

GETTING (AND STAYING) MEDIEVAL: HISTORICAL SETTING IN ROBIN HOOD ADAPTATIONS

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In the opening of Otto Bathurst's 2018 film *Robin Hood*, a voiceover by Tim Minchin as Friar Tuck urges the audience to "forget history."¹ This is useful advice for the audience of the film, which distances itself from both history and also claims of historical accuracy—that is, historicity. Textual declarations of historicity and verisimilitude, whether serious (as in the somber political backdrop of Ridley Scott's 2010 *Robin Hood*) or tongue in cheek (as in Allan-a-Dale's claim at the beginning of the 1973 Disney animated *Robin Hood* that, on behalf of the animal kingdom, he will tell "the story of what really happened in Sherwood Forest"), are prevalent in Robin Hood media, making Bathurst's adaptation something of an exception in this regard.² But while Bathurst's film easily separates itself from history and historicity, it appears to have more difficulty separating itself from an *aesthetic* of history, setting its bow-and-arrow action in castles and stained-glass-windowed churches that mark its backdrop as pseudo-medieval. Why, in an adaptation whose project includes setting aside history, does Robin Hood remain, more or less, in the Middle Ages?

The following essay analyzes the ties between medieval historicity and Robin Hood, exploring the question of why almost all direct Robin Hood adaptations (that is, adaptations that include Robin himself rather than stories inspired by Robin Hood) feature a medieval or pseudo-medieval setting.³ "Setting" here refers to the world of the narrative and consists of the descriptions, images, and/or audio that ground the story in a specific time and place. A story's characters also contribute to narrative setting: their physical appearances, diction and vocabularies, and even their ideologies demonstrate what might be expected (or unexpected) in the world of the story. Methods of establishing setting of course can vary greatly among media, from written description in novels, to visual art in comics, to audio and moving-image visuals in film and television, to interactive and choice-based worldbuilding in video games. Despite the many differences in setting across Robin Hood adaptations and their varying claims to verisimilitude—from anthropomorphic animated adventures to gritty epics—virtually all of them stick to at least a semblance of medieval England. Many of these adaptations include fantastical elements (e.g. magic or, in at least four instances, zombies) or adjustments to the legend (such as a female Robin Hood), but nevertheless retain a more-or-less medieval backdrop for the narrative.⁴ Why, when

¹ *Robin Hood*, directed by Otto Bathurst (Summit Entertainment and Lionsgate, 2018).

² *Robin Hood*, directed by Ridley Scott (Universal Pictures, 2010); *Robin Hood*, directed by Wolfgang Reitherman (Walt Disney Animation Studios, 1973).

³ Under this definition, Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* and the episode "Robot of Sherwood" in the eighth season of the television series *Doctor Who* count as direct Robin Hood adaptations, while the 1942 film *Red River Robin Hood*, which is clearly inspired by Robin Hood but does not include him as a character, does not. "Problem" categories of course exist, such as the DC Comics hero Green Arrow, who is arguably a modern adaptation of Robin Hood in everything but name.

⁴ Zombie adaptations of Robin Hood include (but are likely not limited to): James Black, *Robin Hood vs the Plague Undead* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2012); Paul A. Freeman, *Robin Hood and Friar Tuck: Zombie Killers*

literary icons such as Dracula, Romeo and Juliet, Sherlock Holmes, and, to some extent, King Arthur are commonly lifted from their original narrative settings and dropped in virtually any place or time, does Robin Hood almost always remain within the medieval period? To answer this question, or at least begin to answer it, I will conduct two sets of readings. First, I will examine the use of historical setting in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century adaptations of Robin Hood on the page and screen, then jump forward in time for my second reading of two twenty-first-century theatrically released Robin Hood films and their engagement with medieval settings. In analyzing the reasons for the near-universal medieval setting of Robin Hood tales, I explore both the pseudo-educational value of verisimilitude in these adaptations and, drawing on Stephen Greenblatt's essays on culture and containment, the use of a historical setting to dampen potentially controversial political messages encoded in the text. I will argue that, based on the examples I analyze, Robin Hood is bound inextricably to the medieval period for modern audiences and writers, partly due to the continuing validating effect of history as education and partly as a method of containment.

NINETEENTH-CENTURY ROBIN HOOD ADAPTATIONS

Adaptations of the Robin Hood legends have flourished since the early modern period but nineteenth-century books and plays have been perhaps the most influential—foremost among them Walter Scott's 1819 novel *Ivanhoe*. As Clare A. Simmons notes, even “[a]s late as 1938, when the Warner Brothers studio decided to make a movie incorporating ‘as much of the traditional Robin Hood stuff as possible,’ the resulting portrayal of King Richard and Prince John was very like Scott’s: *Ivanhoe* had actually become the tradition.”⁵ *Ivanhoe* established a new basis for historicity in Robin Hood adaptations, cementing Robin as a denizen of the twelfth century, an ally to King Richard I and enemy of Prince John, and an emphatically Saxon hero opposing corrupt Norman oppressors.⁶ Part of the pervasive influence of these tropes throughout the nineteenth and

(Winnipeg: Coscom Entertainment, 2009); D. G. Leigh, *Diary of a Minecraft Zombie: Rotten Hood and his Merry Zombies: An Unofficial Minecraft Adventure Book of the Legendary Robin Hood* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018); and the low-budget film *Robin Hood: Ghosts of Sherwood*, directed by Oliver Krekel (Phase 4 Films, 2012). Adaptations featuring a female Robin Hood (including those in which Maid Marian or Robin's daughter takes on Robin's role) include: *Princess of Thieves*, directed by Peter Hewitt (Granada Productions, 2001); *Maid Marian and Her Merry Men*, created and written by Tony Robinson, directed by David Bell (BBC, 1989-1994); Meagan Spooner, *Sherwood* (New York: HarperTeen, 2019); Kathryn Lasky, *Hawksmaid: The Untold Story of Robin Hood and Maid Marian* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000); Aminah Mae Safi, *Travelers Along the Way: A Robin Hood Remix* (New York: Feiwel and Friends, 2022); Nancy Springer's *Tales of Rowan Hood* series (London: Puffin Books, 2001-2005); and, as I will discuss below, the television series *Robyn Hood*, created by Director X (2023).

⁵ Clare A. Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest: History and Myth in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 76; quoting Rudy Behlmer, introduction to *The Adventures of Robin Hood* [screenplay], Warner Bros. Screenplay Series (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979).

⁶ Some of these Robin Hood tropes were preexisting when *Ivanhoe* was published: Robin allied with King Richard and fought against Prince John in texts as early as Anthony Munday's Robin Hood plays at the end of the sixteenth century (*The Downfall of Robert, Earle of Huntington* and *The Death of Robert, Earle of Huntington*). Robin's status as a Saxon hero, however, seems to have largely been Scott's invention, as eighteenth-century writings on Robin Hood had comparatively little interest in emphasizing him as either a Saxon or Norman hero. See, for example, Joseph Ritson, “The Life of Robin Hood,” in *Robin Hood: A Collection of Poems, Songs, and Ballads Relative to that Celebrated English Outlaw*, ed. Joseph Ritson (London: Routledge and Son, 1884), 1-113, which

twentieth centuries stems from Scott's relentless appeal to historical verisimilitude. The novel's occupation with its medieval setting is evident in its first chapter, which, after locating the setting geographically, moves backward in time to explain the historical and political context of the narrative:

... the date of our story refers to a period towards the end of the reign of Richard I, when his return from his long captivity had become an event rather wished than hoped for by his despairing subjects, who were in the meantime subjected to every species of subordinate oppression. The nobles, whose power had become exorbitant during the reign of Stephen, and whom the prudence of Henry the Second had scarce reduced into some degree of subjection to the crown, had now resumed their ancient license in its utmost extent.... The situation of the inferior gentry, or Franklins, as they were called, who, by the law and spirit of the English constitution, were entitled to hold themselves independent of feudal tyranny, became now unusually precarious.⁷

Scott is eager to ground his novel in real—or realistic—history, and the political and social context that he describes becomes integral to the novel's narrative and characters, both of which are driven by the political and racial conflict between Saxons (the “inferior gentry” in the quote above) and Normans (the “nobles”). *Ivanhoe* soon became an educational tool for British children, especially after the Education Act of 1870, and popular culture framed the novel as historical and ideological instruction.⁸ Howard Pyle's *Merry Adventures of Robin Hood*, published more than fifty years later across the Atlantic Ocean, would secure Robin Hood tales as educational for young people in America as well as in Great Britain.⁹ As Ann Scott McLeod puts it, “Pyle's writing represented well both the era's take on medieval life and a storytelling mode very popular at the turn of the century. Which is to say that it was adolescent, male, idealistic, violent, and largely unrealistic.”¹⁰ Pyle himself nods at this lack of realism in his preface, explaining that “This country is not Fairyland. What is it? 'Tis the land of Fancy, and is of that pleasant kind that, when you tire of it—whisk!—you clap the leaves of this book together and 'tis gone, and you are ready for everyday life, with no harm done.”¹¹ But aesthetic appeals to historicity and the trappings of a medieval setting appear to be necessary for Pyle's land of fancy, which are best exemplified by his use of archaized language (e.g. “‘Now,’ quoth Robin, ‘will I go too, for fain would I draw a string for the

mentions Robin's Norman ancestry only in its notes (15, 18); and Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry: Consisting of Old Heroic Ballads, Songs, and other Pieces of our Earlier Poets*, ed. J. V. Prichard, vol. 1 of 3 (London: George Bell and Sons, 1900), 56-58, which does not make explicit mention of Robin's heritage at all.

⁷ Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe*, ed. Graham Tulloch, vol. 8 of *The Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels*, ed. David Hewitt (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 15-16.

⁸ Bruce Beiderwell and Anita Hemphill McCormick, “The Making and Unmaking of a Children's Classic: The Case of Scott's *Ivanhoe*,” in *Culturing the Child, 1690-1914: Essays in Memory of Mitzi Meyers*, ed. Donelle Ruwe (Lanham: The Children's Literature Association and Scarecrow Press, 2005), 165-77.

⁹ Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 134-36.

¹⁰ Anne Scott McLeod, “Howard Pyle's Robin Hood: The Middle Ages for Americans,” *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (2000): 44-48, 45.

¹¹ Howard Pyle, *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood of Great Renown, in Nottinghamshire* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1883), viii.

bright eyes of my lass, and a butt of good October brewing”).¹² Even when placed in a setting in which “flowers bloom forever and birds are always singing,” Pyle’s *Robin Hood* still historicizes its setting, lending credence to its ideological instruction for young readers.¹³

This use of history as pedagogy in Robin Hood tales continued into film and television adaptations in the twentieth century, using new audio and visual elements to emphasize Robin’s medieval setting. The 1938 film *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, directed by Michael Curtiz and starring Errol Flynn, was a solidly family friendly affair; as Frank S. Nugent put it in his 1938 *New York Times* review, *The Adventures of Robin Hood* “can be calculated to rejoice the eights, rejuvenate the eighties and delight those in between.”¹⁴ Its opening title scroll signals its educational work, informing the viewer of the film’s historical and political context in faux-gothic script on a parchment-like background. These expositional cards both offer readers a history lesson and emulate some of Pyle’s archaized prose.¹⁵ The 1955-1960 television series *The Adventures of Robin Hood* starring Richard Greene is explicitly educational, with a moral for young viewers in each episode.¹⁶ It also is one of the first Robin Hood adaptations to portray the class-based injustices of the Middle Ages in detail. Jeffrey Richards notes that “[i]ndividual episodes revolved around such burdens as the heriot tax, and marriage tax, the lords’ monopoly of ovens and windmills and the burdens of serfdom in general.”¹⁷ In addition to making Robin “the champion of the serf against the manorial system,” this focus on historical hardships has the effect, I would argue, of giving the series a pedagogical tone. *Wolfshead: The Legend of Robin Hood*, a failed 1969 TV pilot that was eventually released as a film in 1973, made heavy use of verisimilitude in its historical background and plot; despite the film’s current obscurity, its emphasis on historicity influenced more popular Robin Hood films and television series, such as *Robin and Marian* (1976) and *Robin of Sherwood* (1984-1986).¹⁸ It also features an opening voiceover educating its audience with historical context, starting off with, “England in 1190 was an unhappy land, its people divided into two distinct classes: the Saxons, a slave race, and the Normans, the masters who ruled without justice.”¹⁹ As this quote indicates, part of these adaptations’ emphasis on a supposed historical

¹² Pyle, *The Merry Adventures*, 2. For further analysis of Pyle’s archaized language in his Robin Hood retellings, see Alan T. Gaylord, “‘There Was Something About Him that Spoke of Other Things Than Rags and Tatters’: Howard Pyle and the Language of Robin Hood,” in *Images of Robin Hood: Medieval to Modern*, ed. Lois Potter and Joshua Calhoun (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008), 153-73.

¹³ Pyle, *The Merry Adventures*, viii.

¹⁴ Frank S. Nugent, “Errol Flynn Leads His Merry Men to the Music Hall in ‘The Adventures of Robin Hood’—Other Films,” *New York Times*, May 13, 1938. See also Rudy Behlmer, “Robin Hood on the Screen: From Legend to Film,” in *Robin Hood: An Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism*, ed. Stephen Knight (Rochester: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 441-60, esp. 456-57.

¹⁵ For example, the first expositional title card reads: “In the year of Our Lord 1191 when Richard, the Lion-Heart, set forth to drive the infidels from the Holy Land, he gave the Regency of his Kingdom to his trusted friend, Longchamps, instead of to his treacherous brother, Prince John.” The assurance at the end of the credits that the film is “Based Upon Ancient Robin Hood Legends” also provides a succinct example of the validating educational effect of history in the film. *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, directed by Michael Curtiz (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1938).

¹⁶ Jeffrey Richards, “Robin Hood on the Screen,” in *Robin Hood: An Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism*, ed. Stephen Knight (Rochester: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 429-40, 434. See also Knight, *A Mythic Biography*, 160-61.

¹⁷ Richards, “Robin Hood on the Screen,” 434.

¹⁸ Knight, *A Mythic Biography*, 163-64. *Wolfshead* was filmed in 1969 as a television series pilot. The series was not picked up, but the hour-long episode was released as a film in 1973; see Knight, *A Mythic Biography*, 163-164; and Richards, “Robin Hood on the Screen,” 436.

¹⁹ *Wolfshead: The Legend of Robin Hood*, directed by John Hough (Hammer Films Productions, 1973).

accuracy is to lend authority to the ideology of an “Anglo-Saxon” heritage—a theme popularized by Scott’s *Ivanhoe* and emphasized in adaptations from the Flynn film to (to a lesser extent) Pyle’s *Merry Adventures of Robin Hood*. The idea of oppressed, salt-of-the-earth Saxons fighting back against corrupt, cosmopolitan Normans determined to destroy the idealized old ways has carried more than one political valence throughout the past two hundred years. This trope was popular during the nineteenth-century rise of racialism in Great Britain, as Stephanie Barczewski has demonstrated, and, after the American Civil War, it resonated with American Southerners newly deprived of their economic dependence on enslavement.²⁰ A Saxon-Norman dichotomy is only one facet of the ideological education carried in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Robin Hood adaptations. Nevertheless, it provides a useful example of one traditional use of medieval historicity in Robin Hood adaptations: using history to validate contemporary political and cultural claims by framing them as education.

MODERN ROBIN HOOD ADAPTATIONS

Since the 1980s, adaptations have happily eschewed the Saxon-Norman race war of the Victorian Robin Hood tradition, as well as much of its didactic, educational tone, but they have nevertheless clung to its traditional historical backdrop. Why, we might ask, are modern films retaining a medieval setting for Robin Hood, if not for educational and ideological purposes? The two films I will consider in the following section are the only two twenty-first-century Robin Hood films with theatrical releases at the time of writing: the 2010 *Robin Hood*, directed by Ridley Scott and starring Russell Crowe, and the 2018 *Robin Hood*, directed by Otto Bathurst and starring Taron Egerton. These two films engage with historical verisimilitude in rather different ways and together provide a useful example of how Robin Hood adaptations with widely varying attitudes toward history retain at least a veneer of medievalism in their settings.

Ridley Scott’s *Robin Hood* presents a dimly colored world grounded in Russell Crowe’s solemn performance and the legal historicity of Magna Carta—a “manly man movie,” to use Vincent LoBrutto’s phrase.²¹ It opens on expositional cards—lit by flickering candlelight and stylized as calligraphy on parchment—that establish the story’s time period as “England at the turn

²⁰ Stephanie Barczewski, “Nations Make Their Own Gods and Heroes’: Robin Hood, King Arthur and the Development of Racialism in Nineteenth-Century Britain,” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 2, no. 2 (1997): 179-207. Scott’s novels, *Ivanhoe* in particular, were so influential in the American South that Mark Twain famously and only half-jokingly blamed them for starting the U. S. Civil War; see Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (Montreal: Dawson Brothers, 1883), 395. Before the war, American plantation owners and enslavers fancied themselves descendants of the chivalric Normans; see the following studies: Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 161; and Ann Rigney, *The Afterlives of Walter Scott: Memory on the Move* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 109-116. During and after the Reconstruction Era, many Southerners shifted their identification to the Saxon heroes of Scott’s novel. Stephen Knight and Jeffrey Richards note that the 1938 film’s Saxon-Norman dichotomy can be interpreted as a representation of class struggle and the fight against the rise of Nazism in Germany; see the following: Knight, *A Mythic Biography*, 158; and Jeffrey Richards, “Robin Hood, King Arthur and Cold War Chivalry,” in *Bandit Territories: British Outlaw Traditions*, ed. Helen Phillips (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), 169-95, esp. 171-73. Lauryn Mayer suggests that it can be interpreted as an anti-immigration allegory; see Lauryn Mayer, “Reel Fury: White Fragility and the Backlash Against Bathurst’s *Robin Hood*,” *The Bulletin of the International Association for Robin Hood Studies* 3 (2019): 10-22, esp. 13.

²¹ Vincent LoBrutto, *Ridley Scott: A Biography* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2019), 169.

of the 12th Century.” As the film introduces the character of Robin, it precisely notes the location on screen as “Chalus Castle, France - 1199 A.D.”²² The narrative lingers on real historical figures such as King Phillip II of France, King John of England, Eleanor of Aquitaine, and William Marshall alongside epic battles and sieges, such as that of Châlus, and it creates a version of Robin who is crucial to the unfolding of historical (or pseudo-historical) events. The French troops invading England surrender to Robin at the film’s final battle on the beaches, and Robin is instrumental in the drafting of Magna Carta.²³ The film also gives Robin a revolutionary lineage in the person of his father, a stone mason and political philosopher who drafted a proto-Magna Carta before being killed by the king’s men. Robin’s father also left evidence of himself in tangible, architectural solidity: a stone panel engraved with “rise and rise again until lambs become lions,” and another panel with his and Robin’s handprints on it, both of which Robin uncovers near the climax of the film.²⁴ In terms of placing Robin Hood within a historically specific setting and making his character pivotal to that setting, this is probably as grounded as Robin Hood can be, positioned as a major player in a major historical moment, with a (literal) concrete history behind him. Ironically enough, however, this historical grounding unmoors our hero from the literary context of medieval or even Victorian outlaw ballad tropes and motifs. What remains is nearly unrecognizable as Robin Hood material. Robin is outlawed and flees to Sherwood only at the end of the film; his bonding encounter with Little John is displaced to a war camp outside Châlus Castle in France; his initial relationships with Allan A’Dayle and Will Scarlet are forged on crusade; and he and his friends conduct only a single robbery in the course of the film (or two, if one counts the party’s chance encounter upon the ambushed royal party near the film’s beginning). Robin is still a talented archer, ultimately an enemy to King John, and a champion of the poor of Nottingham, but there the similarities end. Robin is more easily removed from his literary context than his pseudo-medieval setting, it seems. If Ridley Scott had changed the hero’s name to Fouke le Fitz Waryn or William of Cloudesley, he would have raised no eyebrows. In Scott’s *Robin Hood*, the emphasis on the historicity of the film’s setting and of Robin Hood himself eclipses even Robin’s identification as a recognizable literary character.

Otto Bathurst’s *Robin Hood*, released a little less than a decade later, could hardly be more different aesthetically than Ridley Scott’s film. Clearly influenced by twenty-first century superhero movies, as well as the political commentary and comedic style of the 2006-2009 BBC *Robin Hood* series, Bathurst’s film is filled with explosions, heist scenes, flashy costuming, and quippy dialogue. This aesthetic corresponds, naturally, to a distancing from attempts at medieval historicity: the crusades are styled as the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan; the industrial labor struggles of Nottingham’s mining operation seem more Victorian than medieval; and Nottingham itself seems to be its own city-state, cut off from the broader politics of England or of Europe as a whole.²⁵ The film’s opening, a tongue-in-cheek voiceover from Friar Tuck, reflects this historical

²² Scott, *Robin Hood*.

²³ Scott, *Robin Hood*.

²⁴ Scott, *Robin Hood*.

²⁵ For more on the film’s treatment of race (and audience responses to it), see Sabina Rahman, “‘Forget History. Forget What You’ve Seen Before. Forget What You Think You Know’: Re/Establishing Space for People of Color in Otto Bathurst’s *Robin Hood*,” *The Bulletin of the International Association for Robin Hood Studies* 3 (2019): 1-9. Leah Haught points out the limitations of film’s diversity and its replication of racial stereotypes from the 1991 film *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*; see Leah Haught, “Racialized Outcasts: Non-White Bodies and the Construction of

flexibility: “So. I would tell you what year it was, but I can’t actually remember. I could bore you with the history, but you wouldn’t listen. What I can tell you is that this is the story of a thief.”²⁶ From the outset, the film tells its viewers that it is unconcerned with the medieval historicity so emphasized in Ridley Scott’s *Robin Hood* and in the title scroll of the 1938 Flynn film, and it warns its audience not to judge it in terms of verisimilitude. Despite this clear separation from claims to historicity, however, and despite Tuck’s exhortation shortly afterward to “forget history,” the film’s efforts to set aside the tradition of a historical setting are somewhat undercut by the visual background preceding this audio. The film begins with a leatherbound tome titled “Robin Hood” that opens to reveal woodcut illustrations that transition to a long shot of Robin’s medieval-style manor, which is surrounded by lush forest and offset by the walled city of Nottingham in the distance.²⁷ One might argue that the shift from a storybook opening—a symbol of literary and historical tradition—to Tuck’s voiceover comprises a dismissal of medieval historicity, but such a reading is complicated by the film’s immediate transition to heraldic pennants, a more detailed long shot of the medieval-styled city of Nottingham, and a messenger on horseback carrying a faux-parchment letter.²⁸ The words “Draft Notice” written in a modernized gothic hand at the top of the letter seem more appropriate to a Monty Python or Mel Brooks film and ruin something of the dramatic effect of the scene—but the draft notice also provides a useful example of the film’s historical conundrum. Despite referencing a contemporary term with specific modern contexts (i. e., the Vietnam War, paired with the Iraq War and the War in Afghanistan), the faux-medieval calligraphy reminds the viewer that the setting is still aesthetically medieval. The film will not fully dismiss a medieval setting, no matter what other liberties it takes. Though the narrative would arguably have been more successful if set in the modern day, or in the industrial era, or even in a more intentionally fantastical setting, it is as if the filmmakers could not quite bring themselves to make the jump to an entirely “ahistorical” Robin Hood. The film continues to cling to a veneer of medievalism, as if a medieval setting (or a setting that at least gestures toward the medieval) is what *defines* Robin Hood.

VALIDATION AND CONTAINMENT

We then have two modern theatrically released films that are less explicitly pedagogical than previous Robin Hood adaptations, but nevertheless both preserve their medieval setting, albeit in different ways and to different degrees. A significant factor of earlier adaptations’ retention of a medieval historical setting was that setting’s role as a vehicle for education and ideology. For what, then, does the medieval setting in modern films serve as a vehicle? I suggest that a medieval setting has, thus far in adaptational history, been a vehicle for Robin Hood himself: as far as modern

the Outlaw-Hero in Modern Robin Hood Film,” in *Negotiating Boundaries in Medieval Literature and Culture: Essays on Marginality, Difference, and Reading Practices in Honor of Thomas Hahn*, ed. Valerie B. Johnson and Kara L. McShane (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2022), 21-48.

²⁶ Bathurst, *Robin Hood*.

²⁷ Bathurst, *Robin Hood*. Interestingly, neither the 1922 adaptation starring Douglas Fairbanks nor the Flynn adaptation opens in this storybook fashion. The reference, if a reference was intended, is likely to the 1973 Disney animated *Robin Hood*, or to the lesser-known 1952 Disney live-action *The Story of Robin Hood and His Merrie Men*, directed by Ken Annakin, both of which open with a book. Thanks to Arielle McKee for bringing my attention to the 1952 storybook opening.

²⁸ Bathurst, *Robin Hood*.

filmmakers are concerned, Robin without at least a gesture at a medieval setting is no longer Robin in any meaningful sense. This insistent historicizing of the outlaw hero serves as both validation and containment, giving audiences the sense of having learned something from the narrative's medieval setting while also keeping Robin carefully within the confines of one place and time.

Though modern Robin Hood adaptations have lost many of their more didactic pedagogical undertones, I would suggest that a medieval setting and sense of historicity in the Robin Hood tradition (and elsewhere) still carries a sense of edification. Medieval or pseudo-medieval texts, such as George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series of novels and their television adaptation, *A Game of Thrones*, often carry implicit claims to realism.²⁹ Indeed, to an extent, pseudo-medieval texts within the fantasy genre ask audiences to engage with them as an analogue or even parallel to history, and one needs only to scroll down *Game of Thrones*-themed Reddit forums and Tumblr blogs to see such discussions in action.³⁰ Whether in the genre of fantasy or historical fiction, the idea that these medieval-inspired texts are portraying history accurately gives readers and viewers a sense that they are learning something—that what they are reading or watching is “real” to some degree. This supposed historicity and realism, even when more aesthetic than factual, acts as a validating force for texts' characters and narratives, implicitly declaring that this media is worth engaging with because it has something to teach the audience. For Robin Hood adaptations, this operates as a transposition from Walter Scott's and Howard Pyle's education of young audiences to edification for adults. While most Robin Hood adaptations do not feature the grittiness of George R. R. Martin's depictions of rape, gore, and incest, both the Ridley Scott and Otto Bathurst adaptations carry a similar sense of separation from the perceived childishness (or, perhaps more accurately, for-children-ness) of many past Robin Hood adaptations, and both films take pains to assure their audiences that “this is no bedtime story.”³¹ Ridley Scott's *Robin Hood* falls neatly into this framework, using historicity to validate its narrative and prove its seriousness, but Bathurst's engagement with validating historicity is not as clear-cut. While the 2018 film is eager to separate itself from past adaptations, as the above quote from Friar Tuck's voiceover indicates, it does so by distancing itself (if not wholly separating itself) from a “realistic” medieval setting rather than emphasizing it in *Game of Thrones* fashion.

A second use of medieval settings in modern Robin Hood adaptations is, I suggest, as a method of containment. Placement in the medieval period ensures that Robin Hood and his more revolutionary tendencies stay firmly in the past. He may work to overthrow the wicked sheriff and Prince John, but, far off in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and in the static location of Sherwood Forest, his threat to any modern political movements is reduced. A medieval setting alienates modern audiences from the actions and ideologies in the narrative, providing a careful

²⁹ In Martin's case, these claims are explicit. See Shiloh Carroll, *Medievalism in A Song of Ice and Fire* (Rochester: D. S. Brewer, 2018), 2-22; Shiloh Carroll, “Rewriting the Fantasy Archetype: George R. R. Martin, Neomedievalist Fantasy, and the Quest for Realism,” in *Fantasy and Science-Fiction Medievalisms From Isaac Asimov to A Game of Thrones*, ed. Helen Young (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2015), 59-76; and Gillian Polack, “Setting up Westeros: The Mediaevalesque World of *Game of Thrones*,” in *Game of Thrones Versus History: Written in Blood*, ed. Brian A. Pavlac (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 251-60.

³⁰ Jolie Christine Matthews has done just this in “A Past That Never Was: Historical Poaching in *Game of Thrones* Fans' Tumblr Practices,” *Popular Communication* 16, no. 3 (2018): 225-42. The striking effect on tourism that *A Game of Thrones* has had, in great part due to its reception as pseudo-history, is detailed in Jana Matthews, “Cinematic Thanatourism and the Purloined Past: The ‘*Game of Thrones* Effect’ and the Effect of *Game of Thrones* on History,” in *Virtual Dark Tourism: Ghost Roads*, ed. Kathryn N. McDaniel (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 89-112.

³¹ Bathurst, *Robin Hood*.

distance from the story. In making this argument I am drawing on (though not entirely adhering to) the concept articulated in Stephen Greenblatt's seminal essay "Invisible Bullets," in which he argues that "the momentary sense of instability or plenitude—the existence of other voices—is produced by the monological power that ultimately denies the possibility of plenitude" and in which the text ultimately "contains the radical doubts it continually provokes."³² Greenblatt's pessimistic argument, which concludes that dominant systems of power produce subversion only to ultimately contain it, has been as controversial as it has been influential—indeed Greenblatt himself would later temper his argument somewhat in his 1989 essay on culture, constraint, and mobility.³³ In Robin Hood's case, however, I do not entirely adhere to the "Foucauldian gloom" of Greenblatt's argument, but rather I suggest that Robin's medieval historical setting is something of a double-edged sword when it comes to containing him politically.³⁴ That is, modern audiences' alienation from a medieval setting allows Robin Hood a political flexibility in which the sheriff, Prince John, and/or the corrupt Normans are free to operate as stand-ins for almost any ideology. Robin Hood adaptations can support or combat virtually any position across the political spectrum, as Richards has demonstrated.³⁵ This sort of flexibility leaves adaptations open to interpretation: one early twentieth-century viewer's allegory for the rise of German fascism is another's allegory for the "northern aggressor" and Reconstruction. This framework applies both to Scott's and Bathurst's films, and may provide an explanation for why Bathurst's adaptation did not break with a medieval setting entirely: despite the clear references to labor rights, twenty-first century Islamophobia, the United States' invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, and left-leaning politics, placing Robin Hood in the modern day or even in the nineteenth or twentieth century may have been considered a step too far for a summer action film.³⁶

My analysis in this essay has primarily focused only on the two theatrically released Robin Hood films that are the most recent at the time of writing. A more complete picture of how historicity and verisimilitude function in Robin Hood adaptations would require broadening the source material in both time period and in medium. It is also worth noting that, while Scott's and Bathurst's films are the most commonly known twenty-first-century Robin Hood adaptations, neither was a critical success, and their respective performances at the box office (Scott's *Robin Hood* cleared even by an estimated \$120 million but was expected to be more popular, while Bathurst's film failed to make a profit) swiftly cut off their directors' plans for sequels.³⁷ If a

³² Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 37 and 65.

³³ Stephen Greenblatt notes that "... even within the powerful constraints of Shakespeare's Jacobean culture, the artist's imaginative mobility enables him to display cracks in the glacial front of princely power and to record a voice, the voice of the displaced and oppressed. ... If it is the task of cultural criticism to decipher the power of Prospero, it is equally its task to hear the accents of Caliban." See Stephen Greenblatt, "Culture," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 225-32, 232.

³⁴ Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 5.

³⁵ Richards, "Robin Hood, King Arthur and Cold War Chivalry," 167-95.

³⁶ In terms of left-leaning politics, Bathurst's film is notable among Robin Hood adaptations for its emphasis on Black agency and power in the character of Yahya, or "Little John," played by Jamie Foxx—though the film's treatment of race is not without its flaws. For analysis of race and the character of Yahya in the film, see Mayer, Rahman, and Haught.

³⁷ For details on the budget for and income from Scott's film see "Robin Hood (2010): FAQ," IMDb, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0955308/faq>, accessed August 6, 2025; and Willa Paskin, "Robin Hood Even More Expensive Than Previously Thought," *Vulture*, May 11, 2010, https://www.vulture.com/2010/05/robin_hood_even_more_expensive.html, accessed August 6, 2025. For

medieval setting is a necessary (or at least typical) component of a Robin Hood film, it is clearly not enough to save a mediocre one.³⁸

While a deeper analysis of the few Robin Hood adaptations not set in a medieval period is beyond the scope of this essay, I'd like to close with a brief examination of a Robin Hood adaptation from the 2020s that features a modern setting: *Robyn Hood*, a Canadian television series featuring a Black woman as Robin and her hip-hop band The Hood as her Merry Men, which aired in the fall of 2023.³⁹ *Robyn Hood* marked both the first instance of a modern setting in a major Robin Hood adaptation, and, to my knowledge, the first Black Robin Hood on film. The series's transposition of the Robin Hood legend onto a modern, urban setting is impressively thorough: it introduces a low-income housing development in place of Sherwood Forest, and its tenants in place of the impoverished townsfolk under threat from Prince John (transformed into real estate tycoon John Prince) and the Sheriff of Nottingham (who remains simply the corrupt local sheriff). Like Bathurst's *Robin Hood* before it, *Robyn Hood* includes a multiracial cast—but unlike the 2018 film, it features an all-Black band of Merry Men and Women, and it actively explores issues of racial inequality. It is, in short, providing historical realism, or at least verisimilitude, depicting fictionalized versions of real political issues such as police brutality, predatory real estate development, and the ethics of protest and direct action in a modern setting. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the show was aggressively review-bombed on social media, with review titles such as “Robyn Hood Director X MELTDOWN As Show FLOPS,” “Robyn Hood is PAINFUL WOKE GARBAGE,” and, amusingly for a review of a Robin Hood narrative, “Robyn Hood: Lazy B*ms [sic] Think They are Entitled to Hard Working People's Money!!”⁴⁰ At the time of writing, IMDb's rating for the show is 1.0/10.⁴¹ The racist backlash to *Robyn Hood*'s modernization of the Robin Hood narrative indicates that, despite the lukewarm reception of the last two medieval(ish) film adaptations, at least some audiences still prefer any robbing from the rich to be safely contained in the distant past. With the long-term reception of *Robyn Hood* still uncertain, it remains to be seen whether the show's unabashed break with a medieval setting will become a warning example to writers who would modernize Robin, or, like the TV-pilot-turned-film *Wolfshead*, ultimately signal a shift in how writers and audiences view Robin Hood and his (or her) ties to history.

Bathurst's, see “*Robin Hood* (2018): Trivia,” IMDb, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4532826/trivia>, accessed August 6, 2025; and Jeremy Fuster, “‘Robin Hood’: The Biggest Blockbuster Bomb of 2018,” *The Wrap*, November 25, 2018, <https://www.thewrap.com/robin-hood-biggest-blockbuster-bomb-of-2018>, accessed August 6, 2025.

³⁸ Ironically, it may have even harmed the reception of Ridley Scott's film, as LoBrutto suggests: “the film may be more realistic than audiences wanted, compared to past versions,” *Ridley Scott*, 170.

³⁹ Corus Entertainment Inc., “Global Original Scripted Series *Robyn Hood* Begins Production June 20,” *Canada Newswire*, June 13, 2022. <https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/global-original-scripted-series-robyn-hood-begins-production-june-20-829609169.html>, accessed August 7, 2025. Other non-medieval adaptations of Robin Hood created in the past decade include *The Hooded Man* trilogy of novels by Paul Kane (2008–2010), Robert Muchamore's *Robin Hood* series of nine novels as of the writing of this essay (2020–2025), and the *Robyn Hood* series of comics by Zenoscope Entertainment (2012–2020), which is unrelated to the 2023 television series.

⁴⁰ Briony Smith, “Director X remains undaunted after ‘Robyn Hood’ troll attack: ‘I hope the rest of y’all catch up,’” *The Toronto Star*, October 5, 2023, https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/television/director-x-remains-undaunted-after-robyn-hood-troll-attack-i-hope-the-rest-of-y/article_ab6bf24c-402d-5383-9c5b-d84afa2062d1.html, accessed August 7, 2025. Disparu, “Robyn Hood Director X MELTDOWN As Show FLOPS,” October 23, 2023, <https://youtu.be/uWRNhwT7KUU>, accessed August 7, 2025; Hypnotic, “Robyn Hood is PAINFUL WOKE GARBAGE | Robyn Hood Season 1 Episode 1 REVIEW,” October 9, 2023, <https://youtu.be/bPFfe4ULUuMs>, accessed August 7, 2025; HeelvsBabyface “Robyn Hood: Lazy B*ms [sic] Think They are Entitled to Hard Working People's Money!!,” September 29, 2023, <https://youtu.be/ayVtpfXIQPw>, accessed August 7, 2025.

⁴¹ “Robyn Hood (TV Series 2023),” IMDb, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt20918756/>, accessed July 28, 2025.

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