcrawler (Alan Cumming), military scientist and mutant expert William Stryker (Brian Cox), his mutant son Jason (Michael Reid Mackay), and his assistant Yuriko Oyama/Lady Deathstrike (Kelly Hu), among others and centers on Stryker’s efforts to kill all the mutants through controlling the Professor and making him use Cerebro in order to locate all the mutants in the planet. When this plan fails, it is Magneto who seizes the opportunity to kill all the humans. In the end, however, Jean manages to save the X-Men and the entire world by sacrificing herself near Alkali Lake, the place used by Stryker in the past for experimentation on mutants.
We are first introduced to Jean in the sixth minute of *X-Men* while she is addressing the United States Congress, explaining slowly and in a calm tone of voice during a hearing on the subject of the possible danger mutants pose to society that mutation is the next stage of human evolution. Jean is standing at the center of an enormous conference room, dressed in a very elegant red suit. She is wearing brown rim glasses and her long, brown hair fall softly on her shoulders creating the look of a scientist/educator who, despite the obvious natural beauty and meticulous attention to external appearance, is competent and knowledgeable. However, as soon as she finishes her sentence, she is attacked by Senator Kelly (Bruce Davison) whose agenda is to turn the politicians and the public who are also attending the hearing against mutants in order to pass the Mutant Registration Act. At first, she answers calmly, but as the Senator keeps raising his voice and demands mutants identify themselves, he creates an atmosphere of fear and doubt that leads to Jean’s obvious unease and perplexity. Alternate shots of the Senator and Jean reveal a clear dichotomy of a strong man, who manages to control the audience and a confused and unpleasantly surprised Jean, who looks around perplexed, gives out inaudible sighs, takes her glasses off in an attempt to speak, but finally does not utter a word. When the Senator’s final remark is met with enthusiastic applause, we see a long shot of Jean from Professor Xavier’s viewpoint, who is sitting in the auditorium balcony, simply standing there, admitting defeat. Her failure as a persuasive public speaker is subsequently balanced in the ensuing scenes. This time Grey is in a safe place, Charles’ school, her home since her adolescence. She is treating Logan in her laboratory and is in full command of her faculties while she explains his condition to the Professor, Storm and Cyclops. Although she clearly acknowledges Charles’ superiority, evidenced by the respectful tone she uses when she addresses him, she exhibits an assertive, educated, and composed personality. Her limited cinematic presence (Jean appears in eight brief scenes during the 104 minutes of the first film and is also present in the extensive climactic battle scene along with Storm, Logan and Cyclops towards the end) does not provide enough information as to her character, background and strength and clearly promotes Logan as the “star” of the film. We learn that she is telekinetic and a bit telepathic, and that the Professor is teaching her to control her powers. However, two scenes prove that she has still a long way to go. When she tries to read Logan’s mind, she sees a cluster of unsettling scenes of his adamantium injections and stops, troubled and obviously distressed. When she tries to use Cerebro, she almost collapses but manages to find Magneto’s whereabouts. These two scenes confirm that although she is an accomplished and confident physician, she is still unable to control her powers and is dependent on male guidance. It is of course necessary that the director and the writer withhold information and show Jean’s progress gradually in order to build up audience expectation. Nevertheless, neither Scott nor Logan shows any sign of vulnerability or discomfort with their powers. Moreover, Jean “is part of a classic...
love-triangle with her fellow X-Men Scott and Logan — Cyclops and Wolverine. She functions as the focus of a continuing heterosexual matrix, promoting the traditional male-female relationship to the audience” (Rebecca House 84).

The first noticeable thing about Jean in X2 is her appearance. Gone are her long hair and her elegant skirts. She is now wearing her hair shorter while she is always dressed in pants. The red color is equally there, in her hair and items of clothing. These seemingly superficial changes, however, are signs which semi-otically lead to interesting observations. Her medium length hairstyle and pants create an androgynous look which combined with Famke Janssen’s features and height — Janssen is six feet tall — create a strong cinematic image, which can attract both the male and female audience. Moreover, this “masculinized” image could also be interpreted as an attempt to show that by looking more like a man, Jean can achieve the status of the ultimate superhero at the end of the narrative. After Stryker’s and Magneto’s respective attempts to win the war between humans and mutants, the X-Men find themselves unable to escape as a result of a malfunction of their jet. The dam is collapsing and Jean can feel that the strength of the water will kill them all. Alternate close-ups of Jean with the water emerging through the walls insinuate that not only can she sense what is wrong, but she is also capable of seeing it. She then makes her decision. She looks at all of her friends over her shoulder, her eyes filled with tears, and steps outside the jet. Xavier senses her absence and although Scott starts shouting and asking Storm to take the ramp down, Jean controls the jet and ignites the engine. “I know what I’m doing. This is the only way,” we hear her say through Xavier’s mouth as they share the same power. A cinematically impressive shot shows Jean with her two arms raised one to lift the jet and the other to stop the massive torrent of water. Just before she unleashes the water and drowns, however, her eyes turn red — a sign of her future metamorphosis into the Phoenix — and she closes her eyes accepting her fate. Jean sacrifices herself to save humanity and the mutant community and assumes the position traditionally reserved for male heroes, in most film genres, echoing the respective acts of selflessness of Robert Duvall as Spurgeon Tanner in Deep Impact (1998), and Bruce Willis as Harry Stamper in Armageddon (1998). In X2, it is a woman who saves the day and leaves the two men who love her (Logan and Scott) crying behind while her company of friends, colleagues and students feel sadness and gratitude for her sacrifice. Most importantly, however, although the first two films begin with Magneto’s and Xavier’s voice-overs, X2 closes with Jean’s voice-over and a repetition of the stages in human evolution which we first heard uttered by Magneto in the first film. A circle has closed, but it is now a female voice that signals the “forward leap in evolution.” Although the comic aficionados understand that the last helicopter shot which shows the sign of the phoenix forming over the lake that destroyed Stryker’s facilities marks Jean’s potential rebirth as the villain, the common viewer cannot help but appreciate Jean’s altruism and place her in the pantheon of superheroes who deserve admiration and praise.
However, Grey’s noble gesture will not be respected for long. X-Men 3: The Last Stand finds our superheroes faced with the vaccine which can “cure” them. However, it begins with Charles and Magneto’s first visit to Jean’s house twenty years before we were first introduced to them. Even before they enter, Charles says, “This one is special.” The Professor is perhaps acknowledging that not only is there another mutant with the same powers, but also one that might surpass him. However, the purpose of this scene is not to show how Jean’s parents treated her as a sick person who had to go away or introduce us to the character. The scene is merely a smokescreen to present that Jean’s dark side (the Phoenix) was already present in her adolescence — she actually lifts all the cars and machines outside her house while talking to Charles telepathically — and that it was the Professor, a man, who managed to subdue it and show her the “right” path. The Pygmalion scenario, repeated in countless written and audiovisual tales, negates the possibility of knowing how Jean would decide to face the world left to her own devices and assures that her adult self will always be marked to a great extent by male influence. After her sacrifice in X2, her rebirth as the Dark Phoenix in The Last Stand, the symbol of resurrection and eternal life, transforms her into the ultimate villain despite the positive connotations that surround the mythology of the mythological bird.6

When Scott visits the lake where his love lost her life saving everyone else, Jean emerges from the sea in an extraordinarily blinding light. Like a beautiful, ancient Greek siren, she approaches Scott; her appearance (her long hair and black leather suit, reminiscent of the X-Men modest doctor and X2 savior respectively) seems to remind both Scott and the audience of the character of the previous two films. However, after she utters her first lines, something in her tone of voice changes. She seems more confident, more sure of herself. Once she starts kissing Scott, her eyes open and red veins cover her face. We thus become sure that it is not Grey but the Phoenix who has come back to life. After she kills Scott, she is found unconscious by Storm and Logan and taken back to Xavier’s school. There, Charles reveals to Logan:

Jean Grey is the only class 5 mutant I’ve ever encountered, her potential practically limitless. Her mutation is seated in the unconscious part of her mind and therein lay the danger. When she was a girl, I created psychic barriers to isolate her powers from her conscious mind. And as a result Jean developed a dual personality. The conscious Jean, whose powers were always in her control, and the dormant side. A personality that, in our sessions, came to call itself the Phoenix, a purely instinctual creature, all desire and joy and rage.

In this revealing monologue, the great patriarch is exposed. It is He who created the barriers to protect her from her powers — which he admitted helped her save her life in X2 when he could not. It is He who created Jean, the sensible and lacking in self-esteem scientist who obeyed him no matter what. And it is He who—for the first and only time in the three X-Men films—becomes upset and says that He will not explain himself to anyone, let alone Logan when the
latter is expressing his doubts whether his actions should take into consideration what Jean really wants or who she wants to be. Jean never stood a chance. As soon as Charles realized that she was equally or more powerful than he, he found a way to tame the “beast.” But now the “beast” has returned to reclaim her individuality and unfortunately confirm that in a man’s world no female can claim the throne. When the Phoenix eventually arises, she goes back to her home, the nest she should have set on fire when the time of her death would approach, and in a cinematically amazing scene, she kills the Professor. She lifts up the entire house and lifts Charles from his wheelchair while Eric’s and the Professor’s mutants are fighting inside and outside. The alternate close-ups of the furious and determined Phoenix and of the always serene Charles suspended in the air convey their respective emotions—rage and sympathy. In the last seconds before his death, time stands still through slow motion montage, and then suddenly the Phoenix actually obliterates the Professor who manages to telepathically tell Jean not to let her dark side control her before accepting his eventual demise with a smile, which connotes the generosity of his spirit and cancels his previous aggression. Before Phoenix has a chance to calm herself she is taken by Magneto to be used as his weapon against humans and the “cure.” It is at this point that the Phoenix as villain stops being interesting, for “What then happens is that she stands around for most of the rest of the film looking sulky and forms and alliance with Magneto more or less by default” (Kaveney 261–2). Not only does she lack the edginess and eccentricity of Batman’s Joker or the exuberance and shrewd ingenuity of Superman’s Lex Luthor, she has to ask to be saved, in other words to die, by and in the arms of Wolverine, her unrequited true love. Thus, “*The Last Stand* becomes unalloyedly the parable about women not being able to handle power that the comics version arguably to some extent avoided being.” (ibid. 261). Unfortunately, this is not the first time that women are punished simply for being superior to man. Jean had to be destroyed once she stopped being the obedient helper and became the most powerful mutant of all. Patriarchy cannot accept this gender reversal and shrewdly turned her into the villain in order to justify her death and restore Order. Harriet Hawkins (54) observes that “Ever since Lilith, the desire to play the star part rather than a supporting role has been deemed anathema—an accursed thing—in woman. And it still is.” In turning the Phoenix into the villain, *The Last Stand* succeeded in firstly, demonizing the female and secondly, in establishing Logan as the ultimate superhero, paving the way for *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*.

**Storm and Mystique: The Teacher and the Rebel**

Storm and Mystique hold significant narrative positions in the cinematic X-Men universe despite their being at opposite ends of the spectrum; Storm is
part of the “good guys,” while Mystique is Magneto’s devious right hand. They are both beautiful women portrayed by Halle Berry and Rebecca Romijn-Stamos, respectively. However, “Storm isn’t on the scene for her physique or face. And she is not the center of a traditional, patriarchal heterosexual matrix.... She is her own person, and brings considerable substance to the X-Men” (Housel 78). Storm is one of the most stable characters in the first three films. Not only is she an accomplished fighter and deliverer of witty one-liners—“Do you know what happens to a toad when it’s struck by lightning?” she asks Toad in X-Men, and while he stares at her in confusion she calmly retorts, “The same thing that happens to everything else,” just before unleashing her powers onto him — she is also one of the teachers in Xavier’s school. Storm always demonstrates patience, tolerance, sensitivity and empathy even when she faces enemies and/or danger. For instance, in the X-Men, she is the one holding the hand of the transformed Senator Kelly before he dies and in X-2 she develops a genuine relationship with the odd-looking Nightcrawler, which leads to their saving the Professor from inadvertently killing all the mutants inside Cerebro. Her most important function, however, is that she is the one Charles entrusts with the future of the school for the gifted and she is the one who decides to keep it open after the professor’s death at the hands of the Phoenix. One could readily argue that Xavier’s decision invalidates the argument that patriarchy refuses to appoint women to top positions and he/she would be right unless they knew the context of the Professor’s decision. Xavier intended to pass the torch to Scott and not to Storm. However, since Scott “took Jean’s death too hard,” the Professor started thinking about Storm. In other words, Storm got the job by default. Furthermore, teaching is usually connected to such feminine qualities as patience, emotional understanding, and nurture and it has almost always been among the most common career choices for women in both the real world and its filmic representations. From Bette Davis’ socially conscious Lilly Moffat in The Corn is Green (1945) to Michelle Pfeiffer’s Louanne Johnson “tougher” version in Dangerous Minds (1995), female teachers exhibit a sensitivity and emotional richness that their male colleagues seem to lack. Finally, at Xavier’s funeral, Storm has the honor of delivering the eulogy. Holding back her tears, she insists that they “must carry on his [the Professor’s] vision, and that’s a vision of a world united.” A world united, indeed, with women constantly pressured to play second fiddle.

Mystique is one of the most intriguing female villains in the cinematic X-Men cosmos. Driven by rage and hostility against those humans who made her “afraid to go to school as a child” starting with her parents who tried to kill her, she mainly does Magneto’s dirty work due to her extraordinary shifting power but also her physical strength and intelligence. In X-Men, she abducts Senator Kelly, she encourages Rogue to leave the school for the gifted, she tampers with Cerebro endangering Xavier’s life, while in X2 it is thanks to her feminine charms she manages to help Magneto free himself from his plastic prison.
It is also in X2 that we see her in her human form for the first time. In a clichéd representation of the dangerously captivating femme fatale, Mystique as Grace appears as a gorgeous blonde, with incredibly long legs—accentuated by a low-angle close shot which renders them even longer, and seduces one of Magneto’s prison guards only to inject him with iron and help Eric escape. Her seduction techniques and her way of creeping into places through turning into whomever is needed for her goal is also highlighted by her snake-like mutant appearance, her yellow eyes and “her indigo skin clumped with patches of scales” (Housel 82). Housel argues that Mystique’s nature is characterized by “an unstable, changing duality” due to the fact that she can change into both male and female forms, and that it is this duality that prevents her from transcending “to the singularity necessary to complete the hero cycle” (ibid.) However, most superheroes have to face this duality; Superman/Clark Kent, Iron Man/Tony Stark, Hulk/Bruce Banner, the list is long. If one accepts Housel’s argument, then most superheroes are caught in a vicious circle and/or cannot fulfill their destiny. It is true that they do have problems with their “other” side both the audience and the fictional characters manage this duality which is in a way part of every human being. In other words, we would all be forced to ask questions such as: Is Bruce Banner an accomplished scientist or should we consider him a green monster and nothing else? Mystique’s extraordinary shape shifting may help her change into every male or female form she wishes but nothing can deter the audience from understanding that the curvaceous and luscious creature they see on the screen is definitely a woman no matter how easily she can change into a man.

And it is her female nature that patriarchy stigmatizes and ultimately punishes in The Last Stand. When the captured Mystique is transported with other mutants to be “cured,” Magneto comes to what seems to be her rescue. However, what he really wants is information on the antibody and the recruitment of new talent. When a guard points his gun at him, it is Mystique who gets shot trying to protect her master. Lying naked on the floor of the bus, she is soon metamorphosed into a beautiful human woman. Surprised and saddened, she looks up and says Eric’s name in the hope he will be there for her. Magneto simply acknowledges that she saved him but without even thanking her, he coldly states, “You are not one of us anymore.” While he abandons her with the rest of the mutants, he adds, “Such a shame. She was so beautiful.” Mystique is reduced to a useful weapon, a tool that broke and can be discarded with no remorse whatsoever. In addition, there is no mention of her help and/or abilities, just the superficial statement that she was beautiful; An attractive object which Eric no longer needs. Magneto’s callousness leads Mystique to the U.S. government to reveal his plans and base of operations. “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,” says the President when he sees footage of Mystique on a screen, while Magneto’s heartless and cruel treatment of Mystique never does become an issue or used to explain what drove her to betrayal. The President’s use of
William Congreve’s quote is yet another example of the devious working of the hegemonic patriarchy. The ancient Greek dramatist Menander also wrote that the three sources of evil in the world are fire, woman and the sea.

X-Men Origins: Wolverine

After Jean’s death, Mystique’s ostracism and Storm’s placement in the benign role of school principal, patriarchy had successfully completed its goal in neutralizing female power and went on in establishing, once again, the much anticipated male order. Since the fourth X-Men was designed around Wolverine’s back story — no need to wonder why neither Jean’s, Storm’s or Mystique’s story was the focus —, the filmmakers produced a true buddy movie as underlined by a visually astounding credit sequence, which shows Logan and Victor (Liev Schreiber) fighting side by side in the American civil war, World War I, World War II, and Vietnam, since the story centers on these two mutant brothers who were born 200 years ago. Women may be present in the story, but they are undoubtedly secondary characters, used to illuminate aspects of Logan’s past and also uphold the mythos of male superiority.

A pre-credit sequence reveals how James/Logan tragically kills Victor’s dad using his claws for the first time, just before he finds out that he was his own father, too. After the murder, James’ mother, overwhelmed by what she witnessed, looks at him and asks, “What are you?” Astonished, frightened and still angry, little James starts running in the woods only to be stopped by Victor who promises they will always be together. This maternal rejection, which could easily be attributed to a mother’s — or any human being for that matter, regardless of sex — natural surprise when her offspring extends claws from his knuckles and kills another person does not interest the filmic narrative. Without any further exploration of what happened to James’ mother, the audience is presented with a female monster; a mother who rejects her own flesh and blood can be nothing less. Of course, it also goes without saying that the cinematic text uses her as the perfect excuse of adult Logan’s hot temper and residual frustration.

Logan and Victor go through life together until they are recruited by Stryker (Danny Huston) to assist him with his devious plans. When Logan has enough of Stryker’s manipulative methods and Victor’s use of unnecessary violence, he quits the team and the narrative flashes forwards six years into the future. Logan is settled in the Canadian Rockies, works as a lumberjack, and is in love with his schoolteacher girlfriend, Kayla (Lynn Collins), who knows of his peculiarity and does not mind the occasional accidental scratch or buying new sheets every time Logan has a nightmare and wakes up with his claws buried into their mattress. Kayla is presented as the tender, understanding and patient woman who drives her man to work, picks him up and takes care not
only of their house, but also of his past wounds. In other words, she is the perfect female patriarchal model. Kayla is narratively important insofar as she provides the key to the evolution of the plot. Just one minute after the first half hour of the film, she is murdered by Victor and is conveniently absent from the better part of the narrative. Love becomes Logan’s motive, and the rest of the film focuses on his attempts to avenge her death. His anger and desperation force him to accept Stryker’s offer to obtain his adamantium claws in order to be able to vanquish Kayla’s murderer, unaware of the fact Victor is also working with the military scientist who exploits mutants. Through the suffering he endures during the operation and his determination to take revenge for his lost love, Logan/Wolverine becomes the eternal hero in the tradition of thousands of stories and myths around the world; a lone wolf who lost his love and tries to take revenge and/or find peace of mind. The film is reduced to a series of fights, albeit visually striking and satisfying, until Kayla re-enters Logan’s world and is proven to have been working for Stryker all along. Logan is therefore twice betrayed by a woman in the film; His mother and his first love, the one that gave him the alias Wolverine. Despite Kayla’s confession to Logan that she was at first forced to enter a relationship with him because Stryker was holding her mutant sister hostage, he remains suspicious until he is convinced that she truly loved him in the course of their living together. However, since the superhero narrative usually prefers its male heroes unattached, Kayla dies in the end. She is not only punished for her ruse, but she also sets Logan conveniently free for his next adventure since the adamantium bullet Wolverine got on the head before the end credits erased his memory.

**Tale as Old as Time**

The preceding discussion demonstrated the understated and at first unnoticed mechanisms that maintain the myth of patriarchy. The X-Men universe is governed by male rules and no woman could ever hope to ascend to the top. Jean and Mystique tried in their respective ways to be the best they could be, but were eventually disempowered. Their fate shows that “the more successful and brilliant and ambitious and glamorous and famous [a woman] is in her own right, and the more she enjoys her success, the more she must be morally anathematised as a femme fatale, a vampire, an unnatural monster, a superbitch” (Hawkins 55). Although Hawkins is mostly interested in literature, her conclusions can also be applied to film narratives since “like virtually everything else created by human beings,” film also tends “to reflect the sexual, social, psychological and theological traditions and taboos of the cultures that produced them” (ibid. 100).

Nonetheless, besides Jean and Mystique, the structure of the X-Men’s fictional world swarms with male potency and prerogatives. Leaving Xavier
and Magneto aside, the two great patriarchs with God complexes, all official posts are occupied by men. Mikhail Lyubansky notes that the mutants “are intended as an allegory for oppression in general” (77). It is unfortunate that this oppression does not include women. For instance, in *The Last Stand*, the Department of Mutant Affairs with Hank McCoy/The Beast (Kelsey Grammer) serving as Secretary is indeed progress in a world which is afraid of mutants. However, the secret conference Hank attends consists exclusively of men—thirteen to be precise—with not even a token woman to soften the testosterone levels that float when they all watch the failed attempts of an FBI investigator to get information from Mystique regarding Magneto's whereabouts. Despite her mutation and the danger she poses, in this scene, Mystique becomes an objectified female image in the second degree as she is not only watched, admired and feared by the men in the filmic scene like a post-modern femme fatale, but is simultaneously watched by the viewers of the film. In the beginning of *X2*, Magneto’s voice-over concludes: “It is an historical fact; sharing the world has never been humanity’s defining attribute.” He should have said; sharing the world has never been man's defining attribute.

**Notes**

1. At the same time, these narratives constitute a new cycle of the superhero or action/adventure genre, which Marc O’Day (201–218) defines as “action babe cinema.” Although O’Day approaches the heroines of these films using Yvonne Tasker’s term of “musculinity” which “indicates the extent to which a physical definition of masculinity in terms of a developed musculature is not limited to the male body within representation (Tasker 3), and Laura Mulvey’s theory of “to-be-looked-at-ness” to prove that these female representations are a step forward in gender politics, he does acknowledge the fact that most of these films are set in a patriarchal environment.

2. For more on feminism and especially the two last feminist waves, see Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley (1–22).

3. Jane Cahill (7) correctly reminds us that “The stories that we call Greek myths are men's stories.... Their substance is the stuff of men's lives and fantasies victory in war, glorious death on the battlefield, heroic enterprise, the slaying of monsters, the fathering of sons.... Female characters in myth are mothers or wives or virgins, defined always in terms of men. Most of them are bad or unusual women: there is Medea who kills her children; there is Clytemnestra who, though married to the richest king in Greece, commits both adultery and murder; there is Thetis who puts her babies on the fire; there is Jocasta who marries her own son.” Moreover, Greek mythology includes several examples of super powerful female monsters, such as Medusa, the Sirens, the witch Kirki, Scylla and Charybdis. Robin Hard (94) also notes that the first person Zeus sent to the world to cause trouble was a woman, Pandora. Additionally, Hard (135–138) underlines that although Hera, Zeus' wife, was firstly celebrated “As a goddess of married women” she was later portrayed and is still viewed today “as a wronged and vindictive wife who is constantly wrangling with her husband and persecuting his mistresses and their children.”

4. In her long career, Lauren Shuler Donner has produced films which belong to diverse genres, such as romantic comedies (*She's the Man*, 2006; *You’ve Got Mail*, 1998),
dramas (*Any Given Sunday*, 1999), and action/superhero films (*Constantine*, 2005). Her success is confirmed by a staggering $3 billion gross worldwide. (imdb.com).

5. The choice of both director and screenwriter for the first film was to present the X-Men as “an established group [...] into whom our viewpoint characters are inserted and eventually treated as equals, or at least — in Rogue’s case — equal foci of attention.” (Roz Kaveney 258). In an interview, Bryan Singer, the director of the first two films, confirmed that “you want to be able to be accessible to all the people who don’t understand or might not be familiar with the comic.”

6. For more on the Phoenix and its existence in several ancient civilizations, see Sophia Fotopoulou, http://www.newsfinder.org/site/more/phoenix_the_symbol_of_rebirth/.

7. Lilith was Adam’s first wife, who “left the garden of Eden because she disliked being ordered around.” For more, on Lilith see Vanda Zajko’s “Women and Greek Myth” (2007).

8. There are, of course, many cinematic examples of brilliant male teachers (*To Sir, with Love*, 1967; *Children of a Lesser God*, 1986; *Dead Poets Society*, 1989), but the interesting thing is that what makes those men so inspirational is that they are not afraid to show their feminine side and openly be sensitive, emotional, indecisive and even scared.

9. The name Wolverine comes from an old tale Kayla narrated to Logan one night. The moon always seems so lonely because she once had a lover whose name was Kuekuaatsheu (The Wolverine). They both lived in the spirit world and every night they wandered the skies. One day, Kuekuaatsheu was deceived by another spirit, the Trickster, who told him that the Moon had asked for flowers. The Trickster advised Kuekuaatsheu to come to earth to pick some wild roses to please the Moon, leaving out the fact that when you leave the spirit world you can never get back. So, now, the Wolverine is forever forced to look up at the lonely moon all night and howl her name.