InterSedes

Revista Electrónica de las Sedes Regionales de la Universidad de Costa Rica

Traditional and Non-traditional Masculine Representations in *Macbeth*
(Shakespeare's and Kurzel's)

Joe Montenegro – Bonilla

Consejo Editorial Revista InterSedes

Traditional and Non-traditional Masculine Representations in *Macbeth* (Shakespeare's and Kurzel's)

Representaciones masculinas tradicionales y no tradicionales en *Macbeth* (el de Shakespeare y el de Kurzel)

Joe Montenegro - Bonilla[1]

Resumen:
En tanto que busca en *Macbeth* una visión trascendental del ser hombre, este artículo ofrece una breve descripción de algunas de las maneras en las que Shakespeare persigue la fragmentación de las barreras de género y problematiza las representaciones masculinas tradicionales. A través del análisis comparativo de la tragedia y de la adaptación cinematográfica dirigida en 2015 por Justin Kurzel, se abordan aspectos como la violencia heroica, la sexualidad, la niñez masculina, la paternidad y la pérdida del ser humano. Al final, la incertidumbre que transmite Shakespeare y la interpretación que de ella hace Kurzel, se combinan para ilustrar un poco más el problema de la masculinidad.

Palabras clave*: masculinidad, literatura y cine, estereotipos masculinos, Shakespeare, ser humano

Abstract:
In an attempt to find in *Macbeth* a transcendental view of manhood, this article offers a brief description of some of the ways in which Shakespeare pursues the fragmentation of gender barriers and problematizes traditional representations of masculinity. Through a comparative analysis of the play and the 2015 film adaptation of it by Justin Kurzel, aspects such as heroic violence, sexuality, boyhood, fatherhood, and the loss of humanhood are addressed. In the end, Shakespeare's uncertainty and Kurzel's interpretation thereof combine in order to further illustrate the issue of masculinity.

Keywords: masculinity, literature and film, masculine steretotypes, Shakespeare, humanhood

Introduction

In spite of the innumerable critical and academic commentaries written and published about William Shakespeare's literary legacy, his works, particularly his tragedies, continue to offer more questions than answers. His political motivations and his philosophical agendas tend to be ambiguous at best and get lost

---

[1] Costarricense, profesor de literatura inglesa, Universidad Nacional, Sede Regional Brunca, y Universidad de Costa Rica, Recito de Golfito. Email: joemontenegrob@gmail.com

in the innuendos of his characters' material and transcendental experiences. This is precisely the case in *Macbeth*, in which the protagonist is portrayed as both a meek husband and a tyrant, a victim and a perpetrator of his own calamities, a hero and an antihero. The enactments of the masculine in *Macbeth* are also conflicting. There is in the protagonist and in other male characters of the play a blend of what is traditionally masculine and what is not traditionally so, a questioning of the role of man but also an exploration of what it is to be a male human being. Stereotypical representations of manhood as violent, aggressive, and dominant permeate the play; however, so do portrayals of the boy and the father within the man, as well as a manifold search for a truer, more realistic masculine identity.

In an attempt to examine and recognize what it is that Shakespeare might be saying —or asking— about masculinity in *Macbeth*, this article interrogates the play and some of its male characters as they shed light on the complexities of manhood. Nevertheless, since no presumption of expertise compels the author to take upon himself alone such a task, a conversation with the most recent film adaptation of the play will illuminate the discussion and fuel the analysis offered herein. The movie in question was released in 2015 and produced under the direction of Justin Kurzel and the performances of Michael Fassbender and Marion Cotillard. The film explores many of the interpretive possibilities offered by the original text through a series of creative liberties that range from breathtaking re-imaginings of the setting to highly suggestive photographic displays against seemingly mismatching lines from the play. In the ensuing analysis, expected and unexpected images of masculinity in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* are uncovered with the assistance of Kurzel's adaptation. The comparative approach allows no disregard for the distinctive languages with which both texts narrate and signify, yet the critical focus is that which pertains to the study of masculinities and masculine representations in literature and in the arts. First, traditional stereotypical portrayals of martial violence, aggressive sexuality, and ruthless manliness are revealed. Second, some emphasis is laid on the relationship between manhood and boyhood, as both the play and the film express a preoccupation with it. Thirdly, the concepts of fatherhood and childlessness attend to the analysis and add meaning to the question of masculinity. Lastly, the ultimate discussion centers on the contrast between manhood and humanhood and the ambivalent nature of masculinity as portrayed by both Shakespeare and Kurzel.

Man as We Know Him

At the banquet in Act 3, when King Macbeth faces the ghost of the recently murdered Banquo, his idiotic behavior drives his wife to curtly ask him, "Are you a man?" (Shakespeare, 1993, 3.4.61). Her question resonates all throughout the play as the protagonist confronts the stereotype of the fearless, ruthless, potent male and struggles to come to terms with his own masculinity. "For Macbeth," Carolyn Asp (1981) explains, "'being a man' has become synonymous with being invulnerable to conscience,

fear, or compassion…" (p. 164). His aggressiveness and brutality, especially as a soldier, are notorious. His peers celebrate his courage on the battlefield by ascribing to him such epithets as "valor's minion" (Shakespeare, 1993, 1.2.19) and "Bellona's bridegroom" (Shakespeare, 1993, 1.2.54), yet his masculine prowess transcends the martial realm. According to Robert Kimbrough (1983), "In *Macbeth*…, to be 'manly' is to be aggressive, daring, bold, resolute, and strong, especially in the face of death, whether giving or receiving…" (p. 177). As a regicide, Macbeth is also the epitome of the medieval male, and his wife, of course, plays an instrumental role in making him so. She appeals to his manliness to commit Duncan's murder: "When you durst do it, then you were a man; / And to be more than what you were, you would / Be so much more the man." (Shakespeare, 1993, 1.7.49-51). She defines "true manhood" as "a territory without boundaries and regicide as the ultimate act of heroic manhood" (Elenany, 2015, p. 7), without which nothing less than her husband's masculinity is put at risk.

Kurzel's *Macbeth* extrapolates the protagonist's stereotypical manhood by accentuating his violent nature and underlying his sexual one. The violence with which Macbeth and his men meet their enemies on the battlefield is greatly dramatized in the film. A very elaborate slow-motion sequence serves to show the "aggressive militarism" (p. 10) and "heroic violence" (p. 117) that, according to Robin H. Wells (2001), are commonly associated with manliness in Shakespeare's tragedies, especially in *Macbeth*. Furthermore, masculinity is also murderous in both the movie and the play. "The manly stereotype… exceeds the limits of soldierly valor and embraces the extreme retaliatory violence" (Asp, 1981, p. 155). The way in which the film's Macbeth (Michael Fassbender) stabs Duncan (David Thewliss) on his bed is vicious and feral. The sequence is masterfully edited and combined with images of a warhorse's savage struggle to break free: a strong reference to Macbeth's unleashed manfulness. In this version, moreover, the protagonist does not flee the murder scene immediately but calmly stays and confronts Malcolm (Jack Reynor) as he enters the tent and discovers the crime. Here, Macbeth's lines are those which in the play are addressed to the other noblemen or to Malcolm in their presence, yet he ends with Banquo's question to the weird sisters from the play's first act: "Live you? Or are you aught that man may question?" (Shakespeare, 1993, 1.3.42-43; Kurzel, 2015, 00:39:16-22). His own masculine confidence is projected onto the young prince. His manliness is real, and cruelly so, yet he implicates that Malcolm's fails to achieve the same standards.

Similarly, Kurzel openly explores Macbeth's sexuality where Shakespeare only suggests it. In the play, Lady Macbeth (Marion Cotillard) complains of her husband's lack of courage and vigor in relation to both his plans and his disposition towards her: "From this time / Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard / To be the same in thine own act and valor / As thou art in desire?" (Shakespeare, 1993, 1.7.38-41). Asp (1981) believes that Lady Macbeth here "challenges an essential element of [her husband's] self-image, that of potent male… To be the heroic warrior, to be king, he must first act the man with her" (p.

160). The film almost gloats over this detail and illustrates the hero's manliness as driven by his virility and sexual performance. As Lady Macbeth directs her husband's resolution towards the murdering of King Duncan, she also leads him to orgasm. She whispers, "…screw your courage to the sticking-place, and we'll not fail" (Kurzel, 2015, 00:30:33-38). The undertones of such words as "screw" and "sticking-place," also present in Shakespeare (1993, 1.7.60), surface in this scene as the characters engage in sexual intercourse. Macbeth thrusts while his wife speaks of her plans, until he reaches climax and exclaims, "I am settled, and bend up each corporal agent to this terrible feat" (Kurzel, 2015, 00:31:55-32:04). His masculinity clearly conforms to his wife's desires and to the stereotype of sexual potency.

From Boys to Men

Masculine stereotypes, so in art as in real life, are nurtured since boyhood, yet this does not make it easy for any man to comply. As Howayda M. Elenany (2015) puts it, "Shakespeare represents through *Macbeth* the struggle of the male to conform to an ideal of manhood endorsed by culture and society" (p. 3). Such ideal is acquired during childhood, when boys learn to be men, and this is deemed not only desirable but also praiseworthy in the play. "Bring forth men-children only," Macbeth asks his wife, "For thy undaunted mettle should compose nothing but males" (Shakespeare, 1993, 1.7.72-73). Lady Macbeth's absolute perception of manhood is so admirable in the eyes of her husband that he wishes to see it realized in a new generation of young men. Boys, from an early age, would be expected to be fearless and unyielding, especially in the face of death. Lord Siward seems to agree with this archetype when he declares that the passing of his young son deserves no more grief than that due to an honorable soldier (Shakespeare, 1993, 5.8.52-53). When announcing the boy's death, Ross affirms, "He only lived but till he was a man, / The which no sooner had his prowess confirmed / … / But like a man he died" (Shakespeare, 1993, 5.8.40-43). Lack of age and maturity, therefore, are no impediments in this Shakespearean world for a boy to be considered a man, provided that he proves a worthy recipient of the masculine ideal.

Nevertheless, Macbeth also sees boys as a source of shame since he does not tolerate being put alongside them. His masculinity is "fragile and unstable" (Elenany, 2015, p. 40), which makes him particularly vulnerable to comparisons. "In the battle scenes at the end of the play," Asp (1981) describes, "Macbeth, who channeled all his energies into being a 'man,' is… surrounded by boys… whom [he] considers inferior to himself" (p. 167). This juxtaposition of men and boys is also made evident in Kurzel's film, whose battle scenes are plagued with the faces of young boys. The "unrough youths that… / Protest the first of manhood," whom Lennox describes in the play's fifth act (Shakespeare, 1993, 5.2.10-11), materialize on the screen. What is more, Kurzel (2015), like Shakespeare, gives to boys the victory over Macbeth. The very last sequence of the movie parallels young Malcolm and young Fleance

(Lochlann Harris) as they gain the king's remains. Fleance walks —and then runs— away toward the sun with the hero's sword in his hand, while Malcolm does the same as he heads out of the throne room (01:45:54-46:26). In Shakespeare (1993), Malcolm's unripe manhood is established by his confession that he is "yet unknown to woman" (4.3.127-128), but his virginity and his boyhood do not prevent him from defeating Macbeth. The hero's fight for his own masculinity is thus rendered unfruitful, and Kurzel does not hide this since he also gives relevance to Fleance as another boy victor.

As the saying goes, "Boys will be boys," but in *Macbeth*, they are more complicated than that, especially in their relationship with grown men and the values that each group represents. Shakespeare, says Wells (2001), is "self-consciously ambivalent" (p. 24), then it should come as no surprise that his representations of boyhood and manhood are so intricate. Kurzel (2015) is aware of this and so depicts a complex connection between Macbeth and the boys around him. As the hero and his soldiers prepare for battle in one of the initial scenes, they paint young boys' faces and tie up swords and daggers around their hands and arms (00:03:55-04:30). The boys that Macbeth resents having to face at the end of the play are his very men on the screen. He even reassures a visibly scared boy (Scot Greenan) by stroking the back of his neck, yet later it will be the ghost of this same boy, among flashbacks of his death on the battlefield, that will present him with the dagger that he is to use to murder Duncan (Kurzel, 2015, 00:33:48-35:15). Macbeth speaks to this apparition as he does to the dagger in Shakespeare, but the boy appears here as a manifestation of both his manly resolution and his sense of humanity. According to Wells (2001), "This ambivalence concerning fundamental values can be seen most clearly in the way the… characters conceive of manhood" (p. 139). *Macbeth* certainly portrays an obscure image of the relationship between boys and men.

"He Has No Children!"

Men in Shakespeare are expected to perform a number of roles, and each one of them is as complicated as the next one. As Wells (2001) puts it, "The problematic aspect of *Macbeth* is… what it has to say about… manhood" (p. 137). Particularly interesting is what the play reveals about the role of father in the context of heroic masculinity. Among many other duties, a man must father children, and when he does not, the implications may be far-reaching. So they are for Macbeth, who ends up with no heir. "The classic ideal associated with manhood in patriarchal society not only stipulates physical prowess, valor, strength, bloodiness but also the ability to procreate" (Elenany, 2015, p. 13). Macbeth is keenly aware of this fact and of the veritable advantage that Banquo has over him precisely on account of his progeny. The prophecies were clear: "Upon [his] head they placed a fruitless crown / … / Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand" (Shakespeare, 1993, 3.1.64-66). Banquo's children will succeed the new king simply because, unlike him, Banquo is a father. This also reminds Macbeth of his "sterility and

impotence" (Elenany, 2015, p. 14). He is not only childless but unmanly, and according to Asp (1981), such conjecture brings about "the collapse of… [his] male ego" (p. 160). As a result, Macbeth decides to kill Banquo's children, not only with the purpose of defeating the oracle, but also, according to Elenany (2015), as an attempt to "avenge his sterility" (p. 14). If this is true, the massacre of Macduff's children also illustrates the hero's frustration at his lost manhood.

Kurzel's (2015) depiction of the murder of Macduff's family is rather unsettling. Unlike in the play, here Macbeth does not send murderers to perform the deed, but he himself sets fire to Lady Macduff (Elizabeth Debicki) and her young children (01:15:32-16:25). In an echo of the film's very first scene, in which Macbeth and his wife bid farewell to their dead child upon the funeral pyre (Kurzel, 2015, 01:03-02:07), in this new sequence, the hero looks upon Macduff's children, as he immolates them, with an expression of longing and melancholy. His childlessness is portrayed in the film —more so than in the play, at any rate— as a strong motivator of his vengeful and tyrannical behavior, and it also accounts, at least partially, for his great frustration as a man.

In contrast with Macbeth, Macduff finds a balance between his manliness and his fatherhood. Being a father grants him a sense of completion and brings him closer to a better-rounded masculinity. Kimbrough (1983) interprets Macduff's reaction to the news of his children's death as Shakespeare's declaration in favor of a more realistic and stable manifestation of masculinity. He maintains that "the point Shakespeare makes through Macduff is clear: bravery and compassion are not incompatible" (p. 178). To Malcolm's entreaty to "dispute it like a man" (Shakespeare, 1993, 4.3.226), Macduff answers that he "must also feel it as a man" (Shakespeare, 1993, 4.3.228), which implies tears. Kurzel (2015) draws upon this line to have not only Macduff (Sean Harris) but other male characters in the scene visually weep over the terrible news (01:18:20-21:03). Macduff's position as a family man, as a father, entitles him to a manifestation of emotion that men are not normally allowed. Both in Shakespeare (1993) and in Kurzel (2015), Macduff rationalizes the tyrant's monstrous crime through the exclamation that "he has no children" (4.3.222; 01:19:18-22). Because Macduff is a father, he is a more complete man; because Macbeth is not, he is more beast than man.

Becoming *Hu-man*

According to Kimbrough (1983), Shakespeare's works "move toward liberating humanity from the prisons created by inclusive and exclusive gender labeling" (p. 175). He claims that humanhood, as opposed to manhood or womanhood, was the truest preoccupation of the playwright. In *Macbeth*, the question of masculinity is best understood against the backdrop of the human search for fulfillment. Through characters like Macduff, Shakespeare shows that being a man means, first and foremost, being alive and feeling alive. Kimbrough (1983) affirms about this character that "he expresses a fuller range of

his being: his humanhood" (p. 178). In Kurzel (2015), Macduff fights in cold blood but also tenderly kisses his wife goodbye (01:11:32-35). Macbeth also provides some indications that he cares more about his humanity than about his need to prove his manhood, especially through the affectionate concern that he shows for his young soldiers, yet like in the play, he ends up losing all contact with the "milk of human kindness" for which his wife shuns him (Shakespeare, 1993, 1.5.4).

For Shakespeare and his contemporaries, Kimbrough (1983) explains, there was no difference between being human and being kind: "Kindness is humanness; mankind is humankind" (p. 179). Macbeth's ultimate fall is due to a failure to comprehend the relationship between this notion and his construction of manhood. Nevertheless, "…Shakespeare does not allow us to forget that once Macbeth had a fuller vision…" (Kimbrough, 2983, p. 183). In Act 2, after he murders the king, he asks, "Who can be wise, amazed, temp'rate, and furious, / Loyal and neutral, in a moment?" (Shakespeare, 1993, 2.3.87-88), and although he replies negatively, it is suggested that his actual answer is contrary, for he understands now how much of his humanness he has lost. His early refusals to heed his wife's entreaties are also an indication of his original sense of kindness and morality (Elenany, 2015, p. 10). "We will proceed no further in this business," he curtly says to her at first (Shakespeare, 1993, 1.7.32), and he resists her until that moment when the dagger appears before him. In spite of the maliciousness with which he acts throughout the remaining scenes, there is evidence of a man who was once more ethical and more human. As Elenany (2015) claims, Macbeth was determined to "identify manhood with morality and honour" (p. 3). If he fails to do so, it is mainly because of an artificial construal of masculinity that has been fabricated for him.

Macbeth, both in the play and in the movie, bends over backwards to establish his masculinity even in spite of his humanity. Although he starts as a manly hero and is initially at peace with his stereotypical manhood, he soon discovers that this is not enough. Elenany (2015) states, "Macbeth is forced to re-evaluate his masculinity, adopting in the process extreme measures which further alienate him from the heroic self-image he establishes for himself in the battlefield" (p. 41). Much of this is due to Lady Macbeth's intervention, for whom manliness is true only if inhumanly ruthless and violent. Before meeting her, Macbeth, although shaken by the witches' prophecies, still clings to reason: "If chance will have me king," he soliloquizes, "why, chance may crown me / Without my stir" (Shakespeare, 1993, 1.3.47-48). However, he is finally *stirred* by her warning that, unless he acts quickly against Duncan, he'll "live a coward in [his] own esteem" (Shakespeare, 1993, 1.7.44). His fall into fearless cruelty after this is absolute, and not anymore dependent upon his wife's urgings.

In Kurzel (2015), Macbeth's manhood gradually overpowers his humanhood to the point of shocking even the queen, his maker, who nervously witnesses how the king grows more and more ambitious and threatening by the hour. "Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill," Macbeth confesses as he

slides his hand under his wife's garment, and he continues, "Come, seeling night, scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day, and with thy bloody and invisible hand, cancel and tear to pieces that great bond which keeps me pale" (00:54:16-55). This scene ends with a single tear down the hero's cheek (Kurzel, 2015, 00:55:20-22). For Kimbrough (1983), Macbeth eventually "admits his state of degeneration" (p. 186); for Elenany (2015), he "abdicate[s] his humanity to reclaim his manhood" (p. 12). What is evident both in Shakespeare and in Kurzel is that the work of Lady Macbeth proves too perfect, and the new king is all the manlier because he is less human and less humane.

Conclusion

Shakespeare presents in *Macbeth* a hero who is greatly tormented by his compulsion to adhere to an impossible ideal of masculinity. On the one hand, he epitomizes the heroic male and is even admired by his peers on account of his valor, his fierceness, and his military prowess. On the other hand, he is pitifully subdued by his wife and thus transformed into a monster, something less than a man and something less than human. Shakespeare's views on gender issues are never easy to fathom, and in *Macbeth*, this is particularly so. In this tragedy, according to Wells (2001), "There are two mutually opposed conceptions of manhood. One is based on heroic epic, the other on the Gospels. But the play is not simply claiming the superiority of one set of values over the other" (p. 140). If this is true, Shakespeare does not attempt to answer the question of masculinity but merely poses it. However, it would be unwise to assume that the new humanistic and chivalric ideals upheld during the Renaissance did not cause the playwright to at least shake the traditional conceptions of masculinity a little. For Kimbrough (1983), "Shakespeare criticizes the destructive polarity of the genders and recognizes a fuller, androgynous vision of life" (p. 188). At any rate, *Macbeth* does alert audiences to the loss of humanity brought about by an artificial, unrealistic understanding of what it is to be a man. "A major part of Macbeth's agony," Asp (1981) maintains, "is created by his recognition of what constituted full manhood and his conflicting acceptance of an incomplete stereotype" (p. 156). Macbeth becomes less stable, less real, and less human on account of his delusive search for true manhood.

In his film, Justin Kurzel delves into the possibilities for masculine representation in Shakespeare's play and expands on its ambiguities and inconclusiveness to try and describe the hero's expression of manhood. Just like in the play, the film's Macbeth is a war hero, but in this version, several other aspects of his masculinity are more emphatically depicted so as to enlarge him as a character. His ferocity and mercilessness are amplified by the visual medium —special effects included—, and his tragic grandeur is also played against the backdrop of sublime Scottish landscapes. Furthermore, Macbeth's sexuality is underscored by Kurzel's incorporation of explicit graphic references to it, and his childlessness surfaces amidst the great number of child characters that appear on the screen. Ultimately, Kurzel, if anything,

provides an interpretation of the original play that directs the attention of viewers toward the protagonist's struggle to come to terms with his masculinity. Macbeth looks more temperate, tenderer, even perhaps a little more tragic than he tends to appear in the play. Conversely, when he is to be brutal, he appears even more so, yet he is also more worthy of pity and somewhat more honorable towards the end. Such ambiguities only highlight Shakespeare's original vagueness in delineating the hero's manhood. In the end, both the literary and the cinematic texts convey a sense of the uncertainty and the complexity that surround representations of masculinity.

References

Asp, C. (1981). "Be bloody, bold, and resolute": Tragic action and sexual stereotyping in *Macbeth*. *Studies in Philology,* vol. 78(2), pp. 153-169. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org.una.idm.oclc.org/stable/4174071

Elenany, H. M. (2015). The paradox of masculinity in Shakespeare's Macbeth. (MA thesis, The American University in Cairo). Retrieved from https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/8092/b8cd6918ca3ce4470fe1d7f97c7af00533fe.pdf

Kimbrough, R. (1983). Macbeth: The prisoner of gender. Shakespeare Studies, vol.16, pp. 175-191. Retrieved from web.https://login.una.idm.oclc.org/menu

Kurzel, J. (Director). (2015). Macbeth [film]. United Kingdom: See-Saw Films.

Shakespeare, W. (1993). Macbeth. Retrieved from http://shakespeare.mit.edu/macbeth/

Wells, R. H. (2001). *Shakespeare on Masculinity.* Port Chester: Cambridge University Press.