

## **The Bald Truth: Baldness as a Symbol of Power in *Harry Potter* and *The Story of Harap-Alb***

### **Shaving off the stereotypes**

“Come out and play, then it will be quick, might even be painless, I would not know, I have never died” affirms Voldemort in front of Harry Potter, shaving off the stereotypes by presenting the power he holds in comparison to his degrading, veiny physique. This research paper contextualizes baldness in the media context as a symbol of power through the monstrous appearances of Voldemort in the film *Harry Potter and The Goblet of Fire* (Newell, 2005) and The Bald Man in the Romanian folklore story from the nineteenth century, *The Story of Harap-Alb* (Creanga, 1877). The purpose of this paper is to present the villainizing process of the two characters previously mentioned in the context of their physical appearance, specifically, their baldness trait, tracing how baldness becomes part of the construction of monstrous masculinity. After a brief contextualization of baldness in the past and of monstrosity, this paper will draw a parallel between the two media objects and their antagonists which represent powerful faces of baldness in the media.

Both media objects share lots of similarities even though they come from different centuries and cultures. The plots cover ‘the hero’s journey’; when a young, attractive boy goes through an adventure, encounters obstacles, defeats the villain, and receives a reward, making the media objects almost identical. In *Harry Potter and The Goblet of Fire*, just like the other films from the franchise, Harry Potter returns to Hogwarts, the wizard school in the magical world, and is haunted by this disembodied presence and worse enemy, Voldemort. Compared to the other films, in *The Goblet of Fire*, Voldemort’s physique appears for the first time. By the end of the film, Voldemort tricks Harry and he ends up in a graveyard where they both compete and Harry wins. The Dark Lord is re-embodied in this film and the audience sees him in his real, unpleasing form of a hairless evil creature.

Nonetheless, *The Story of Harap-Alb* follows to some extent the same plot as *Harry Potter and The Goblet of Fire*, but on a more simplistic note with fewer wizards and more traditionalism and symbolism. The plot follows Harap-Alb’s adventure, which is the youngest prince in the family. He faces multiple traps and encounters helpers whilst The Bald Man tricks him by falling into a magic fountain in order to switch bodies and destroy his journey. The traditional view of The Bald Man, since it is a children-appropriate story, is that a hairless man should never be trusted when coming on someone’s path; it should be avoided and feared because of its power. Both media objects project the young heroes in relation to their villains whilst representing magic being lured off.

The Dark Lord and The Bald Man represent the fearful faces of the two sources, but that work on the protagonist’s development and journey of maturity, their power portraying “[a] placeholder for [Harry’s and Harap-Alb’s] transcendence” (Holland 2013, 4). The following paragraphs will contextualize baldness in the context of the two media pieces and how these antagonists trace how actions and physique intersect in the construction of monstrous masculinity.

### **Beyond the Hairline: A Brief History of Baldness**

Baldness has been seen as an issue for the male gender since the beginning of time, with men being marginalized or seen as inferior because of their loss of hair since “manhood” is not a permanent concept and “can be lost” (Jin et al. 2021, NP5523). Voldemort and The Bald Man represent victims of such fear and feel threatened by the young heroes; thus, their baldness conveys their fears which, on a surface level, never come out. Johnes claims that “baldness has long been associated with negative stereotypes of weakness, age, and illness” (2023, 196). This natural condition of the hair is a part of “contemporary masculinity”, men’s reactions to it being “contingent and idiosyncratic”, representing a social concept that grew from being shamed to being appreciated and viewed as a symbol of intelligence or power (Johnes 2023, 191). The two media objects evoke through their bald villains the power and intelligence they hold which is undeniable when tricking and haunting their enemy.

For both The Dark Lord and the Bald Man the loss of hair is more than just their appearance. Both represent powerful villains with huge egos that cannot be bothered and that is precisely what triggers their ego, the baldness becoming both “an emotional as much as a physical experience” (Johnes 2023, 191). Although the loss of hair was seen as a reason to be a “target of jokes” baldness was indeed associated with masculinity since it was considered an issue that only men would face, and “this made the lack of hair a signifier of masculinity in itself” (Johnes 2023, 191). The presence of baldness in *Harry Potter and The Goblet of Fire* and *The Story of Harap-Alb* follow the pattern present in the past as well, creating a difference between the two young heroes, The Dark Lord, and The Bald Man.

Once with the development of media platforms and pieces, baldness started to be represented more in media pieces such as films. The Dark Lord is portrayed as a completely bald and disfigured villain, his actions representing complete vainness and evilness. Johnes affirms in his paper that “baldness has become a symbol of individuality (...) of rebellion, and of standing out of the crowd” (2023, 210), which is how Voldemort is portrayed in the Harry Potter franchise, being the protagonist’s most relevant enemy and even being called “You-Know-Who” or “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named”. The prior nicknames were given to him for a good reason, that being the fear and threat he brings into people’s daily lives. The “You-Know-Who” emphasizes his glorious persona and importance in the wizard’s universe, showing that everyone knows who he is, meanwhile “Must-Not-Be-Named” evokes the fear and threat he brings between all wizards. His baldness in this context represents his “physical and moral deformity”, emphasizing his evil nature (Johnes 2023, 195).

The same characteristics apply to the Romanian story “The Story of Harap-Alb”, where The Bald Man here is completely hairless, the baldness representing his evilness and power because of the way he tricked the prince, just like Voldemort tricked Harry Potter in *The Goblet of Fire*. The Bald Man represents the degradation of a human being, finding himself superior to the prince, and by virtue of his traits, he manages to trick everyone he wants. His moral traits are mostly formed out of vain and hoaxes, which not only deform his physique through his ugliness but also his morals. Both characters, through their actions, show “general mental superiority”, “stage of evolution” and (monstrous) masculinity because, without their abilities to trick and fight the young boys, they could not have been so frightening by everyone else (Johnes 2023, 200).

The way baldness is perceived has been shaped by “evolving social and cultural conditions” (Johnes 2023, 192) which can be seen in the media now through the numerous

representations of bald men. Both bald villains and heroes are perceived as dominant and masculine since their “bodies [are] central to how men produced and ‘performed’ masculinity to themselves and to the wider world” (Johnes 2023, 192). In addition, Voldemort and The Bald Man turn the tables and show that “evil is an obvious presence, readily apparent to anyone who takes time to look” (Heit 2011, 4).

According to Peretz, Tal, and Vidmar, being part of manhood means representing “norms of toughness, dominance, and willingness to prove” it, which applies to both Voldemort and The Bald Man. Their physical appearance combined with their evil actions represents “a powerful symbol of masculinity” (Peretz, Tal, and Vidmar 2021, 5). Through their hairless physique, it is emphasized in this context their strength because of their actions, representing dominance, toughness, and power, following David and Brannon’s “rules of manhood” (Perez and Vidmar 2021, 2). Both villains value success and power, have emotional restrictions, and refuse to show any weaknesses while dominating through violence and aggression (Perez and Vidmar 2021, 2). The way they treat the young boys shows a lack of compassion, being raised with the belief that “physical aggression [is] a part of their cultural script” (Jin et al. 2021, NP5522). Both characters fit manhood through historical prejudices, representing power in the media pieces they are in.

Young men grew up with the idea that losing their hair will be the saddest thing that could happen related to their own bodies. It affected “their sense of dignity” and made them believe it will take their masculinity away (Johnes 2023, 206). Thus, they do represent men as a symbol of masculinity, because of their “willingness to stand against social norms”, shaving off the stereotypes and shining through with their dominant and manly attitude (China Staff 2012, 10). The present shows now that the loss of hair is presented in the media as a representation of power and manhood, Voldemort and The Bald Man representing the pride of baldness in different corners of Europe.

### **The Bald and The (Male)volent: A Parallel between The Dark Lord and The Bald Man**

The Dark Lord and The Bald Man follow the monstrous stereotype of the perfect enemy. What is interesting in both *The Goblet of Fire* and *The Story of Harap-Alb* is the creation and the resemblance the two villains have, even though they ‘were born’ in different centuries and parts of Europe, since Voldemort represents J.K. Rowling’s masterpiece while The Bald Man is a part of Romanian history and folklore. Although they would not be expected to be so alike, their physique, vein actions, and demonized status make them identical. Heit affirms about The Dark Lord that for him “good is literally an absurdity” (2011, 208), a quote just as applicable to The Bald Man.

They follow the perfect villain by being cruel and hating their enemy for being ‘the chosen one’. Harry Potter fits Harap-Alb on all levels since he is seen in the beginning as a pitiful boy with no future but turns out to be more powerful than expected and succeeds in winning each adventure or obstacle that he confronts, including their bald enemies. By defeating them, Voldemort and The Bald Man consider their manhood threatened and see it as precarious (Jin et al. 2021, NP5522), which hurts their ego and makes one of their main traits come out: arrogance. Through arrogance, their superiority is shown, which triggers “the arrogant eye”, making them commit wicked actions (Holland 2013, 11). Arrogance breaks the moral circle, which in *The Goblet of Fire* is conveyed through the use of magic, while in *The Story of Harap-Alb* symbolism and traditions are used.

In *The Goblet of Fire*, when Voldemort tricks Harry and uses his blood in order to be re-embodied, takes advantage of the boy's naivety. The same happens with Harap-Alb and The Bald Man; he is tricked to fall into the fountain and switching bodies, which in the Romanian folklore symbolizes re-birth or a second baptism. The antagonists' intelligence and arrogance followed by their confidence represent masculinity and power since they will now dominate the young boys, supporting Vidmar, Tal, and Peretz's claim that "men have primarily been framed as perpetrators of violence" (2021, 1). Although their demonized features and attitude emphasize violence, for both media objects the villains represent a "necessary evil" or a mentor in their young heroes' journey in order to evolve, mature and grow as men.

Related to arrogance are all the manly characteristics that represent manhood and the way Voldemort and The Bald Man cope with them traces their path into the viewer's eye. Since both media pieces are children-appropriate, their arrogance is portrayed at first sight in a simpler way, but that does not make the profoundness of the character less relevant to the plot. Heit affirms that The Dark Lord, like any other villain became evil because of traumas and early childhood family issues (2011, 204). Although that does not excuse "his choice, fate and predestination" (2011, 204). The precarious manhood theory (PMT) supports that "manhood is a social status that must be earned and achieved" which is a statement that both Voldemort and The Bald Man are following (Jin et al. 2021, NP5523). Through their evil behavior, they express their masculinity, which blends with their physical appearance, making them fearless and dominant in front of their enemy. Their dominance is born from the same place as their arrogance, which is the ego. It makes them feel manly and be a part of the manhood which represents a status that can easily be lost and that under those circumstances is threatened by the young heroes.

"Manhood requires a public demonstration" (Jin et al. 2021, NP5523) which is what The Dark Lord is doing when confronting Harry, through his re-embodiment and by treating him with despise. In the final scene of *Harry Potter and The Goblet of Fire*, Voldemort is re-embodied in flesh and bone with the help of Harry's blood which marks the connection between the protagonist and the antagonist as being unbreakable whilst showing one is as powerful as the other. His baldness and deformed face nicely blend with the setting, represented by a graveyard. The graveyard signifies in this context death but also birth since Harry's parents are buried there while Voldemort's body is reborn. The graveyard symbolizes Voldemort's vainness since he is re-embodied in a place where people are buried after they die. Although The Dark Lord is defeated, their fight represents a public demonstration of his manhood and the beginning of his revenge because his ego is being threatened by this young man, which in his eyes may be seen as disrespectful.

The same phenomenon happens with The Bald Man and Harap-Alb when tricking him to go inside the fountain, it follows the same destiny, showing superiority through his attitude and arrogance, physical aggression being key in order to make the young boys acknowledge their status. The fountain passage from *The Story of Harap-Alb* follows the same connotation as the graveyard, but the fountain has the role of a second baptism for the two characters since they switch bodies. By tricking the young boy, The Bald Man shows his masculinity, but the same as with Voldemort, it is unsure for how long he will be the one in power. Both of their physiques help create a demonized setting, the baldness representing little to no vitality (Johnes 2021, 198).

Johnes claims that hair is a “secondary source of individual identity”, which follows the baldness of both Voldemort and The Bald Man since an individual’s identity is formed by his physique and behavior (2023, 194). In this context, the lack of hair represents their “death-to-destruction-loving will to power and thirst for vengeance” against any threats (Heit 2011, 204). Both The Dark Lord and The Bald Man follow this ideal of ruining the young boy’s life because he is seen as a threat. Looking in perspective, they fear losing their manhood in front of an individual much younger than themselves, since “threats to manhood could evoke increased aggressive cognition and behavior” (Jin et al 2021, NP5525). Their attitude would be seen as weak or vulnerable in front of young boys, which for them is seen as a complete failure. This way of thinking follows David and Brannon’s “rules of manhood” presented in Vidmar, Tal, and Peretz’s paper (2021, 2) where the two antagonists portray a view of ‘the standard man’ within the past: dominant, risk-taking, aggressive, and bald.

Johnes affirms in his paper that a doctor from New York “maintained that the balder the man is the more advanced his stage of evolution” (2023, 200), which applies to the two characters since their traits both physical and behavioral follow how men were in the past, representing (monstrous) masculinity.

### **Understanding and Empathizing with The Manhood**

Baldness has been from the beginning a physical condition that affected predominantly men because of their higher level of testosterone. According to multiple studies, men with “a 3.5 or greater” level of testosterone are the ones affected by the loss of hair compared to the ‘nonbalding subjects’ (Choi et al. 2001, 2). The baldness of The Dark Lord and The Bald Man evokes power, masculinity, and fear in the large audience and especially young boys since they are placed in relation to them. While baldness has long been associated with sickness and the elderly, these characters show the contrary, imposing monstrous masculinity through their physique and vein actions, the lack of hair being used as a tool for dominance and control. Moreover, the plot of both *The Goblet of Fire* and *The Story of Harap-Alb* represents a parallel between the strong masculine figure that the two antagonists portray and in relation to Harry Potter and Harap-Alb which are the threats to their dominant attitude.

The villains’ manhood is threatened which makes them more aggressive and feel the need to impress in order to support their (man)agement (Jin et al. 2021, NP5537). By analyzing their baldness in the context of the plot and in relation to their evil actions of dragging down the protagonist, the role of physical appearance is better understood in shaping manly attitudes which represent control and authority. The complexity of baldness as a physical trait in literature and popular culture challenges people into reconsidering their opinions on stereotypes and recognize the deeper meanings of this symbol. “Evil is merely the absence of good” affirms Heit (2011, 1) about the wicked which applies to both The Dark Lord and The Bald Man following their destiny into misery.

To conclude, the perception of baldness has changed depending on the era, society, and the mentality of people at the time. This highlights the impact of symbols and of baldness through the cultural norms at a specific time. Meanwhile, the lack of hair has been perceived as a symbol of masculinity for various reasons previously mentioned, for the chosen media objects, baldness remains, besides masculinity, a symbol of monstrosity, dominance, and violence.

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