Boys Armed with Sticks William Goldings Lord of the Flies

Immediately after their arrival on the island the boys embark on dramatic assertion of their masculinity in contradistinction to what they perceive as its 'other'. In the absence of girls or women, nature itself—announcing its untamed difference 'with a witch-like cry' (p. 7: my emphasis)—provides the otherness over which the boys attempt to gain control and establish their superiority. They set out to map the wilderness, casting themselves in the role of heroic explorers who confidently inscribe their presence on the island. In this contest, Golding suggests that the urge to dominate and the excitement derived from finding oneself in a position of power is innate to the boys, as his description of Henry, one of the younger children, demonstrates:

Henry became absorbed beyond mere happiness as he felt himself exercising control over living things. He talked to them, urging them, ordering them. Driven back by the tide, his footprints became bays in which [the little sea creatures] were trapped and gave him the illusion of mastery. (p. 66)

The boys' tendency to set themselves off as controlling agents against an objectified, 'othered' world is not simply a gratuitous pleasure, but a highly functional (if catastrophic) element in a vicious circle of hierarchical self-assertion. While Henry is rejoicing in his rule over 'tiny transparencies' (p. 66), Roger starts throwing stones at him. Both boys are desperate to distract from their own helplessness and do so by projecting their fear of subjection onto an even weaker other. While bullying appears as a reliable strategy of expressing one's superior masculine composure, a self-conscious admission of fear would threaten their integrity as boys. …

As the boys' sense of forlornness steadily increases, so does their need for 'others' to testify to their masterful superiority. Their hunting of the pigs, for example, is clearly motivated by a desire for manly autonomy. The act of killing provides relief from their quintessentially 'feminine' and hence shameful feelings of fear and disempowerment, endowing them with the 'knowledge that they had outwitted a living thing, imposed their will upon it' (p. 76). Symptomatically, the killings become ever more ferocious and orgiastic, culminating in a particularly vicious attack on a sow. Beside themselves with fear, the boys fling themselves at this female emblem of their own panic and vulnerability, determined to master and kill it once and for all. As the sexual undertones and disturbing orgasmic imagery of Golding's description signal, this is no mere killing, but also a rape, which facilitates the boys' initiation into the violent masculinity of big game hunters:

the sow fell and the hunters hurled themselves at her … Roger ran round the heap, prodding with his spear whenever pigflesh appeared. Jack was on top of the sow, stabbing downward with his knife. Roger found a lodgment for his point and began to push till he was leaning with his whole weight. The spear moved forward inch by inch and the terrified squealing became a high-pitched scream. The sow collapsed under them and they were heavy and fulfilled upon her.
… Roger began to withdraw his spear and the boys noticed it for the first time. Robert stabilized the thing in a phrase which was received uproariously.
'Right up her, ass!' (p. 149f.)

The boys engage in a relentless, ultimately self-annihilating battle against their own nature. In their attempt to assert themselves as men and avoid the stigma of being referred to as 'a lot of cry-babies and sissies' (p. 90), they determinedly violate and destroy their 'femininity'. Willingly, they metamorphose into what they are not, donning impassive, uniform masks of masculine strength intended to bring about an eclipse of the terror of individuality. Jack's response to his transformation into a savage by means of clay and charcoal is typical: 'He looked in astonishment, no longer at himself but at an awesome stranger … the mask was a thing on its own, behind which Jack hid, liberated from shame and self-consciousness' (p. 69). Notably, the mask of savagery is so compelling and indisputably masculine that, while wearing it, the boys feel free to tie their long hair back for comfort, an act previously perceived as girlish and hence entirely out of the question.

The boys' masculinity is a precarious construct, extremely paranoid and hypersensitive to the forever imminent threat of unmasking. Both Piggy and Ralph become guilty of disrupting the camouflage by reminding the other boys of the actual reality of their condition. Piggy accuses the hunters of 'acting like a crowd of kids' (p. 42); Ralph refers to them as 'boys armed with
Ralph, Jack and Roger included... one tends to become oblivious to the fact that Golding's protagonists... As male violence and paranoia escalate in... of pre... individual identities become indistinguishable from the roles they play. Hence, the boys' tendency to express their feelings by dint... or distress. They are inclined to mistake the fantasy of heroism for something real, learning and acting out its scripts until their... of superheroic masculinity and show themselves prone to emulate its rigidly coded behaviour in situations of particular exhilaration... and therefore impossible to have a dialogue with' (Middleton 1990: 27). Golding's boys are clearly influenced by representations... of their superiority by means of a glamorously costumed outward appearance and a compelling style. In most cases, their heroism is... discussions about how they feel. Heroes are free, independent agents, unencumbered by a complicated emotional life, maintaining... 'hard', infallible masculinity, at once the cause and effect of their apparent invulnerability. Heroes act; they do not engage in... 'Whizzoh!' (p. 12).

As Peter Middleton argues, such an adamant refusal to apply 'the inward gaze' of self-inspection and self-examination is... time, it enforces a total annihilation of the self's own inherent complexity, prescribing, instead of individual self-fulfillment, the ritual enactment of a tautly scripted role. The process of becoming a man within the conceptual framework of this particular kind of masculinity necessitates a complete surrender of the individual self to totalitarianist, effectively self-oppressive rules and modes of behaviour, hence propagating not self-liberation but ritual self-oblivion. Recoiling in terror from the reality of being frightened little boys on a desert island beleaguered by a world at war, the boys seek refuge in the security of ritualistic role-play. Ironically, in order not to lose face, they resort to gender-specific masquerade....

According to Middleton, seemingly innocuous boyish behaviour like this hints at a grave masculine dilemma. As his detailed analysis of boys' comics shows, the fundamental emotional inarticulacy of superheroes is an indispensable constituent of their 'hard', infallible masculinity, at once the cause and effect of their apparent invulnerability. Heroes act; they do not engage in discussions about how they feel. Heroes are free, independent agents, unencumbered by a complicated emotional life, maintaining their superiority by means of a glamorously costumed outward appearance and a compelling style. In most cases, their heroism is facilitated by an explicit negation of their private persona. For example, unlike Clark Kent, Superman appears incognito, reduced to an exemplary icon of efficiency and action. The public role of heroic masculinity categorically excludes the individual man's private self. As Middleton states, all that can emerge from such a state of enforced impassivity is 'the meaningless cry, prelinguistic and therefore impossible to have a dialogue with' (Middleton 1990: 27). Golding's boys are clearly influenced by representations of superheroic masculinity and show themselves prone to emulate its rigidly coded behaviour in situations of particular exhilaration or distress. They are inclined to mistake the fantasy of heroism for something real, learning and acting out its scripts until their individual identities become indistinguishable from the roles they play. Hence, the boys' tendency to express their feelings by dint of pre-linguistic neologisms can be read as a symptom of their incipient metamorphosis into men, that is, their gradual hardening, and remote-controlled decline into emotional atrophy and self-oblivious role-play....

As male violence and paranoia escalate in Lord of the Flies, one tends to become oblivious to the fact that Golding's protagonists are in fact boys, not men. All the greater then is the shock of recognition at the end of the novel when we are reminded that all of them—Ralph, Jack and Roger included—are in fact 'littluns'. Faced with the sudden appearance of grown-up miles ex machina.
the hunters spontaneously drop their masks of masculine prowess and determination. Their self-assertive agency wilts immediately, to be replaced by an emotional display of feminine passivity and helplessness. A real man now occupies the superior position of masculinity that the boys struggled to usurp, an officer emblematic of the heroism the boys were so keen to emulate. However, like the boys before him, the soldier is only acting out a role, hiding his individual self behind a well-devised mask of ‘white drill, epaulettes, a revolver, a row of gilt buttons down the front of the uniform’ (p. 221). His fortuitous appearance saves Ralph and unmasks his persecutors, yet it does not resolve the novel’s central problem. In fact, the soldier appears to epitomise the ordeal the boys have just been through, as he emerges from a world equally devastated by ‘a jolly good show’ (p. 223) of boyish ‘fun and games’ (p. 221).

Instead of effecting a genuine rescue of the boys from their gender-specific predicament, the officer only suspends it temporarily, delivering them back into the ‘care’ of the patriarchal order and its man-making imperatives that will eventually expect all of them to re-adopt the masculine role. Clearly, the officer himself has internalised all the imperative ideals of patriarchal masculinity: its mask-like uniformity, its paradoxical heroismcum-servitude, its ethical ambiguity (this saviour carries a revolver!), and its peremptory unemotionality. The grown-up man's response to the boys' tearful display of despair and relief seems equally revealing: 'The officer, surrounded by these noises, was moved and a little embarrassed. He turned away to give them time to pull themselves together …' (p. 223). His masculine superiority expresses itself in a deliberate gesture of emotional detachment that serves to accentuate his own manliness in opposition to the boys' femininity. Moreover, his attitude of waiting for the boys to 'pull themselves together' is reminiscent of Jack's fateful earlier demand that the boys should learn how to 'put up with their fear'. The officer's appearance not only triggers the tears to which the boys succumb 'for the first time on the island' (p. 223); he also embodies the principle that is responsible for their tragic belatedness.

Significantly, even at the very end of Golding's novel there remains some ethical ambiguity as to the goodness or badness of male violence. On being informed that two boys have been killed, the officer asks if the children are all British, insinuating that if the boys had been fighting against German or Japanese 'enemies', their savagery might have been acceptable. After all there is a war going on!

*Lord of the Flies* seems a far more complex and complicated book than humanist critics like Reilly, discussing an entirely hypothetical *conditio humana*, appear to find conceivable. Its message is expressly gender-specific, testifying to the urgent accuracy of Middleton's statement that 'modern men have suffered greatly in a series of wars generated by largely masculine codes of behaviour whose close examination might be a useful step towards preventing their endless repetition' (Middleton 1990: 2–3).