

Review: *Men*

directed by Alex Garland

United Kingdom/United States of America
DNA Films, 2022
100 mins

Diane A. Rodgers, Sheffield Hallam University

(Please note: review contains spoilers)

Men are *awful*. Men are threatening, abusive, violent, patronising, dismissive of women and expect to be loved for it. Men have always been, and will always be, so. This seems to be the overarching message of Alex Garland's film *Men*.

At the very least, this is the perspective of the film's central character Harper Marlowe who, to be fair, is working out her own psychological demons having recently lost her unstable husband who punched her before committing suicide (and cruelly telling her she has driven him to it). Harper has escaped her metropolitan London life for a break in a large country manor house in the fictional isolated village of Cotson, a narrative played many times over in classic television folk horror, including Nigel Kneale's 1976 'Baby' episode of *Beasts* and John Bowen's 1970 teleplay *Robin Redbreast*. It is difficult not to think of these earlier examples watching *Men*, in the remote, timeless village setting, where Harper takes long walks in the lush woods along an abandoned railway line (the stuff of public information film warnings) and Harper herself wearing attire that wouldn't be out of place in a 1970s Laura Ashley catalogue. Harper's name itself is hauntological, suggestive of times past. Her first name recalls Harper Lee, author of *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1960), a book which deals with issues of rape and racial inequality, and her surname Marlowe complimenting a reference to the manor house she is renting being older than Shakespearean times with reference to Elizabethan playwright Christopher Marlowe.

Over-saturated greenery, drifting dandelion seeds and the dewy atmosphere of the British countryside creates a timeless, dreamlike and otherworldly ambience – the cinematography in this film is one of its highlights. The soundtrack is another: a beautifully crafted scene in which Harper calls into a tunnel, creating repeated echoes with which she harmonises and makes musical patterns is woven into the remainder of the non-diegetic compositions. This emphasises not only the simple folksy tone in general but also echoes thematic patterns of the cycle of nature and repetitions seen elsewhere in the film.

From the moment Harper arrives in Cotson, there is a looming sense of threat from every male villager she meets, from anachronistic country gent Geoffrey who jokingly threatens her not to eat ‘forbidden fruit’ from the garden through to a sinister, disturbed naked stalker, a very unsympathetic police officer and a rude young boy who calls her a ‘bitch’. The Green Man, who in legend most often represents the idea of rebirth or new growth, features heavily in the narrative as a recurring motif, both as pagan carvings in the local church and as what seems to become a literal character. In *Men*, the Green Man represents toxic masculinity, which is made so obvious it goes beyond symbolism and metaphor to overly-clunky literal interpretation. He imposes his need for rebirth upon woman: we see him trying to force his seed into Harper as his human incarnation blows dandelion seeds into her open mouth whilst another version of him tries to rape her; he is frustrated by his desire for her.

Harper, like pregnant Jo in ‘Baby’ and impregnated Norah in *Robin Redbreast*, is certainly a victim in the film, vulnerable and alone in the large manor house, spending much of the film being afraid, screaming and running, needing to be saved. *Men*, and both of these television examples, feature central female characters, narrative themes of fertility and impregnation (willingly or otherwise) and all are written by male writers. Interestingly, the only folk-horror-adjacent film equivalent that immediately springs to mind written by a woman is *Prevenge* (2016), written and directed by Alice Lowe. Lowe is a folk-horror fan and frequently appears in folk horror narratives on and off screen. The major difference in her

film is that the heavily pregnant protagonist is *herself* the murderous threat – a rather wonderfully refreshing change and an example perhaps more male writers could heed.

The victim perspective of Harper in *Men* does echo the element of threat posed by all men that surely all women have felt on at least one occasion (although based on my own experience as a woman I'd guess at multiple times for most), whether from rough teenagers, cartoonish louts or less-than-reliable authority figures – all represented in the film. A stroke of genius has the splendid Rory Kinnear recognisably playing every single male character (including the young boy, the only disappointing use of computer-generated effects in the film though remains somewhat disconcerting) emphasising the conspiratorial feeling that all the men in the village harbour ill feeling toward Harper. Kinnear's unforgiving vicar with ash grey shoulder length hair, one fingernail creepily longer than the others and over-familiar hands is especially unsettling. The graphic supernatural horror denouement sees Kinnear's naked stalker, skin pierced with leaves and twigs, turn into a more overt representation of the Green Man and graphically giving birth repeatedly to other men in the film as versions of himself. His belly swells each time and we see the head of the successor burst through a vaginal opening which appears in a different place on each version's body: the naked man gives birth to the young boy who in turn gives birth to the vicar, then Geoffrey and finally James, Harper's deceased husband. The Green Man, here symbolising all men, is apparently doomed without a woman to give birth to only himself for all eternity. I confess here to wondering what the man and his two teenage sons in front of me at the cinema made of these rather explicit childbirth-esque scenes.

If we dismiss the fantastical events of the film as paranoia or existing only in Harper's mind, are we guilty of misdirecting blame toward the 'hysterical woman' rather than focussing on making men (#NOTALLMEN) accountable for their behaviours? Perhaps this is a question Garland intended to pose in blurring lines between reality, the imaginary and supernatural folklore but, however well-meant the message is about the threat of men toward women, this is not one that is anything new. The first half of the film sets the tone, atmosphere and creeping dread in an artful fashion but, as it progresses, the message is

rather heavy-handedly made. Particularly so when it takes a film of 100 minutes to do this when Nigel Kneale was able to convey similar ideas five decades ago, in an arguably more subtle fashion, in under 50 minutes.

Is the metaphor heavy handed? Yes. Does the folk-horror narrative do something new? Not especially. Even the genuinely shocking gore, impressively horrible, just splatters the ideas larger across the screen, leaving nothing especially thought-provoking or mysterious, which makes it far less frightening than it could have been. However, the film is still a beautifully crafted one with some outstanding performances and plenty of genuinely creepy moments.

WORKS CITED

'Baby', *Beasts* [television episode]. Wr. Nigel Kneale. Prod. Nicholas Palmer. ATV, UK,

21.00, 6/11/1972, ITV. 52mins.

Lee, H. (1960). *To Kill A Mockingbird*. J. B. Lippincott & Co.

Men [feature film]. Dir. Alex Garland. DNA Films, UK, USA, 2022. 100mins.

Prevenge [feature film]. Dir. Alice Lowe. Western Edge Pictures, Gennaker Group, Ffilm

Cymru Wales, UK, 2016. 87mins.

'Robin Redbreast', *Play for Today* [television play]. Wr. John Bowen. Dir. James MacTaggart.

BBC, UK, 21.20, 10/12/1970. 75mins.