DISABILITY AND MEDIEVAL (IN)JUSTICE IN *THE ADVENTURES OF ROBIN HOOD* (1938) AND *ROBIN OF SHERWOOD* (1984)[1]

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INTRODUCTION

The society in which Robin Hood operates on the large and small screen is typically a dysfunctional one. In *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) and *Robin of Sherwood* (1984), that dysfunction is signaled by the way in which disability, as a constructed category, is used "to mark its opposite, normality, and thereby to manage social—particularly class—relations."[2] With a range of interpretative options and literary precedents open to them, screen depictions of Robin Hood typically give the outlaw values and goals recognizable and sympathetic to contemporary audiences.[3] In the adaptations under consideration, I argue, these values and goals are aligned with disability justice and disability activism. Robin Hood can thus be read as a figure resisting contemporary oppressions as well as those of the imagined medieval, whether those of the widespread eugenics movements of the 1930s or the austerity and neoliberal aspirations of Thatcherite Britain.[4] I have chosen to focus on these adaptations both because they highlight ableism and injustice as intertwined, and because they can be read productively in conversation with disability theory.

Most screen retellings of the Robin Hood legend seek an answer for the central question of how the dysfunction of twelfth-century England under the alleged Norman yoke is to be established and represented.[5] In 1922 and 1938, 1955, 2010, and 2018, opening intertitles suggest that the medieval period creates both the possibility and the necessity of Robin Hood: the boyishly enthusiastic hero who is fearless in combating abusive feudal power.[6] The 1976 and 1991 adaptations use images rather than text to accomplish similar goals. Richard Lester's *Robin and*

[1] I am indebted to the anonymous readers of this article and to the editors for their suggestions; to the International Association of Robin Hood Studies for providing a forum for presentation of an early version of this research at the 2023 International Medieval Congress, Kalamazoo; to Rachel E. Clark for her valuable feedback on an early draft; to Beatrice J. Adams, Julia Wallace Bernier, and Christina Welsch for their generative and generous commentary; to Sarah Heim for helping me track down and obtain fanzines; and, not least, to the late Damon Douglas Hickey for introducing me to *Robin of Sherwood* and holding lively conversations on this and other examples of medievalism.
[2] Paul K. Longmore and David Goldberger, "The League of Physically Handicapped and the Great Depression: A Case Study in the New Disability History," *The Journal of American History* 87, no. 3 (2000), 889.
[3] Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 173, argues that it is film and television adaptations that have given Robin Hood "extended politics both domestic and international." The book does not discuss disability activism as a feature of these politics.
[4] On Thatcherite rhetoric and values as inherently ableist see Robert McRuer, *Crip Times: Disability, Globalization, and Resistance* (New York: NYU Press, 2018), 176-218.
[5] On the so-called Norman yoke, see Siobhan Brownlie, *Memory and Myths of the Norman Conquest*, Medievalism 3 (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2013).
[6] *Robin Hood*, directed by Allan Dwan (Douglas Fairbanks Pictures Corporation and United Artists, 1922); *The Adventures of Robin Hood,* directed by Michael Curtiz and William Keighley (Warner Bros., 1938); "The Coming of Robin Hood," *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, directed by Bernard Knowles and Ralph Smart, ITC, 26 Sept. 1955; *Robin Hood*, directed by Ridley Scott (Universal Pictures, 2010); *Robin Hood*, directed by Otto Bathurst (Summit Entertainment, 2018).

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Marian uses impressionistic shots of rotting fruit, a cross-shaped hilt blotting out the sun, and a one-eyed man contemplating a barren landscape to establish the medieval setting as one of corruption, violence, and disability.[7] Similarly and infamously, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* opens with unjust imprisonment and the threat of maiming.[8] Both the medievalism and the disability representation of *The Adventures of Robin Hood* and *Robin of Sherwood* are, however, distinctive. These influential adaptations not only present oppressive political systems as inherently disabling and violent, but also, more unusually, argue for the inclusion of those with disabilities as one of the characteristics of a functional community. In both respects, they take advantage of the ways in which films set in the Middle Ages simultaneously rely on tropes concerning the imagined past, and provide opportunities for reflection on present realities.[9]

The Adventures of Robin Hood and *Robin of Sherwood* present a medieval world simultaneously romantic—filled with virtuous good fellowship and daring adventures—and almost dystopian in its endemic brutality. This paradoxical medievalism, also present in other Robin Hood adaptations, is far from uncommon, relying on tropes largely set in the nineteenth century.[10] *The Adventures of Robin Hood* and *Robin of Sherwood* are unusual in the ways that they represent disability justice as central to Robin Hood's social vocation, and the community of the greenwood as guided by values like those of disability activism. Both adaptations, while they predate the significant growth of disability studies as an academic field, offer imaginative possibilities for the social integration of those with disabilities. I will discuss how this compares to the representation of disability in Robin Hood adaptations, followed by a summary of recent scholarship on disability in twelfth-century England, where most modern adaptations are set. I will then briefly address questions of intersectional oppression and resistance in the early texts before turning to an analysis of disability, disability justice, and disability activism in the two adaptations under consideration. In conclusion, I argue that the medievalism of these adaptations showcases ways of resisting contemporary ableism.

DISABILITY, DISABILITY STUDIES, AND ROBIN HOOD

Contemporary disability activism has often been linked to embracing an enforced "exile" from able-bodied society, and an elective community with like-minded activists that, as Eli Clare has argued, enables the creation of "chosen families and homes [rooted in] shared passion, imagination, and values."[11] The creation of this chosen community, however, necessitates exile from a place of origin in which the exiled would otherwise "have to tolerate a lack of community,

[7] *Robin and Marian*, directed by Richard Lester (Columbia Pictures, 1976). A group of blind travelers—it is unclear whether they are pilgrims or beggars—near a roadside cross on the outskirts of Sherwood Forest also contribute to the film's portrayal of an England where groups of the marginalized attempt to survive despite the indifference or abuses of the elite.

[8] Rachel E. Clark, "Azeem and the Witch: Race, Disability, and Medievalisms in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*," *Open Library of Humanities Journal* 9, no. 1 (2023); *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves,* directed by Kevin Reynolds (Morgan Creek and Warner Bros., 1991).

[9] On the ways in which medieval films function distinctively from those set in other eras, see David Williams, "Medieval Movies," *The Yearbook for English Studies* 20 (1990): 1-6.

[10] Marcus Bull, *Thinking Medieval* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 7-41.

[11] Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 32.

unspoken disdain," rumor, and the possibility of violence.[12] Not only can the 1938 and 1984 Robin Hood adaptations be read in this way, but doing so facilitates an interrogation of how the imagined medieval is constructed as the temporal locus of injustice, and how injustice operates in contemporary societies. The focus on Sherwood Forest as a space central to Robin Hood's identity and activities is something that Stephen Knight has identified as an influential choice of the 1938 adaptation, echoed by *Robin of Sherwood* and others.[13] This is one of the characteristics which distinguishes these adaptations, in my view, as well-suited to disability studies readings. In this, they are distinctive from other adaptations where disability is present.

In most screen versions of Robin Hood, disability, particularly acquired disability, is used as a signifier of the medieval period as one of both injustice and disease. There is the figure of the blinded servant Duncan in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, and the derivative figure in *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*. But the Kevin Costner vehicle treats Duncan's blindness as simultaneously capable of being overlooked, and inherently enfeebling as well as disabling, when it's not being used for comic effect. The film's opening scene, too, presents disability as an inherently medieval abjection. As Rachel Clark has argued, disability in *Prince of Thieves* is both linked to racial othering, and reduced to stereotyped narratives.[14] In the case of Sir Walter of Locksley (Max von Sydow) in Ridley Scott's *Robin Hood* (2010), blindness is linked with the infirmity of old age. Old age itself is exceptional in medieval films; whether in *The Lion in Winter* (1968) or *The King* (2019), even kings are lucky to be alive at 50.[15] The treatment of old age as a form of progressive disability, found in both the Scott film and *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, is not without medieval precedent.[16] A similar blurring of the categories of old age and physical and mental disability is found in the opening sequence of *Robin and Marian* (1976), where Sean Connery's Robin pleads for mercy for a one-eyed combatant on the grounds that he is a "mad old man."[17] In the Scott film, disability intersects with age, class, and gender in how it affects Sir Walter's delegation of manorial administration to Cate Blanchett's Marion, and provides the catalyst for his plan to have the able-bodied—though lowly-born—Robin (Russell Crowe) take on the identity of his assassinated son. More recently, in Otto Bathurst's 2018 *Robin Hood*, Yahya (Jamie Foxx) has his right hand removed as a judicial punishment. The film fails to explore the potential of a Black disabled Little John figure, instead indulging in supercrip tropes as Yahya uses his exceptional expertise to train the white, able-bodied Robin Hood (Taron Egerton.)[18] The loss of Yahya's hand itself can be read as a nod to *Prince of Thieves*, as well as a more general invocation of the medieval violence that modern audiences expect to see in neomedievalist films.[19] Thomas Leitch has suggested that

[12] Clare, *Exile and Pride*, 32-33.
[13] Knight, *Mythic Biography*, 157-66.
[14] Clark, "Azeem and the Witch."
[15] *The Lion in Winter,* directed by Anthony Harvey (Haworth Productions and Embassy Pictures, 1968); *The King*, directed by David Michôd (Plan B Entertainment and Netflix, 2019).
[16] See Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1997).
[17] *Robin and Marian* (1976).
[18] Clark, "Azeem and the Witch." For a contrasting argument, see Lauryn Mayer, "Reel Fury: White Fragility and the Backlash Against Bathurst's Robin Hood," *The Bulletin of the International Association of Robin Hood Studies* 3 (2019).
[19] Amy S. Kaufman, "Medieval Unmoored," *Studies in Medievalism XIX* (2010), 2, discusses neomedievalism as characterized by "an intensified combination of love and loathing, its desire for the past torn asunder between the

modern films can be understood as "adaptations without sources," using Robin Hood's cultural capital and popular reputation rather than any text perceived as authoritative.[20] It is worth considering the historical reality of disability in Anglo-Norman England, where most modern Robin Hood adaptations are set, as well as the relationship of the outlaws to structures of power in the early legends.

Disability in Anglo-Norman England has received recent scholarly attention: Ruth Salter has analyzed the accessibility of care and the experience of disease, while Claire Trenery has examined representations of mental illness in twelfth-century English miracle collections. The work of both Salter and Trenery, however, draws chiefly on hagiography, a genre that expects those affected by illness and impairment to seek cures.[21] The construction and the marginalization of modern disability have been connected to the construction of the modern state and an often ableist norm of the ideal subject. A fraught state-subject relationship, while not medieval, has been central to modern adaptations of the Robin Hood legend, arguably from *Ivanhoe* onwards.[22] To quote Fiona Kumari Campbell: "Inscribing certain bodies in terms of deficiency and essential inadequacy privileges a particular understanding of normalcy that is commensurate with the interests of dominant groups."[23] It is precisely this sort of descriptive work that is explicitly resisted in both *The Adventures of Robin Hood* and *Robin of Sherwood*. Instead, the outlaws craft a community guided by an ethics of care and what Rick Godden has called an "ethics of neighboring."[24]

Within medieval societies, there were both multiple models of understanding disability and impairment, and multiple options for the "localized enactment" of ableism.[25] The ways in which the methods of disability studies can be applied to the European Middle Ages have been debated, largely because of the absence of state structures, centralized laws, and medicalized institutions to enforce norms in ways more typical of modern western societies. Irina Metzler, influentially, has written of disability and impairment as conferring liminal status in medieval society. I however view semi-integration as the default in medieval communities. While those with disabilities were marked by difference, they also were included through practices of accommodation, in ways affected by factors of class, age, gender, and race.[26]

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denial of history and a longing for return." I read both *Prince of Thieves* and the 2018 *Robin Hood* as characterized by this highly-charged and ambivalent relationship to a loosely evoked medieval past.

[20] Thomas Leitch, "Adaptations without Sources: *The Adventures of Robin Hood*." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2008).

[21] Claire Trenery, *Madness, Medicine and Miracle in Twelfth-Century England* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019); Ruth J. Salter, *Saints, Cure-Seekers, and Miraculous Healing in Twelfth-Century England* (York: York Medieval Press, 2021).

[22] See Esther Liberman Cuenca, '"Normans 'vs. 'Saxons': Cinematic Imaginaries of Race and Nation in Angevin England, 1938–1964," *Open Library of Humanities* 9, no. 1 (2023): 1-20.

[23] Fiona Kumari Campbell, "The Project of Ableism," in *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Abledness* (London: Palgrave, 2009), 11.

[24] Richard H. Godden, "Neighboring Disability in Medieval Literature," *Exemplaria* 32, no. 3 (2020): 231.

[25] Campbell, "The Project of Ableism," 6. For a recent survey of the field and approaches, see Cameron Hunt McNabb, "Introduction," in *Medieval Disability Sourcebook: Western Europe*, ed. Cameron Hunt McNabb (Santa Barbara: Punctum Books, 2020), 13-21.

[26] Irina Metzler, *A Social History of Disability in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2013); for the model of semi-integration, see Guy Geltner, "Social Deviancy: A Medieval Approach," in *Why the Middle Ages Matter*, ed. Celia M. Chazelle, et al. (London: Routledge, 2011), 29-40.

The representation of Robin Hood as offering an alternative set of social values to that of the dominant political community is largely absent from the earliest texts. These portray Robin as a figure who may defy elements of the social hierarchy as represented, but does not present an alternative to it.[27] In *Robin Hood and the Potter*, the band of merry men is invested in seeing that the potter does right by the community by paying his tolls of travel. Robin Hood assumes the potter's identity in order both to benefit the populace of Nottingham and to deceive the sheriff in the role of a tradesman and honored guest at his dinner table.[28] While there are subversive elements to the tale, perhaps particularly in the amusement of the sheriff's wife at her husband's discomfiture, the episode does not appear to fundamentally challenge Nottingham's political and economic organization. Both the *Lytell Geste* and *Robin Hood and the Monk* raise the possibility of Robin Hood as a rival power to the king, but this is not presented as the result of conflicting social values. In the *Geste*, Robin plans to restore Sir Richard of the Lea's fortunes, and lends Little John as a squire to serve him. It is the king who fears that Robin will establish a rival power in the north.[29] Similarly, in *Robin Hood and the Monk*, the king's anger is kindled by the fact that Much and Little John, though rewarded with titles and income by the crown, retain their primary loyalty to Robin rather than to the king himself.[30] As Wendy Turner has observed, Robin's redistribution of wealth, so key to his later reputation in *Ivanhoe* and beyond, is largely absent.[31] In modern adaptations, Robin poses at least a temporary threat to the status quo. I argue that the two adaptations under discussion present the community of Sherwood as not only a possible but a necessary alternative to oppressive and disabling power structures.

READING DISABILITY ACTIVISM IN *THE ADVENTURES OF ROBIN HOOD* AND *ROBIN OF SHERWOOD*

The model of disability activism and its elective affinities can be effectively mapped onto the representation of the outlaws in both *The Adventures of Robin Hood* and *Robin of Sherwood*. In both adaptations, those who become outlaws are exiled from the norm in a variety of ways, implicitly linked to incompatibility with an oppressive society, rather than a singular act of rebellion or crime against that society.[32] Conspicuously linked to a single act of rebellion, in contrast, is Robin Hood himself. Although in the 1938 film he has apparently committed various "outrages" against Norman law, in both adaptations it is Robin's acceptance of responsibility for

[27] Alexander L. Kaufman, "A Desire for Origins: The Marginal Robin Hood of the Later Ballads," *Studies in Medievalism XXIV* (2015): 31, has pointed to the "outsider, transgressive status" of the oral Robin Hood tradition referenced in *Piers Plowman*.
[28] Thomas H. Ohlgren and Lister M. Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Edition of the Texts, ca. 1425 to ca. 1600* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2013), 27-32.
[29] Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes*, 65-71 and 98-103 for Robin and Sir Richard; at 52-53, 85, 135 for the anger of the king.
[30] Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes*, 12-17.
[31] Wendy Turner, "English Law and the Outlaw: Resistance and Contempt," *Bulletin of the International Association for Robin Hood Studies* 4:1 (2022): 1-18, esp. 14-16; Cuenca, "'Normans' vs. 'Saxons': Cinematic Imaginaries of Race and Nation;" Thomas Leitch, "Adaptations without Sources," 22.
[32] For actions that could result in legal outlawry, see Turner, "English Law and the Outlaw," 3-13. On attitudes of resistance, Valerie B. Johnson, "Agamben's *homo sacer*, the 'State of Exception', and the Modern Robin Hood," in *Robin Hood in Greenwood Stood*, ed. Stephen Knight (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 207-27.

another man's killing of one of the king's deer that serves as a catalyst for his move to Sherwood Forest, and outlawry.[33]

In *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, this act of rebellion is followed by a very public defiance, which can be productively read through a disability studies lens. One of the things that Robin's defiance does is to make systemic inaccessibility visible. The viewer "enters" the space of Prince John's great hall at Nottingham Castle via a shot from a crane-mounted camera, panning past hawks and hounds, servers and musicians, to the gaudily-clad antagonists at the head table. It is only when the noise of Errol Flynn fighting four guards with a stag's carcass becomes audible that we are made to realize this is a fortified space, inaccessible by design.[34]

When Flynn's Robin Hood has delivered his public defiance and barely escaped being murdered as a result, he launches his resistance by telling Much to "pass the word to every man who's been beaten or tortured" to gather in Sherwood, defining his audience and accomplices as those who have been the targets of potentially disabling violence.[35] This scene cuts to the interior of Nottingham Castle, where Prince John legally strips Robin of his possessions. The film then moves from Guy of Gisbourne's vain promise of death and bodily abjection—I'll have him dangling within a week—to Much's fulfillment of his promise, as he and others spread the word to men engaged in various trades and none.[36] This diversity of occupations is significant because physical wholeness is not required for all the trades represented, some of which—fletching, smithing—carried with them elevated risks of acquired impairment. The space and society of Sherwood, too, are explicitly framed in opposition to those of Nottingham Castle and the Norman rule it represents. Sherwood itself, thus, becomes a potential space for the work of disability studies and disability activism in "crafting a territory that is antithetical to ableist normativities."[37] In the context of modern adaptations of the Robin Hood legend, Sherwood is frequently a territory antithetical to normativities of all kinds; here, resistance to ableism is centered.[38] Can Sherwood itself be read as a crip space? Particularly in *Robin of Sherwood*, the forest itself is treated as linked to the outlaws' mission in both practical and spiritual terms. Robin promises Marion that he will survive precisely because he knows the forest and his pursuers do not. Also in the pilot episode, when Robin liberates Little John from his possession, their location in Sherwood is treated as more essential knowledge than either of their names.[39]

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[33] On the defiance of forest law as a feature of modern Robin Hood adaptations, see Stephen Knight, "Robin Hood and the Forest Laws," *The Bulletin of the International Association for Robin Hood Studies* 1 (2017): 1-14; and Knight, *Mythic Biography*, 157.

[34] See Tanya Titchkosky, *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), which is structured by linked questions about when, where, how, and for whom accessibility is perceived as an issue.

[35] *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938).

[36] The spelling of Sir Guy of Gisborne's name has varied across texts. In my essay, I have chosen to keep the spelling of the character's name as it was intended by the writers/directors of the source in which he appeared.

[37] Campbell, *Contours of Ableism*, 194. See also, influentially, Rosemary Garland-Thomson, "The Case for Conserving Disability," *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* 9 (2012): 339-55.

[38] See Brian J. Levy and Lesley Coote, "*Mouvance*, Greenwood, and Gender in *The Adventures of Robin Hood* and *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*," in *Robin Hood in Greenwood Stood*, ed. Stephen Knight (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 165-86.

[39] "Robin Hood and the Sorcerer: Part 1," *Robin of Sherwood*, directed by Ian Sharpe, HTV and Goldcrest Films, 15 Jan. 1984, HTV and Goldcrest Films. On the forest as space of liberation in *Robin of Sherwood*, see Knight, *Mythic Biography*, 164-65.

In the pivotal Sherwood Forest scene where Errol Flynn's Robin makes his appeal for followers, he invokes the shared experience of disabling injustice as grounds for both rebellion and solidarity: "You've all suffered from their cruelty—the beatings, the ear-loppings, the blinding with hot iron." One of the first members of the audience visible in the subsequent panning shot has been both blinded in one eye and disfigured. By addressing those with acquired impairments and then appealing to the forest as a space that can "feed and shelter and clothe a band of good, determined men," Robin is resisting the production of ableism. His target audience has not changed. The camera does not single out different groups to respond to each of his appeals. And the cheer greeting his call to resistance is unanimous, as is the response to his call for them to vow support to their common cause. Moreover, he wants men defined, not by their ability to fight, but by their willingness to do so in whatever ways they can. As Much's participation in the final battle later shows, even armed combat on behalf of the cause could be adapted to a range of physical capabilities.

Those with impairments are not conspicuous among the men of Sherwood after that opening oath-taking scene; they are paradoxically included and invisible. Relevant here, I think, is the centrality of Flynn's own physicality, the implicit suggestion that he must make his body a stand-in for the bodies of others who cannot directly oppose tyranny in the same way. Aristotelian theory presents the able-bodied male as the ideal body, but medieval ideals of courtliness also incorporate the idea of passibility of the body as inherent, identities of ability and gender as being non-static.[40] The concept of normativity is a modern one, not found in the English language before the mid-nineteenth century; but Hollywood is, of course, a space dominated by idealized bodies.[41] While Brian J. Levy and Leslie Coote have written about Errol Flynn's Robin Hood as incarnating the alpha male par excellence, I argue that both his masculinity and his physical ability can be read as serving more complicated rhetorical purposes in the film.[42] Basil Rathbone's Guy of Gisbourne, with his fencer's calves, presents a more straightforward characterization of the alpha male: sexually eligible, martially accomplished, and politically powerful. Moreover, as Levy and Coote have observed, "he is impeccably dressed and groomed throughout the film, and his bearing is unfailingly tall and elegant."[43] I do not wish to argue against the possibility of the queer reading for Rathbone's Gisbourne that Levy and Coote have put forward. But his smooth performance of normative masculinity is contrasted with both the stereotypical effeminacy of the Sheriff of Nottingham, and the camp flamboyance of Claude Rains' Prince John. Meanwhile, it is Flynn whose physicality is always on show, whether he's leaping over furniture in Nottingham Castle or swinging over Gisbourne's head to land, lightly, on a rocky outcropping. This is a kind of transcendence of a norm, a masculinity that, even while transgressing against social expectations, is apparently effortless, requiring no exclusions to reinforce it.

While Michael Praed's Robin Hood is obviously not a spectacle in the same way, he is also presented as a stand-in for those who are disabled or infirm. While Robin's vocation is reiterated in Season Three in general terms as helping the weak, defending the helpless, and fighting against

[40] Elizabeth B. Bearden, *Monstrous Kinds* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019), 33-77, esp. 48-50.
[41] Bearden, *Monstrous Kinds*, 33, for the formation of normativity as a conceptual framework.
[42] Levy and Coote, "*Mouvance*, Greenwood, and Gender," 174.
[43] Levy and Coote, "*Mouvance*, Greenwood, and Gender," 173.

tyranny, disability justice is explicitly centered in the first two seasons.[44] When Robin first receives his vocation from his semi-divine mentor Herne, he is told that he must become Robin Hood because "they are all waiting: the blinded, the maimed, the men locked in the stinking dark." His work is thus framed as intersectional and, foundationally, as anti-ableist. When he asks what is wanted from him, Herne answers bluntly: "Your life. Your strength."[45] Implicitly, Praed's Robin Hood, like Flynn's, becomes a stand-in for those whom Norman injustice has disabled. I argue that in both cases, Robin represents not an able-bodied norm, but an outlaw masculinity that functions outside and against bodily norms. His physicality is characterized by both hyperability—ability that diverges from physical norms and may threaten social ones—and inherent vulnerability. While not physically impaired, Robin is excluded from the Norman production of abledness.

The iconic archery contest is a site for the articulation of Robin's physical exceptionalism in both adaptations; in *Robin of Sherwood*, it announces his arrival as a hero. In 1938, Robin's demonstration of hyperability is swiftly and brutally punished. In the later show, Robin is able to both succeed and escape due first to his feigned infirmity as an old man with a limp, and subsequently to the collaboration of the merry men, an interdependent project that succeeds against the rival egos of the sheriff, Guy of Gisburne, and the evil baron who is the episode's villain.[46] This foils the sheriff's plan to have the prize of the silver arrow won on his behalf, affirming his identity as "the real power" against Robin. It is worth noting that the arrow itself, unusually phallic in shape, and defined crisply by the sheriff as an "English thing," can also be read as a prosthetic, supplementing the physical potency of its possessor.[47] It is also worth considering the degree to which Robin's iconic longbow can also be read as a prosthetic, conferring spiritual as well as physical power. The 1938 film, setting the pattern for many subsequent adaptations, conflates man and weapon in the frames highlighting Robin's lethal and liberating skill.[48] In *Robin of Sherwood*, Robin receives his first bow, distinct from his own hunting weapon, from Herne the Hunter.[49] He is commanded to string it, and viewers are shown his hands trembling with effort as he does so. He is hailed as Robin in the Hood as he draws back the string, and it is this action which appears to confirm him in his own sense of mission.[50] The second bow he receives is a longbow even more clearly framed as a prosthetic. He receives it from a man who explains that he himself was an archer until his hand was amputated as a punishment for killing the king's deer, his acquired impairment making it impossible for him to use it.[51] In the final shot of the second season, Robin,

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[44] "The Power of Albion," *Robin of Sherwood*, directed Gerry Mill, HTV and Goldcrest Films, 19 Apr. 1986.
[45] "Robin Hood and the Sorcerer: Part 1," *Robin of Sherwood*.
[46] "Robin Hood and the Sorcerer: Part 1," *Robin of Sherwood*.
[47] "Robin Hood and the Sorcerer: Part 2," *Robin of Sherwood*, directed by Ian Sharpe, HTV and Goldcrest Films, 15 Jan. 1984; "The Enchantment," *Robin of Sherwood*, directed by James Allen, HTV and Goldcrest Films, 30 Mar. 1985, in which Robin is tempted by an enchantress to give the arrow literally into her hands as a symbol of his love.
[48] *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938); see Leitch, "Adaptations Without Sources," 21, on the influence of the 1938 film as an "authoritative" version of the Robin Hood legend.
[49] Throughout the *Robin of Sherwood* series, folk belief is represented as primarily shaped by an enduring stratum of paganism. Even Friar Tuck appears not to be discomfited by this. Such ideas about a robust and coherent paganism existing as an alternative system to medieval Christianity have been since comprehensively critiqued by Ronald Hutton, for example in *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).
[50] "Robin Hood and the Sorcerer: Part 1," *Robin of Sherwood*.
[51] "The Swords of Wayland: Part 1," *Robin of Sherwood*, directed by Robert Young, HTV and Goldcrest Films, 6 Apr. 1985.

having shot his last arrow, breaks the longbow over his knee, a gesture that functions as prelude and prophecy of the breaking of his body.[52]

In *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, the outlaws form a category whose exclusion is represented by the film's antagonists as ipso facto reasonable and indeed necessary to ensure the status quo of the community, part of the ongoing, rational project of Norman governance. In winning over participants and sympathizers to his cause, Robin participates in the undoing of what Tanya Tichkosky has called a process of "dis-education," through which those belonging to a dominant majority group are taught not to notice the absence of the disabled.[53] To accept an absence that is the result of exclusion, and to accept it as normative, is doing work in the service of the ordinary. This acceptance of structural inequality is something which Olivia de Havilland's Maid Marian gradually comes to experience as horrifying, and recognize as abusive. Central to this process of awareness-raising is the scene in what may be called Sherwood's refugee camp. This scene has been often criticized, including by Roger Ebert, but it is also one of the scenes that most directly makes Robin a hero for the present as well as the past, suggesting contemporary realities of persecution and displacement.[54] I've failed to find people with visible impairments in the scene, though there are several who are bed-bound. But disabling violence is presented as central to the experience of injustice in Robin's own narrative, this time to Marian as a wide-eyed audience of one.

The place of de Havilland's Marian in the film is a crucial one. As Angela Smith has argued, "embodying 'normality' in eugenic thought was the young, healthy, white woman, whose body had to be protected to secure the reproduction of the natural order."[55] Such narratives were conspicuous in 1930s Hollywood; in *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, however, this narrative is conspicuously subverted.[56] Olivia de Havilland's Maid Marian is introduced as a ward of the crown, whose marital—and thus reproductive—future Prince John is attempting to arrange over dinner. This scene is violently interrupted by Robin himself, who has already been identified in the high table conversation as both ethnically inferior and a criminal. Norman anxiety over Marian's physical safety and sexual purity is made explicit at multiple other junctures in the film: in the journey through the forest, where the sheriff and Gisbourne are waylaid despite her presence; and at the ensuing, carnivalesque feast, where Robin's escorting of Marian alone to see the consequences of Norman injustice is interpreted by Gisbourne as a direct threat to both his power and her innocence. The same presumed threat is evoked later by the Sheriff of Nottingham's lubricious insinuations ("they seemed very friendly…").[57] When Robin is captured and subsequently sentenced to hanging, Marian is forced by Gisbourne to behold his rival's physical

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[52] "The Greatest Enemy," *Robin of Sherwood*, directed by Robert Young, 13 Apr. 1985, HTV and Goldcrest Film.
[53] Titchkosky, *The Question of Access*, 76-91. While her work is a case study based on the University of Toronto campus—a site not devoid of medievalisms, but very different from Sherwood Forest—it offers some theoretical concepts helpful in thinking about Robin Hood and the spaces he inhabits through a disability studies lens.
[54] Roger Ebert, "The Adventures of Robin Hood." *RogerEbert.com*, 17 Aug. 2003, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-the-adventures-of-robin-hood-1938.
[55] Angela M. Smith, *Hideous Progeny* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) 36.
[56] See Smith, *Hideous Progeny*, 37-38 on *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*; Cynthia Marie Erb, *Tracking King Kong* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009), 59-120, discusses the influence of tropical documentaries and horror tropes on Merian C. Cooper's *King Kong* (1933), with Fay Wray as the endangered blonde par excellence.
[57] *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938).

abjection. The stated Norman goal of preserving Marian from a dysgenic alliance ultimately defeats its own objective. Marian is proved to be less safe in the stronghold of Nottingham Castle than in Sherwood, as Prince John determines that her death is preferable to her socially-determined dishonor. The feared ethnic misalliance, moreover, seals the climax of the film, as Robin and Marian slip away from the celebration of King Richard's rule to the implicit consummation of their mutual desire.

The above is particularly significant in light of the Hays Code's emphasis, as part of its general principles, on the obligation of films to represent good as right, as part of the art form's imperative to function as "entertainment which tends to improve the human race."[58] Key to the triumph of good in *The Adventures of Robin Hood* is King Richard's promise that he will free his people from all injustices and oppressions which have burdened them. These injustices and oppressions are, as I hope I have convincingly argued, linked not only to class, ethnicity, and gender, but also—and not least—to disability. Lennard Davis has argued that "the right to be ill, to be infirm, to be impaired without suffering discrimination or oppression" should be enshrined as a civil right.[59] *Robin of Sherwood* presents such possibilities as existing within the greenwood in stark contrast to the rest of society. Sensory impairment is presented as the potential result of warfare, as well as of judicial punishment. Season three features a one-eyed veteran of the crusades, and one early episode features an antagonist who had an eye put out for thieving.[60] Semi-integration is occasionally represented as a possibility, as when people with dwarfism are seen attending the archery contest in the pilot episode as spectators, rather than as entertainers. But temporary and permanent disability appear throughout the show as the result of systematic abuse by the Normans. Norman rule is thus presented as both ableist and disabling.[61] While the Norman approach to organizing and thinking about society contributes to the production and performance of ableism, the outlaws fight for a different reality.

While the fact that the Normans of 1938 are Nazi-coded has been discussed, the relevance of this fact to US eugenicist policy in the 1920s and 1930s has not.[62] It is true that both the visuals of the film and the politics of the Warner studio were conspicuously linked to antifascism, rather than explicitly to anti-ableism. But in the late 1930s, eugenics research and policies in the United States had been linked for some time with similar projects in Germany, with the Nazi rise to power

[58] While the Motion Picture Production Code was not enforced rigorously until 1934, it was written in 1930; its text is reproduced, with later addenda, in Thomas Patrick Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 347-64, quoted at 348. It is worth noting that *The Adventures of Robin Hood* not only presents what can be read as a transgression against the Code's prohibition of miscegenation, but also shows torture, killing, and attempted rape.

[59] Lennard Davis, *Bending Over Backwards* (New York: NYU Press, 2002), 4.

[60] "Seven Poor Knights from Acre," *Robin of Sherwood*, directed by Ian Sharpe, HTV and Goldcrest Films, 12 May 1984; "The Inheritance," *Robin of Sherwood*, directed by Ben Bolt, HTV and Goldcrest Films, 26 Apr. 1986.

[61] Dan Goodley, commenting on the work of Fiona Kumari Campbell, writes about the implication of ableism in organizations "which aim to instill (and install) forms of subjectivity, ways of living and forms of governance" ("Forward," Campbell, *Contours of Ableism*, ix).

[62] On *The Adventures of Robin Hood* as an anti-Nazi film, see for example Knight, "Robin Hood and the Forest Laws," 11; Cuenca, "'Normans' vs. 'Saxons': Cinematic Imaginaries of Race and Nation"; Knight, *Mythic Biography*, 158-59, observes that while the parallel is plausible, it need not have been intentional.

leading indirectly to the closure of the Eugenics Record Office in 1940.[63] I believe that it is important to consider how this film's vision of abusive political structures—and resistance to them—found domestic resonance at a time when international eugenicist movements, including those in the US, were conducting what one journalist has called a "war against the weak."[64] Eugenics occupied an increasingly prominent place in public and scientific discourse in the interwar period. The American Eugenics Society was founded in 1923; four years later, the infamous Supreme Court case *Buck v. Bell* affirmed the legality and the desirability of sterilization laws as part of a project to promote the ideal society by taking away the agency of its disabled subjects. By 1933, California had performed more eugenic sterilizations than all the other states in the union combined.[65] In Los Angeles County itself, Pacific Colony served as a site of diagnosis and control for men and women primarily of Mexican origin, seeking to apply eugenicist principles connected to race, ability, and poverty.[66] Pacific Colony was designed not only for the segregation and potential sterilization of its residents, but for their education as productive subjects of the state, a managed underclass.[67] Similar hierarchical dreams, without the apparatus of the modern state, are visible in *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, much of which was which was filmed just over 10 miles from the Pacific Colony site. It is worth noting here that the 1930s saw the growth of disability rights activism, with the formation of the League of the Physically Handicapped, and that Pacific Colony saw acts of resistance from the time of its founding.[68]

The representations of mental illness and disability are more striking in *Robin of Sherwood* than in the earlier film. The presence of mad sorcerers attests to the reproduction of an ableist trope. But the weekly villains are typically driven by the major vices: greed, pride, envy, lust. Only occasionally and incidentally is real or reputed "madness" linked to their antagonism. Far more frequent is the threat of mental possession and an associated loss of agency. Little John's possession by a sorcerer in the pilot is only the first of such episodes. In the second season, Robin is similarly portrayed as subject to manipulation by magical forces, as wielded by an enchantress. That Robin is "out of his wits," as Tuck puts it, is treated as a problem to be solved by his friends, but not something for which he is responsible; this response aligns with the treatment of those who are amens, temporarily alienated from their own minds, in hagiographical narratives.[69] Eventually, Marian obtains a magical antidote, and Robin is fully restored to his relationships with her and the rest of the outlaws.[70] A potential slippage between the categories of madness and possession is made explicit in "The Swords of Wayland," when Robin's accusations of an abbess are dismissed as mere raving. The same villain who imprisons him treats Marion's defense of Robin and his conduct as a form of insanity, separating her from both reason and grace.[71] Viewers, of course,

[63] Garland E. Allen, "The Ideology of Elimination: American and German Eugenics, 1900–1945," in *Medicine and Medical Ethics in Nazi Germany*, ed. Francis R. Nicosia and Jonathan Huener (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 13-39.
[64] Edwin Black, *War Against the Weak* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003).
[65] Daniel J. Kevles, "Controlling the Genetic Arsenal," *The Wilson Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (1992), 71.
[66] Natalie Lira, *Laboratory of Deficiency* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022), xiii-xiv, 182.
[67] Lira, *Laboratory of Deficiency*, 51-56.
[68] Longmore and Goldberger, "The League of the Physically Handicapped and the Great Depression," 888–922; Lira, *Laboratory of Deficiency*, 51-55, 146-49, 154-66.
[69] Trenery, *Madness, Medicine and Miracle*, 9-13, 87-88, 94-98, 146-149.
[70] "The Enchantment," *Robin of Sherwood*.
[71] "The Swords of Wayland: Part 1," *Robin of Sherwood*.

know that this designation is both inaccurate and coercive. The abbess and her nuns—borrowing from the tropes of nunsploitation films and the aesthetics of Hammer Horror—manage to manipulate almost the entire band through evil magic. While similar narratives in medieval literature frequently rely on a timely invocation of the saints or the sign of the cross, Friar Tuck never intervenes as a religious practitioner against the forces of evil. Rather, their defeat relies on human agency and the solidarity of the outlaws. Moreover, Robin's necessary escape from captivity is directly facilitated by a disabled Welshman who is falsely diagnosed as 'mad' by the possessed outlaws.[72] While possession is connected with a loss of agency, Much is never so threatened. Nor do the other members of the Sherwood band treat him as a secondary member of the band; he is included in everything from the cooking rota to raiding parties, through the provision of accommodations as necessary. The ableist pejorative most often used for Much by the Sheriff and Guy of Gisburne is "halfwit," although "halfwit" and "half-witted" are not recorded before the early seventeenth century.[73] This definition is one resisted by Robin and Much, although it is not clear before the third season that Much is conscious of this as both an insult and an identity that he rejects.[74] The persistence and consistency with which the Sherwood outlaws reject ableist terminology and imposed identity categories is notable, and a central element of their solidarity.

CONCLUSION

As the Sheriff of Nottingham sneers in the first season of *Robin of Sherwood*, there's not much to choose between outlaws and outcasts.[75] This echoes and appears to respond to a model of equating disability with deviance, popular in the social sciences in the 1970s and since resisted.[76] Similarly, in the second season, Robin initiates a formal ceremony of alliance between the Sherwood band and the inhabitants of the nearest village, "between the outlaws and the oppressed."[77] In the conclusion of the same episode, a group of Flemish mercenaries enter a tavern where Robin sits alone. When he does not react either to their rowdy mockery of the innkeeper, or to their harassment of him, they begin taunting him for presumptive disability. "Are you deaf?" asks one jocularly. "Dumb," suggests his companion. This does not put an end to their verbal and physical abuse; what does is the intervention of the entire Sherwood band. The unusual choices made in this climactic scene make visible the possibility that violent harassment might target people with disabilities. It not only shows a characteristically medieval slippage between the categories of

[72] "The Swords of Wayland: Part 1," *Robin of Sherwood*.
[73] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "halfwit (n.), sense 1," July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6231506994; see particularly "Seven Poor Knights from Acre," *Robin of Sherwood*. The sheriff uses ableist language in other instances as well, not only routinely insulting the mental capacity of his underlings but referring to a barber who cuts him as a "palsied butcher" in "The Greatest Enemy," *Robin of Sherwood*.
[74] "The Sheriff of Nottingham," *Robin of Sherwood*, directed by Christopher King, HTV and Goldcrest Films, 10 May 1986. The eugenicist construction of neurological difference as inherently undesirable is discussed by Leslie Swartz et al.," Disability: The Forgotten Side of Race Science," in *Fault Lines*, ed. Jonathan Jansen and Cyrill Walters (Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2020), 145-159.
[75] "The Children of Israel," *Robin of Sherwood*, directed by Alex Kirby, HTV and Goldcrest Films, 16 Mar. 1985.
[76] A much-cited articulation of this position is Lawrence D. Haber and Richard T. Smith, "Disability and Deviance: Normative Adaptations of Role Behavior," *American Sociological Review* 36:1 (1971), 87-97.
[77] "Lord of the Trees," *Robin of Sherwood*, directed by James Allen, HTV and Goldcrest Films, 23 Mar. 1985.

deafness and muteness, but also conflates the vulnerability of Robin's outlaw status with other forms of social vulnerability.[78]

A pugnacious camaraderie distinguishes the outlaws who "fight for the value of differential embodiment," in a band where Much's mental difference, Nasir's racial difference, Tuck's fatness, and Marion's womanhood are facts that do not preclude their full participation in community.[79] Like the defiant exploits of the men and women of Sherwood, the work of critical disability studies is defined partially by what it fights; it is also a generative force defined by what links its practitioners.[80] I argue that both *The Adventures of Robin Hood* and *Robin of Sherwood* are characterized by what Tanya Titchkovsky has called "a politics of wonder," that is, a sociopolitical stance animated by the certainty that the social production of disability as a problem is, like disability as a category, worth examining.[81]

The perpetually unfinished nature of fighting for social reform and social justice is something to which both *Robin of Sherwood* and *The Adventures of Robin Hood* draw attention. While the former does so more conspicuously, the latter concludes with what is framed as only the beginning of collective efforts at rebuilding a more just and equitable England. The last line is Robin's, as he expresses the hope that he may obey all his king's commands with as much pleasure as he marries the woman he loves. Since viewers have seen him defy the king's laws and critique the king's policies, this is clearly a hope, rather than a certainty. A previously institutionalized person said in the 1970s of the dismantling of abusive systems designed to control and exclude those with disabilities: "We are not out of the Dark Ages yet."[82] Natalie Lira, using this line to title the conclusion of her study of eugenics and institutionalization in the first half of the twentieth century, closes the monograph with the hope that "we might be ushered out" of an enduring 'Dark Ages' in which racism, ableism, and misogyny are still too often enforced by policy and practice.[83] In view of how these contemporary evils are rhetorically identified as more properly belonging to the imagined Middle Ages, the alternative possibilities presented by these adaptations are particularly remarkable. Both, it is true, present versions of the Middle Ages that are stylized, romantic, and fantastical. They also use the Middle Ages to critique recognizable injustices, and to showcase collective resistance to injustice as not only necessary, but joyous. Moreover, in presenting Robin Hood as opposing the regime that constructs disability, both adaptations invite their audiences into the work of examining and resisting this construction.[84] Such work is ongoing;

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[78] On this slippage, see Irina Metzler, "Speechless: Speech and Hearing Impairments as Problem of Medieval Normative Texts—Theological, Natural-Philosophical, Legal," in *Social Dimensions of Medieval Disease and Disability,* ed. Sally Crawford and Christina Lee (Oxford: BAR Publishing, 2014), 59-68.
[79] Titchkosky, *The Question of Access*, 150.
[80] Titchkosky, *The Question of Access*, 127.
[81] Titchkosky, *The Question of Access*, 135.
[82] Quoted in Lira, *Laboratory of Deficiency*, 185.
[83] Quoted in Lira, *Laboratory of Deficiency*, 192.
[84] *Robin of Sherwood* fanzines from the 1980s-1990s tend to elide Much's mental difference, and explore possibilities of temporary and permanent disability. See, for example, Cath Knowles, *Shadows and Travelers* (1987), in which the possibility of permanent impairment and the reality of possession both shape Nasir's experience, and form the main focus of the fic. Also notable in this regard is Linda Ruth Pfonner, "The August King," in *The Sacrificial King*, ed. Joy Harrison (Osiris Publications/The Sonic Screwdriver, 1991), 12-40. In this story, Robin has been temporarily disabled by an injury, and makes use of mobility aids and receives assistance from his friends throughout the story.

by definition, it is unfinished. When, in *Robin of Sherwood*, Robin asks when his mission of resisting oppression will be completed, he receives this answer: "There is no end, and no beginning; it is enough to aim."[85]

[85] "The Children of Israel," *Robin of Sherwood*.

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