Fantasy Feminism: Joseph Campbell's Heroic Model as a Framework for Marginalization in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*

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A fantasy of feminism prevents modern cinematic portrayals of Robin Hood from regressing into obsolescence, while ensuring key patriarchal structures that define the tradition are maintained. Kevin Reynolds' *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991) is a key example of this balance between feminist sensibility and the maintenance of the patriarchal status quo. Featuring Kevin Costner as Robin and Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio as Marian, *Prince of Thieves* became one of the highest-grossing blockbusters of 1991 and set the tone for cinematic Robin Hoods for the next three decades. Costner's Robin in *Prince of Thieves* can be figured as Joseph Campbell's hero archetype—a deliberate decision by filmmakers to use Campbell's framework perpetuates the ubiquity of white, masculine heroism within mainstream Robin Hood films. Additionally, Costner's feathered hair and a Bryan Adams ballad were not the only early-1990s trends to feature in the film—Mastrantonio's Marian is emblematic of white, commercial feminism of the early 1990s, which is an early example of what Angela McRobbie dubs "faux feminism."[1] The inclusion of faux feminism in *Prince of Thieves* allows for Robin's hero status to be maintained while providing the semblance of feminist progression that befits a blockbuster film in the cultural and media milieu of the 1990s. Marian is marginalized in the film through her exclusion from the masculine-coded space of Sherwood Forest (due to her potential to destabilize Robin's position of power), and the negation of her physical combat skills (which allows Robin to rescue her and reinforce his position as hero). *Prince of Thieves* provides a façade of feminist progression that masks this marginalization, ensuring basic contemporary cultural relevance while maintaining broadscale popular appeal. This is enabled via deliberate coding of Campbell's monomythic model into the film's narrative structure, which compromises Marian's potential and preserves patriarchal practices within the Robin Hood legend.

Despite the patriarchal structures that often appear in Robin Hood texts, the legend itself is not explicitly misogynistic. Many Robin Hood texts show proto-feminist elements, with early ballads and play/games showing a clear transgressive streak that revel in subversions of social hierarchies.[2] However, the tendency of Robin Hood scholarship to celebrate occasional glimpses of feminist progress in various Robin Hood texts neglects deeply entrenched patriarchal structures throughout the legend. Much of current feminist scholarship in Robin Hood studies focuses on Marian as a woman character who often challenges gender roles and expectations through transgressive acts, such as cross-dressing, and excelling in traditionally masculine-coded skills, such as fighting, archery and horse-riding.[3] Valerie B. Johnson, Lorraine K. Stock, and Candace

[1] Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2009), i.
[2] See Peter Stallybrass, "'Drunk with the Cup of Liberty': Robin Hood, the Carnivalesque, and the Rhetoric of Violence in Early Modern England," in *Robin Hood: An Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism* (Cambridge: D. S Brewer, 1999), 297-328.
[3] Lorinda B. Cohoon, Sherron Lux, and Evelyn Perry have all written about Marian's transgressive potential in the legend (see Bibliography).

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Gregory-Abbot highlight the marginalization of women characters in various Robin Hood texts, emphasizing the legend's homosocial nature and androcentricity.[4] However, as Sherron Lux points out, even the most transgressive and proto-feminist Marians tend to be returned to "disturbingly subordinate positions" once their narrative quest (normally to seek out Robin in Sherwood Forest) has been accomplished.[5] Johnson argues that cinematic Marians are inherently marginalized by the neomedievalist setting of Robin Hood films, which situate Marian as either a "historical" woman who can "navigate her place in a man's world," or an ahistorical "representative feminist fantasy to rewrite the past."[6] This insert of Marian as a feminist figure is particularly prevalent in *Prince of Thieves*, and it is emblematic of Angela McRobbie's "faux feminism"—a brand of feminism that emerged within early third wave feminism from 1990 as the result of a backlash to more organized movements of the 1970s and 1980s, which were defined by a shift from collective political activism to individual women's empowerment and choice.[7] McRobbie argues that faux feminism consists of the "process of undoing, taking place most visibly in the privileged site of culture," which allowed governments and the media to claim contemporary relevance without political upheaval.[8] Building on this scholarship, I argue that *Prince of Thieves* deliberately deploys faux feminism as a tactic to provide a thin veneer of progression (a leaning into a false reality and distorted realism of equality) that is ultimately overshadowed by Robin's narrative role as a Campbellian hero.

Constructing Robin as Campbellian Hero

Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* is a structuralist approach to character, and in particular the identity and patterns of storytelling that define a typical hero. Campbell's work has served as a blueprint for the study of many heroes in popular culture and is particularly productive in highlighting patriarchal structures in the Robin Hood legend. Consideration of Campbell's understanding of a patriarchal hero helps to reveal how Robin's supremacy is essential to his character and quest narrative in modern versions. Sarah Nicholson notes that Campbell's outline of the hero's journey is not just a heroic quest but also a hermeneutic journey of self, stating "the hero's journey was the ideal of a life lived in pursuit of realizing one's inborn potential."[9] Campbell's monomythic hero undergoes a journey of metamorphosis that can be summarized as a cycle of *separation—initiation—return*, with the hero undergoing a parallel psychological journey

[4] See Valerie B Johnson, "A Forest of Her Own: Greenwood-Space and the Forgotten Female Characters of the Robin Hood Tradition," in *Robin Hood in Outlaw/Ed Spaces: Media, Performance and Other New Directions*, ed. Lesley Coote and Valerie B. Johnson (London: Routledge, 2017): 21-39; Lorraine K. Stock and Candace Gregory-Abbott, "The 'Other' Women of Sherwood: The Construction of Difference and Gender in Cinematic Treatments of the Robin Hood Legend," in *Race, Class, and Gender in "Medieval" Cinema*, ed. Lynn T. Ramey and Tison Pugh (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 199-214.

[5] Sherron Lux, "Maid Marian's Transgressive Identities," *Medieval Perspectives* 13 (1998): 84-98, 97.

[6] Valerie B. Johnson, "Maid Marian: Neomedievalism and Misogyny in the Reel," in *Medieval Women on Film*, ed. Kevin J. Harty (Jefferson: McFarland, 2020), 68-85, 69.

[7] McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, i.

[8] McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 26.

[9] Sarah Nicholson, "The Problem of Woman as Hero in the Work of Joseph Campbell," *Feminist Theology* 19, no. 2 (2011): 182-93, 184.

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of transformation concomitantly with his physical journey.[10] This character type and quest narrative is readily applied to the legend of Robin Hood, which since Anthony Munday's *The Downfall of Robert Earl of Huntingdon* (ca. 1598) has seen Robin undertake an inner journey of self-transformation from noble landowner to heroic outlaw of Sherwood Forest. Both Barbara Korte and Kimberley Azmi argue that the archetypical figure of Robin Hood easily fits within Campbell's notion of the monomythic hero. Korte argues that heroic figures in literature and popular culture serve as "founders, anchors and saviours" in times of cultural crisis,[11] noting that Campbell himself defined the monomythic hero as "eloquent, not of the present, disintegrating society and psyche, but of the unquenched source through which society is reborn."[12] Korte contends that this is particularly relevant to the Robin Hood legend, with various texts presenting England as "a country whose peace and security are under internal and external threat," requiring a hero who will "make the nation whole again."[13] Azmi observes that the legend has seen the Robin Hood character develop from a simple archetypal hero into a more complex Campbellian one, moving from simple physical deeds in early ballads and oral traditions to more complex spiritual deeds in modern texts.[14] Azmi argues that Sherwood Forest is a space of change (or an "archetypal testing area"), a version of Campbell's notion of the "temple" that the hero enters to commence metamorphosis.[15] *Prince of Thieves* utilizes this trope, with Costner's Robin fleeing to Sherwood to avoid persecution and subsequently discovering his capability to be a hero and lead his outlaw band against injustice.

Both Korte and Azmi establish Robin Hood as a Campbellian hero who undertakes a journey of self-realization and puts aside his own needs for the greater good. However, it must also be acknowledged that the fairness, justice, and equality that various Robin Hoods heroically fight for is relative to their position as a white man who, in many versions, comes from a background of privilege or nobility. If Robin Hood is a hero who fights to right the errors of an unjust society, what can be inferred from his heroism when he is fighting for a society that privileges white men? Johnson argues that the legend's role is to act as a "conservative model of reform," with many texts portraying seemingly transgressive or progressive elements only to ultimately reinforce conservative norms.[16] Similarly, Stephen Knight argues that although a conflict with authority is at the core of the tradition, Robin Hood does not stand for "anything static"— he is only required to be a "brave representation of resistance."[17] Regardless of the antagonist (whether it be the Church, the monarchy, the Sherriff of Nottingham, or corrupt government), various Robin Hoods all work to reinforce a patriarchal society where their own brand of heroic masculinity is valorized and they are lauded as heroes—regardless of who is marginalized along the way.

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[10] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 26.
[11] Barbara Korte, "The Hero's Journey and the State of the Nation," in *Heroes in Contemporary British Culture: Television Drama and Reflections of a Nation in Change*, ed. Barbara Korte and Nicole Falkenhayner (London: Routledge, 2021), 21-43, 21.
[12] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 18.
[13] Korte, "The Hero's Journey and the State of the Nation," 23.
[14] Kimberly Azmi, "Archetypal Analysis of Robin Hood and Maid Marian" (masters thesis, California State University, 2009), 4.
[15] Azmi, "Archetypal Analysis of Robin Hood and Maid Marian," 7.
[16] Johnson, "A Forest of Her Own," 32.
[17] Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 5.

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Marian is often relegated to an auxiliary status in Robin Hood texts, with her primary role being to support Robin as a companion or romantic interest. Johnson argues that Marian's marginalization is linked to "fiscal conservatism," with blockbuster versions being "exceptionally risk averse" by "avoiding nearly every form of controversy, including diversity, feminism and complex political messages."[18] Marian's representation in cinema is therefore a delicate push and pull of characterization, resulting in a paradoxical character arc that Johnson articulates thus: "independence, in order for audiences to mentally classify Marian as a 'strong independent woman'; dependence, so Robin Hood's rescue and claiming of 'his' woman becomes a major plot point; marginalisation, both physical and emotional, to ensure Marian never overshadows Robin."[19] Marian's subordinate status is particularly prominent in *Prince of Thieves* due to the film's use of Campbell's monomythic model to underscore Robin's heroism. The notion of the hero being reinforced at the expense of a woman is not a phenomenon unique to the Robin Hood legend—in fact, it is codified in Joseph Campbell's model. Campbell defines the role of the goddess met by the hero on his journey as conventionally gendered, describing her as, "the incarnation of the promise of perfection … the comforting, the nourishing, the "good" mother—young and beautiful."[20] He then reinforces the hierarchically gendered division between the hero and the goddess by stating that, "The whole sense of the ubiquitous myth of the hero's passage is that it shall serve as a general pattern for men and women."[21] Additionally, Nicholson astutely observes that despite analyzing various cultural myths that feature both men and women as heroic figures and using "conscious and deliberate" gender-inclusive language, Campbell's analysis always defaults back to "the vantage point of the male hero."[22] Evelyn Perry also observes that female heroic potential in Robin Hood texts is often neglected and is instead subordinated to a "dominant (masculine) paradigm."[23] For Campbell, any heroic potential of women is lost to their status as either the "goddess of the flesh" or the "queen of sin."[24]

While undertaking his journey of self-discovery, Campbell's hero often encounters two diametric archetypes of women: the Goddess and the Temptress. Where the Goddess guides the hero and provides him with divine knowledge to assist his journey, the Temptress instead seeks to lead him astray. With "loins of irresistible attraction and breasts bursting to be touched," the Temptress commits the ultimate transgression against the hero: she seeks to lead him astray from his sacred path of self-realization.[25] This whore/Madonna binary is prevalent in Robin Hood texts, with Lorinda B. Cohoon noting that many late-twentieth-century Robin Hood texts emphasize Marian's "maiden" status, highlighting a contemporaneous fascination with maiden figures such

[18] Johnson, "Misogyny in the Reel," 70.
[19] Johnson, "Misogyny in the Reel," 68.
[20] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 101-2.
[21] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 111.
[22] Nicholson, "The Problem of Woman as Hero in the Work of Joseph Campbell," 188.
[23] Evelyn M. Perry, "Disguising and Revealing the Female Hero's Identity: Cross-dressing in the Ballad of *Robin Hood and Maid Marian*," in *Robin Hood in Popular Culture: Violence, Transgression, and Justice*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 191-96, 191.
[24] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 113.
[25] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 115.

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as Princess Diana and their juxtaposition against more sexualized figures such as Madonna.[26] While Cohoon refers to Madonna, the American recording artist, it is worth noting that Marian's position in the legend is often equated with *The* Madonna—the Virgin Mary. Lesley Coote emphasizes the importance of the Virgin Mary in early Robin Hood ballads such as Adam de le Halle's pastourelle *Jeu de Robin et Marion*, suggesting that this ballad's Marion (a proto-Marian) is a "mirror image of the Virgin Mary, the other side of the same coin."[27] These early ballads feature Robins who are devoted to the Virgin Mary (and sometimes Mary Magdalene), acting as her servant to protect the vulnerable from the corrupt.[28] While Robin's worship of Mary dropped out of favor in post-Reformation texts,[29] the Marian archetype—with her maiden status and benevolent demeanor—neatly fills the gap left by The Madonna.

In Robin Hood texts, Marian is strongly associated with moral certainty, particularly in her support of Robin as hero. Whatever tensions are between her and Robin, Marian never betrays him and only ever works for the advancement of his outlaw heroics. This steadfast morality makes Marian an almost religious figure, aligning the Marian archetype closely with Campbell's definition of the Goddess. For Campbell, a woman is not a person with her own complexity or internal journey to discover, but instead she is a symbolic figure for the hero to encounter and use for the advancement of his own journey: "Woman … is the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know."[30] Campbell defines women as auxiliary to the hero: they hold knowledge that will help him succeed in his quest, but they will never experience the journey of self-realization themselves. In these terms, woman can only be understood as a Goddess or Temptress, and Marian can only be understood as a maiden who supports Robin in his heroic journey. Further, Campbell explicitly states that the Goddess can "never be greater" than the hero, but he concedes that "she can always promise more than he is yet capable of comprehending. She lures, she guides, she bids him burst his fetters."[31] Within Campbell's monomythic model, the Goddess holds divine knowledge to ensure the hero's success, however she—including Marian—is an auxiliary character in his quest, one who can never jeopardize his superior status. Campbell's model helps us to understand how the hero's position atop the narrative hierarchy privileges his journey of self-discovery, revealing how patriarchal structures embedded in the Robin Hood legend necessitate the marginalization of women characters such as Marian.

Robin as Patriarchal Hero in *Prince of Thieves*

Prince of Thieves establishes Robin as head of an outlaw band of men (and later women) in Sherwood Forest, where he appoints himself as leader after happening upon the ragtag bunch. The hierarchy of the group is clear and patriarchal, with Robin consistently reinforcing his position at

[26] Lorinda B. Cohoon, "Transgressive Transformations: Representations of Maid Marian in Robin Hood Retellings," *Lion and the Unicorn* 31, no. 3 (2007), 209-31, 209.
[27] Lesley Coote, *Storyworlds of Robin Hood: The Origins of a Medieval Outlaw* (London: Reaktion Books, 2020), 81-82.
[28] Cohoon, "Transgressive Transformations," 213; Coote, *Storyworlds of Robin Hood*, 99.
[29] Stephen Knight, *Reading Robin Hood: Content, Form and Reception in the Outlaw Myth* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 19.
[30] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 106.
[31] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 106.

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the apex. Upon arriving at his family estate after years away fighting in the Crusades, Costner's Robin finds his house and title taken over by the Sherriff of Nottingham (Alan Rickman). He openly challenges the Sherriff's authority, then flees to Sherwood. There, he encounters a band of outlaws already living and operating in the forest—a ready-made group of merry men without a heroic leader. The outlaw band is initially led by a version of the Little John archetypal character (Nick Brimble), whom Robin physically defeats, thus establishing Robin's physical prowess and superiority to lead the group. Francis Child first defined this trope in his collection of Scottish and English ballads, stating, "We shall have only too many variations of the adventure in which Robin Hood unexpectedly meets his match in a hand-to-hand fight ... His adversaries, after proving their mettle, are sometimes invited and induced to join his company."[32] Knight notes that the "Robin meets his match" structure indicates that each Robin is elected leader of his band not merely by brute power or skill, but through consensus—even after the "near humiliation" of defeat, his authority is always restored.[33] This trope is key in establishing the outlaw/patriarchal hierarchy of the group.

Little John, styled as John Little, is initially introduced in *Prince of Thieves* as the leader of the forest outlaws. From their introduction, the outlaws' inferiority to Robin in both class and intelligence is clearly signaled. Robin refers to the men as "rabble,"[34] while they mock him for being a wealthy nobleman, with Will Scarlet (Christian Slater) crowing, "Beg for mercy, rich man!"[35] John and Will Scarlet waylay Robin as he attempts to cross a river in Sherwood—these outlaws are competent, but they do not yet match the merry men of the legend who rob from the rich and give to the poor. In fact, they are initially presented as self-serving, insisting that Robin pay a tax for crossing the river. Robin is quick to note the lack of honor in the men's actions, pointing out that he has no money or sword. When John demands payment in the form of Robin's medallion (a precious memento of his father), Robin insists that John fight him for it. In a classic example of the "Robin meets his match" trope, Robin and John fight. While the men are ostensibly fighting for the medallion, there is also a larger power struggle at play here—they are fighting for leadership of the outlaw band.

The broader legend also includes the Marian archetype in the 'Robin meets his match' trope, with one of Marian's first appearances as a major character involving her dressing as a page and seeking Robin out in the greenwood in the ballad *Robin Hood and Maid Marian*. The two are already lovers but wear disguises and do not recognize each other, and a fight ensues. Robin and Marian are evenly matched in the ballad and continue to fight "at least an hour or more" until Robin capitulates and offers her a place in his band, still unaware of her true identity.[36] Marian recognizes his voice and reveals herself, and the two fall into each other's arms with "kind imbraces, and jobbing of faces."[37] This trope is played out in a similar fashion in *Prince of Thieves*,

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[32] Francis James Child, ed., *Robin Hood and the Potter*, in *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, vol. 3, pt. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 108-14, 109.
[33] Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study*, 82.
[34] *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, directed by Kevin Reynolds (Warner Bros, 1991), 00:39:04, https://watch.foxtel.com.au/app/#/movie/142145.
[35] *Prince of Thieves*, 00:38:09.
[36] Francis James Child, ed., *Robin Hood and Maid Marian*, in *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, vol. 3, pt. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 218-19, 219.
[37] Child, ed., *Robin Hood and Maid Marian*, 219.

first with a disguised Marian in her home, and then with Little John in Sherwood Forest. However, while the ballad Marian is invited into Robin's band of outlaws after equaling him in combat, *Prince of Thieves*' Marian is only temporarily included in the forest, and her fighting prowess is negated at the end of the film.

Little John's treatment in *Prince of Thieves* is more emblematic of the trope's execution in other Robin Hood texts. John physically bests Robin three times, but the victory is not based on brute strength. Robin's persistence and cunning is what ensures his supremacy—he briefly disappears into the rushing river and then reappears and clubs John between the legs with his staff. He also emasculates John throughout the fight, mockingly calling him "Little John"[38] (and thereby re-christening him to align with the Little John archetype of the legend). After falling into the river, John panics and cries, "I can't bloody swim!"[39] Robin uses this advantage to ensure John yields and is proclaimed the victor. John decrees, "Well, Robin of Locksley—you got balls of solid rock!"[40] and the two become friends. John's proclamation of Robin's "balls of solid rock" highlights how different masculinities compete for hegemony in this scene—John admires Robin's physical prowess and bravery, and he expresses this through the locus of the male body. Robin's masculinity is deemed worthy of victory, and Robin soon appoints himself the leader of the outlaw band.

Disenchanted with the sluggish, rudimentary outlaw camp after a night of drinking, the listless Robin goes to Nottingham, steals the Sherriff's horse, and returns to the camp with stolen food. The outlaws are furious, warning Robin that he has started a war. Robin is indignant, declaring that they should "strike back at the very man who takes our homes."[41] When Little John mockingly asks if Robin is planning to join them, Robin replies, "No, to lead you."[42] Robin's leadership in *Prince of Thieves* is consistently signaled as a superiority of intelligence, honor and duty. While drinking around the campfire, one outlaw refuses to give Azeem (Morgan Freeman) a drink of mead. Robin admonishes the man, asking, "Has English hospitality changed so much in six years that a friend of mine is not welcome at this table?"[43] When the men declare Azeem as a savage, Robin counters: "That he is, but no more than you or I."[44] Robin is treated as leader by the band due to his honor and integrity, rather than simply his class or noble blood. For example, he refuses to be called "sire" by the men. This emphasis on Robin's superior character is featured again later in the film, when Robin tells Marian that, "Nobility is not a birthright. It's defined by one's actions."[45] As Leah Haught notes, the notion that nobility is not a birthright is an entirely anachronistic concept to the medieval setting of the film, however this exchange reaffirms Robin's position as supreme patriarch.[46]

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[38] *Prince of Thieves*, 00:41:21.
[39] *Prince of Thieves*, 00:42:29.
[40] *Prince of Thieves*, 00:42:56.
[41] *Prince of Thieves,* 00:55:06.
[42] *Prince of Thieves*, 00:55:00.
[43] *Prince of Thieves*, 00:43:33.
[44] *Prince of Thieves*, 00:43:42.
[45] *Prince of Thieves*, 01:20:56.
[46] Leah Haught, "Racialized Outcasts: Non-White Bodies and the Construction of the Outlaw-Hero in Modern Robin Hood Film," in *Negotiating Boundaries in Medieval Literature and Culture: Essays on Marginality, Difference, and*

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THE WOMEN OF SHERWOOD

Robin's supremacy over other white men is reinforced in *Prince of Thieves* by his dominance over women and racial others. The women of Sherwood join the outlaws after their village is ransacked by the Sherriff's men. Robin takes an active and authoritative role in transforming the forest into a space of outlaw freedom, proclaiming, "What do we need that the forest cannot provide? We have food … wood for weapons … we'll find safety and solace in the trees."[47] Johnson argues that Robin Hood narratives "embody masculine control" by co-opting traditionally feminine spaces and transforming them into masculine ones, arguing that the forest is "wilderness, chaos, the interior that must be dominated and conquered: the feminine."[48] Under Robin's guidance, the natural wilderness of the forest is tamed into a structured, patriarchal society, moving to "civilization, order, the space that controls itself and others: the masculine."[49] This is demonstrated in a montage (accompanied by a triumphant brass section) of the outlaws creating an idyllic forest paradise complete with treetop bungalows, mechanical lift systems, and perfectly camouflaged hidey-holes for ambushing the Sherriff's men. Under Robin's leadership, the ragtag group in the wilderness turns into disciplined, driven outlaws living in a functional, almost utopic, patriarchal society under Robin's leadership—a positive mirror image of the corrupt society run by the Sherriff in Nottingham. This is demonstrated not only by the civilization of their forest society, but by the men's emulation of Robin's hegemonic masculinity. By demonstrating Robin's values of courage, honor and integrity, his specific form of masculinity is valorized within the patriarchal hierarchy, cementing his status at its apex. While these values are not inherently problematic, they do outline the acceptable parameters of Robin's hegemonic masculinity (and therefore the kind of behaviour the outlaw hierarchy should emulate). Anyone who does not adhere to this valorised masculinity threatens to destabilize Robin's leadership of the patriarchal hierarchy, resulting in their systematic invalidation and exclusion from the group.

Robin's authority in the forest is not just leadership of the men in the outlaw hierarchy, but it also includes authority over women and non-white characters, revealing an intersectional hierarchy of race in *Prince of Thieves* that doubly reinforces Robin as a white, male hero. Leah Haught notes that *Prince of Thieves* features non-white bodies that are "only valuable as tools to support a white nationalist agenda" and which positions Anglo-American identity as "at once inherently heroic and unequivocally white."[50] This intersection of racial and patriarchal hierarchies is demonstrated in a key scene in the film when John's wife Fanny (Soo Drouet) has a troubled labor. With his advanced medical knowledge, Azeem is called to assist Fanny, with John, Friar Tuck (Michael McShane) and Robin hovering behind. Azeem advises that the baby is in a breech position and will require his assistance to be born. When Friar Tuck protests, it is Robin who makes the final decision in the matter of Fanny's obstetric health: "The good Friar's done all he can. I

Reading Practices in Honor of Thomas Hahn, edited by Valerie B. Johnson and Kara L. McShane (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2022), 21-48, 31.

[47] *Prince of Thieves*, 00:59:40.

[48] Johnson, "A Forest of Her Own," 23.

[49] Johnson, "A Forest of Her Own," 23.

[50] Haught, "Racialized Outcasts," 22.

Johanna Black, "Fantasy Feminism: Joseph Campbell's Heroic Model as a Framework for Marginalization in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*," in in "Explorations in Realism and Verisimilitude in Post-Medieval Robin Hood Texts," in Alexander L. Kaufman, ed., special issue, *The Bulletin of the International Association for Robin Hood Studies* 7 (2025): 19-31. DOI: 10.33043/BIARHS.7.1.19-31.

suggest you let the Moor try."[51] This chain of deference to Robin establishes his authority over both Azeem and the Friar in the patriarchal hierarchy, despite Azeem's superior grasp of medicine. Haught identifies this as a "Western depiction of heroism that privilege(s) name recognition and white mediocrity over non-white exceptionalism."[52] Fanny also does not speak during this exchange, allowing Robin to make the final decision in the traditionally woman-dominated space of childbirth and apparently deferring to him regarding her bodily autonomy. By giving Robin the ultimate say in how Fanny gives birth, *Prince of Thieves* emphasizes the intersectional nature of Robin's authority over women and non-white men, doubly reinforcing the notion that the quintessential hero is a white male.

MARIAN'S MARGINALIZATION IN *PRINCE OF THIEVES*

Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio's Marian is emblematic of many seemingly strong heroines in the 1990s, with the *New York Times*' contemporaneous review of *Prince of Thieves* touting her as "a beautiful, intelligent strong-willed woman."[53] However, this initial impression of independence and capability is negated throughout the film as Marian serves to reaffirm Robin's status as Campbellian hero. *Prince of Thieves* marginalizes Marian by negating her fighting skills (in order for Robin to rescue her in the film's climax) and excluding her from permanently residing in Sherwood Forest (as her presence as a romantic heroine threatens to destabilize Robin's position as leader of the outlaws). This marginalization and invalidation of her feminist potential is necessary within the text to ensure that Robin's position as a patriarchal hero is maintained—as Johnson notes, an "analysis of [Marian's] introduction demonstrates that the film deploy[s] a harmful neomedieval interpretation of feminism that will encourage Marian to be put in her place later on."[54]

In the opening of the film, as Robin returns home from the Crusades, he fulfills the dying promise he made to Marian's brother to protect her. Robin seeks out Marian at her home and is attacked by a masked assailant. The two combatants fight and seem evenly matched in strength and skill. Robin eventually thrusts the attacker's sword hand over a candleflame. She shrieks in pain, revealing herself to be a woman. Robin whips off her mask, revealing his attacker as Marian, before she kicks him between the legs. In this fight, there is no clear winner—it seems the two are evenly matched in both combat and romance. This re-versioning of the "Robin meets his match" trope is a fitting introduction for a feminist heroine—a clear nod to the Marian of medieval ballad who demonstrated the prowess to fight Robin at length.

Marian's capability and agency continue to be demonstrated to *Prince of Thieves*' audience as she firmly fends off the sexual advances of the Sherriff of Nottingham, looks out for the wellbeing of the peasants under her care, and seeks out Robin in Sherwood Forest. She is welcomed into the forest; however, her presence there is temporary. While other women (such as Fanny) have permanent residence in Sherwood, Mastrantonio's Marian (along with almost every other Marian in the canon) is not able to stay. In *Prince of Thieves*, it is implied that the reason for

[51] *Prince of Thieves*, 01:23:07.
[52] Haught, "Racialized Outcasts," 43.
[53] Vincent Canby, "Review/Film; A Polite Robin Hood in a Legend Recast," *New York Times*, June 1991.
[54] Johnson, "Misogyny in the Reel," 81.

Marian's departure is because of her duties at court as a noble lady, as well as her responsibilities for caring for the peasants that are under her charge. She is also required to return to Nottingham to act as a double agent at the castle, with Robin asking her to send a message to her cousin King Richard calling for aid. Marian's return to Nottingham is of her own free will—she even insists that she and her handmaiden be blindfolded when they are brought to the secret village to ensure they are able to leave without jeopardizing the safety of the outlaw camp. While *Prince of Thieves* does not actively exclude Marian from the forest, she is the only woman whose presence in the greenwood is temporary (when compared to the wives and daughters of the other forest outlaws). I argue that this is due to her key function as a love interest for our hero, Robin—a version of the Campbellian Temptress whose presence would present a dangerous disruption to the hierarchy of the outlaws and undermine Robin's authority as hero. Johnson posits that the exclusion of women from the forest "permits homosociality while avoiding the 'risk' of homosexuality."[55] I suggest that Marian's temporary presence in the greenwood assures the audience of Robin's heterosexuality without jeopardizing the homosocial bonds of the hierarchy. Her brief visit is punctuated by her PG-rated overtures as a Temptress—she sensually blows in Robin's ear as he attempts to demonstrate archery to his men, causing him to miss his target and raising jeers from the crowd. This interaction highlights the potential for her to destabilize Robin's position in the forest, as the temptation of her presence could draw focus from his leadership duties and undermine his authority in the hierarchy.

Marian's presence as a romantic interest not only threatens Robin's position at the apex of the hierarchy, but it also causes destabilization of the hierarchy itself. While dancing around the fire, a coy Will Scarlet offers Marian a flower and asks her to dance. Robin immediately interjects, declaring his ownership of Marian by stating, "This lady is spoken for."[56] This aggravates the already tense relationship between Robin and Will, as Robin is not yet aware that Will is his half-brother. Incensed by Robin's position as the legitimate son of their father and jealous of his leadership of the group, Will ultimately offers to betray Robin to the Sherriff of Nottingham. It is only when Robin finds out the truth and embraces him as a brother that Will abandons the betrayal. Their relationship is not only defined by their literal patriarchal lineage, but also by Will's position beneath Robin in the outlaw band. Marian's brief appearance in the forest camp affirms Robin's heterosexuality, but even her short stay disrupts his leadership by tempting him with romance. Consistent with the treatment of Marian within many texts in the legend, she departs the forest and the outlaw hierarchy stabilizes once more.

Marian's temporary presence in Sherwood is not the only way her feminist potential in *Prince of Thieves* is neutralized—her previously demonstrated skills in fighting are also negated in the film in order for Robin to fulfill his role as hero. Upon returning to Nottingham, Marian is captured by the Sherriff's men and brought to Nottingham Castle. As the king's cousin, she is forced to marry the Sherriff in order to consolidate his political position. This is a powerful example of a patriarchal tradition in the Robin Hood legend, in which women are treated as trade objects between men.[57] Despite holding her own against Robin in a fight earlier in the film, she is

[55] Johnson, "A Forest of Her Own," 23.
[56] *Prince of Thieves*, 01:25:47.
[57] Johnson, "A Forest of Her Own," 28; Stock and Gregory-Abbott. "The 'Other' Women of Sherwood," 203.

easily overpowered by the Sherriff and struggles ineffectually as she is dragged through Nottingham Castle. After refusing to participate in the rushed marriage ceremony, the Sherriff attempts to rape her on the chapel alter. As Roger Ebert noted in his review of the film, this is a confronting scene for a family blockbuster that includes a "graphic, floor-level shot" of the Sherriff straddling Marian's prone form.[58] While he pins her down and holds her wrists, she cries, "You may take this body, but it will not be me. It will not be me!"[59] Despite the vile actions at play, the scene is played for laughs—the Sherriff enters an awkward pike position over Marian's body in order to spread her legs apart in a physical gag. When Marian is at her most vulnerable, Robin literally swings in to save the day, cementing his status as hero. Marian's kidnapping and attempted sexual assault is a stark contrast to her introduction in the film, which positioned her as Robin's equal in physical combat. However, the film performs a narrative backflip in order for Robin to fulfil his role as hero and rescue his heroine from the evil Sherriff. This engagement with and then abandonment of strong, independent traits in the heroine allows *Prince of Thieves* to provide a palatable veneer of feminism, while reinforcing Robin's position at the apex of the patriarchy.

Just as McRobbie's faux feminism was adopted by governments as a substitute for gender equity without a fundamental political upheaval, *Prince of Thieves* provides a fantasy of feminism without meaningfully challenging or dismantling Robin's position as patriarch in the storyworld, and hero in the narrative. McRobbie argues that faux feminism is a double movement of "disarticulation and displacement, accompanied by replacement and substitution," which she says "devalues or negates" any collective political action on the assumption that it is no longer required.[60] My application of Campbell's model of the monomythic hero demonstrates how *Prince of Thieves* privileges Robin's status as a self-realized hero at the expense of Marian's own characterization and development. Joseph Campbell's model of storytelling has been remarkably influential in Hollywood, as a touchstone for the "real" heroic type of character and narrative, one that justifies a pervasive industrial adoption of storytelling that is centered on the personal growth of a patriarchal hero.[61] Although Campell's hero's journey is used as an analytic tool in this study of *Prince of Thieves*, the film itself seems heavily influenced by the Hollywood screen industry's valorization of Campbell's heroic model. *Prince of Thieves* provides a fantasy of feminism by initially presenting Marian as a capable and independent heroine, which aligns with the seemingly postfeminist sensibility of the early 1990s. Thus, on a surface level viewing and analysis of the film, Marian appears to be modeled on certain third wave feminist stances. However, the film's attunement to the realism of such positions is distorted, for it ultimately performs Robbie's disarticulation by devaluing Marian's feminist potential, marginalizing her from Sherwood Forest and negating of her fighting skills. Until mainstream Robin Hood texts are willing to depart from the Campbellian hero model, the legend will continue to undermine its feminist potential in favor of valorizing Robin Hood as a patriarchal hero.

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[58] Roger Ebert, "Review: *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*," June 14, 1991, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/robin-hood-prince-of-thieves-1991.

[59] *Prince of Thieves*, 02:16:41.

[60] McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 28.

[61] Ian W. Macdonald, *Screenwriting Poetics and the Screen Idea* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, 3rd ed. (Studio City, CA: Michael Weise Productions, 2007).

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