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## Azeem and the Witch: Race, Disability, and Medievalisms in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*

Rachel Ellen Clark, Wartburg College, US, [rachel.clark@wartburg.edu](mailto:rachel.clark@wartburg.edu)

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*Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* was the second highest-grossing movie of 1991. Its fuzzy version of the Middle Ages invokes the Angevins only in cameo and revises a genre of medievalism I call 'Robin Hood Times'. This medievalism claims a specific setting, usually during the reign of King Richard I, even while it generalizes that setting enough to comment on contemporary problems. In *Prince of Thieves*, the characters Azeem and Mortiana serve as opposites, their racialized bodies participating in an individualized discourse about race that ultimately upholds a neoliberal, 'colorblind' form of white supremacy. Azeem's physical competence and ability also contrast sharply with Mortiana's physical frailty and deformity in a classic example of what Mitchell and Snyder (2000) call 'narrative prosthesis.' The intersections of race and disability in the fantasy setting of Robin Hood Times suggest that the solution to social injustice is individual rather than systemic. The return of the 'good' King Richard I restores order, virtue, the Locksley lands—and the status quo. The Robin Hood story has revolutionary potential, but this version of Robin Hood Times chooses to reinforce neoliberal ableism and 'colorblind' racial tolerance instead of the utopian promises of equity that the forest society could provide.

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## Introduction

For a movie set so precisely in 1194, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (dir. Kevin Reynolds, 1991) seems surprisingly unmoored in time. Or, rather, everything about it conjures up a fuzzy medievalism, a muddy *mélange* of the Crusades, the Bayeux Tapestry, and early modern witchcraft beliefs, with a hefty dash of *Swiss Family Robinson* treehouse engineering and a ruined castle or two. As the second highest-grossing domestic film of 1991, *Prince of Thieves* produced an outsize effect on popular culture in the United States, even prompting Mel Brooks to parody many of its elements in 1993's *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*. Reynolds's version of Robin Hood has set the conversation for Hollywood renditions of the story ever since. Both Ridley Scott's 2010 endeavor and the 2018 Otto Bathurst flop grappled with the legacy of *Prince of Thieves*, but neither came close to its box office success.

Perhaps the most enduring legacy of *Prince of Thieves* is its revision of Robin Hood-related medievalisms. I refer to the Hollywood versions of these medievalisms as 'Robin Hood Times,' a nod to the phrase 'Back in medieval times...' used to introduce or ask questions about popular stereotypes, myths, and misconceptions of the Middle Ages. Films set in Robin Hood Times evoke the reigns of Richard I (r. 1189–1199) and John (r. 1199–1216). They are set primarily in Nottingham and Sherwood Forest. However, even the geography of Robin Hood Times can defy reality: in *Prince of Thieves*, Robin and Azeem somehow walk along Hadrian's Wall and pass the Sycamore Gap Tree on their way from Dover to Nottingham.<sup>1</sup> Films set in this imagined era also feature familiar characters. As the stereotypically 'good' characters, we have Robin Hood (Robin of Locksley), Maid Marian, Little John, Will Scarlet, Friar Tuck, and various other 'Merry Men'; the villains they fight include Prince John (if he exists in the world of the film), the Sheriff of Nottingham, Guy of Gisborne,<sup>2</sup> and their henchmen and allies. Whether John appears in the film or not, Richard is always absent, save for cameos. In fact, director Ridley Scott kills him off entirely at the beginning of *Robin Hood* (2010). Robin and his allies need to 'steal from the rich to give to the poor' as vigilantes because Prince John, the Sheriff of Nottingham, and other governing forces are committed to tyranny and oppression. Most importantly, although the absence of 'Good King Richard' reveals systemic problems (absentee rule, governmental corruption, exploitation of the working classes, and so on), post-*Prince of Thieves* films set in Robin Hood Times

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<sup>1</sup> As a result of this movie, the Sycamore Gap Oak is now also known as the Robin Hood Tree. See Environmental Partnership Association (2017), 'The Sycamore Gap Tree,' *Tree of the Year*, <https://www.treeoftheyear.org/previous-years/2017/Javor-v-prikrem-udoli> [Last accessed 2 April 2023].

<sup>2</sup> In the 1938 film, this character is 'Sir Guy of Gisbourne'; in *Prince of Thieves*, he is 'Guy of Gisborne.' Below, I use whichever spelling is correct for the film being discussed.

posit individual action as a solution. In this sense, Robin Hood Times stymies the radical leveling potential of the legend, instead elevating a conservative narrative that privileges the same old systems of nobility, wealth, and honor.

The structure of *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* sets the template for this conservative, individualistic narrative. It is framed at the beginning and end by invocations of the Crusades and especially King Richard I, from the title card that opens the movie to Sean Connery's uncredited cameo as Richard at the end. Yet John is notably absent, never even mentioned. Nor is William de Longchamp (d. 1197), whom the historical Richard named regent when he left the country. In fact, no one appears to be governing England. Alan Rickman's iconic Sheriff of Nottingham is the one worried about Richard's return and its effects on the barons. Richard himself, despite the ahistorical return to England at the end of the movie, is most important throughout for his absence. As I argue below, the Angevins' absence in the film helps rewrite Robin Hood Times for the *Wall Street* era, focusing on individual rather than systemic solutions for inequities of not only class but also race and dis/ability, embodied by the Muslim Azeem (Morgan Freeman) and the witch Mortiana (Geraldine McEwan).

### **'Robin Hood Times' and the Absent Angevins**

Although the title card pins the backdrop of the film to 'the third Great Crusade to reclaim the Holy Land from the Turks', nothing else in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* has any historical specificity (Reynolds, 1991). The title sequence's use of the Bayeux Tapestry, which famously depicts the Norman Conquest rather than Robin Hood or any of the Crusades, illustrates that a general *feeling* of the Middle Ages is more important to the film than any historical underpinnings. Marcus Bull (2005) has pointed out that popular conceptions of the Middle Ages as a whole resemble 'mood music playing in the background, as opposed to a single memorable tune' (9–10). To build on this metaphor, Robin Hood Times serves as one melodic thread of this background music, whereas several others operate in harmony or counterpoint: 'King Arthur Times'; 'Non-Arthurian Chivalry Times'; and, with a nod to Hobbes, 'Nasty Brutish And Short Times' (notably satirized in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* [dir. Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones, 1975]). A focus on outlaws—instead of chivalry, knighthood, jousting, and courtly love—distinguishes Robin Hood Times from King Arthur Times and Chivalry Times; its charming characters, forest shenanigans, and utopian tendencies distinguish it from Nasty Brutish And Short Times.

Unlike these other medievalisms, Robin Hood Times as a concept is pinned firmly and paradoxically to both specific years and specific monarchs. Chivalry Times and Nasty Brutish And Short Times do not require particular monarchs. King Arthur Times,

which does, can evoke anything from the 5th to the 14th centuries. Robin Hood Times, however, manages to be the most locatable medievalism in time and space while still maintaining the fuzziness that all medievalisms share. This fuzzy locatability is one characteristic that post-*Prince of Thieves* Robin Hoods share with earlier Hollywood versions. Even when Robin Hood tales invoke the Angevins and other historical figures, they do so ahistorically. Although the historical John did lead a rebellion and attempt to set himself up as an alternate regent to Longchamp, he never ultimately stole the throne and indeed surrendered. Nevertheless, Robin Hood films tend to portray him as a usurper. The animated Disney *Robin Hood* (dir. Wolfgang Reitherman, 1973) memorably highlights this legacy of power-hungry corruption. Richard has joined the Third Crusade only because John's advisor Sir Hiss hypnotized him in order to allow John to steal the throne. As the Merry Men sing, 'Too late to be known as John the First / He's sure to be known as John the Worst / A pox on that phony king of England!' (Reitherman and Hand, 1973). Like other Robin Hoods, this film needs John's villainy to enhance both Robin's and Richard's heroism. Unlike *Prince of Thieves*, however, it does not posit individual action as the solution. Kevin J. Harty (2012) notes that in this film, 'The wealthy and greedy—not church and state—are the enemy. Indeed, both church and state in the person of Tuck and Richard ... are the guarantors of the poor, the downtrodden, and the dispossessed' (142–3). Institutions may be personified in individuals, but individual action matters only inasmuch as it leverages collective institutional power on behalf of justice and care.

Disney's most famous film predecessor, Michael Curtiz's *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), relies on a similar dynamic. The first scene gives us an announcement that King Richard is being held captive in Austria, and we cut to Prince John conspiring with Sir Guy of Gisbourne to overthrow Longchamp and profit from increased taxes on the Saxons (Curtiz, 1938). Thus, when we meet Robin as the valiant defender of Much the Miller's Son, who has shot one of the king's deer, we already know the stakes: John and Gisbourne stand for tyranny, usurpation, and exploitation, while Robin defends the powerless against these misuses of power. At the end, Richard returns in disguise, only to reveal himself in the middle of John's attempt to depose him. He aligns himself with Robin and the powerless by exiling John, Gisbourne, and all their followers. In contrast, Richard promises to build a free and fair England for both Normans and Saxons. He will no longer be absent; he will ensure justice. State reforms again constitute the backbone of the improved society.

In *Prince of Thieves*, then, Richard's absence and return fit in with previous Hollywood narratives. As in the Disney and Curtiz versions, Connery's Richard appears at the end as an uncomplicated heroic figure. Instead of focusing on restoring order to the

kingdom, though, his sole concern here appears to be approving the marriage of Robin (Kevin Costner) and Marian (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio). When Robin welcomes the king, Richard responds, ‘It is I who am honored, Lord Locksley’ (Reynolds, 1991). This imprimatur efficiently restores Robin’s title and casts him as a heroic victor over the pagan evils embodied by the Sheriff and the witch Mortianna. Robin’s individual love story matters more than righting the social wrongs perpetrated in Richard’s absence; clearing Robin’s name stands in for building the free and fair England promised in the 1938 version.

Even while serving as *deus ex machina*, however, Richard manages not to be wholly present. For the audience, Richard’s appearance is wrapped up inextricably with Sean Connery’s star image. Star image, as defined by Richard Dyer (2004), ‘consists of everything that is publicly available about stars’, from film roles to interviews, puff pieces, press coverage, public appearances, and more (2). Nickolas Haydock (2008) even refers to Connery as ‘the reigning king of medieval movies’ (95). Thus, when Connery enters the scene, he is simultaneously Richard the Lionheart; James Bond; the older, tragic Robin Hood of *Robin and Marian* (1976); Jimmy Malone; Dr. Henry Jones, Sr.; his many other roles; and the public-facing Sean Connery of interviews and other appearances. Tison Pugh (2009) has observed that the ‘heroic masculinity’ of Connery’s star image ‘shores up the alpha-male status of Robin Hood as character and of Kevin Costner as actor’ (161). Thus, even when the movie shows us King Richard, he is more Connery than Angevin king. Any relationship to the historical Richard I is purely coincidental.

And yet the film’s continuities with earlier versions of Robin Hood Times, simultaneously Angevin-focused and Angevin-light, serve an important function. Like other forms of medievalism, Robin Hood Times raises what Louise D’Arcens (2014) calls ‘key medievalist questions’, including the roles of ‘cultural memory, reception, adaptation, authenticity, presentism and anachronism’ (4). Robin Hood Times may be violent and unjust, but it also advances the importance of a harmonious society—albeit a conservative vision of what this means. The outlaws’ forest community seems to provide a fantasy of a separatist and egalitarian paradise where the wealth accumulated by exploiting the workers is redistributed to both the workers and the outlaws. However, even aside from Hollywood’s typically inaccurate representation of downtrodden peasants with no rights or resources whatsoever, this paradise is less utopian than it seems. Although the peasants have more money than before, no permanent changes increase their power. Redistributing the stolen coins and jewels of wealthy travelers fails to restructure an economy that allows the aristocracy to exploit the peasantry. Instead, the ‘merry men’ function merely as haphazard vigilante tax collectors.

Moreover, in *Prince of Thieves*, the changes are purely local. No one seems to care about the plight of the poor in York or Chester or London. Even in earlier versions, though, the economic solutions of Robin Hood Times, no matter how apparently socialist on the surface, maintain a fundamentally conservative view that supports the same old power dynamics. The occupants of powerful and wealthy positions shuffle, but the structures of power remain the same. That the historical Richard demonstrated far more interest in crusading than in ruling England is irrelevant to the nostalgic fantasy of a functional royal and aristocratic hierarchy.

Not all medievalisms must be inherently conservative, though. Ina Rae Hark (1976), for example, has pointed out that the 1938 *Robin Hood*'s forest hideaway 'has all the earmarks of the government camp which shelters the Joads in John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath*' (6) and calls the Warner Brothers studio 'the most socially conscious major studio of the time' (3)—even while acknowledging the narrative's investment in relying on good rulers (4). Kathleen Biddick (1998) similarly notes that '[t]he 1938 film with its New Deal politics brings the pastoral virtues of the good leader to the state' (75). For Biddick, the importance of the state here stands in sharp contrast to *Prince of Thieves*, which 'makes no space for the state, instead constructing an elaborate family space that is divided between absent mothers, aristocratic and peasant, and their offspring, noble and bastard' (1998: 77). By 1991, the happiness of the Locksley family, not the effectiveness of the Angevin state, marks the restoration of social order.

The post-Reynolds *Robin Hood* that most challenges the conservative, individualistic narrative is Scott's 2010 version. Scott also deviates the most from the usual tropes of Robin Hood Times: Richard dies, there are more battles than forest shenanigans, and—most strikingly—Robin is heir to a populist leader whose motto for the rebellion that he led was 'Rise and rise again until lambs become lions' (Scott, 2010). The film ends with John refusing to sign the Magna Carta and declaring Robin an outlaw; only then do we see an idyllic forest society in the greenwood. Marian describes it as 'the outlaw's friend,' a place where there is 'no tax, no tithe, nobody rich, nobody poor: fair shares for all at nature's table' (Scott, 2010). This egalitarian utopia, of which we catch only a brief glimpse, comes closest to the communal values of the pre-Reynolds movies. However, it reaches further. State and church are inherently corrupt, so society's outcasts must 'right' the 'many wrongs' in 'the country of King John' (Scott, 2010). Instead of a conservative turn toward the family, Scott provides an anarchist turn toward a commune. Still, the emphasis on individual actions rather than state reform remains constant.

The libertarian and neoliberal privileging of the family over society also helps to explain the simplistic politics of race and dis/ability in *Prince of Thieves*. Although the

film does work in some ways to counteract white supremacist notions of medieval England, in other ways it supports them. The character in the movie with the strongest moral center, the greatest wisdom, and the most strategic mind is Morgan Freeman's Azeem, a 'Moor' who owes a life-debt to Robin and returns with him to England. Although this is the first Hollywood version of Robin Hood to include a Black co-star, it is not the first adaptation to introduce a 'Moorish' character. That honor belongs to the BBC television series *Robin of Sherwood* (1984–86), which gives us the character Nazir (Chapman, 2015: 158, 165). The 'life-debt' premise in *Prince of Thieves* reveals old Orientalist stereotypes about Islam and honor; nevertheless, Azeem plays a key role in the outlaws' victories. He also kills Mortiana, saves Robin, and survives to celebrate Robin and Marian's wedding. There the community embraces him as order is restored, and the narrative allows him never to take a knee to Richard's authority.

At the same time, the narrative forces Azeem into stereotypical Black roles, including the Wise Mentor and the Magical Negro, even if his 'magic' really comes from Islamic science (or at least the movie's version of it). Furthermore, the other Muslim characters in the movie, all of whom exist only in the initial dungeon scene set in Jerusalem, might as well be cardboard cutouts. They borrow the worst Islamophobic stereotypes: cruel, sadistic, 'savage'. Azeem's goodness and loyalty set him apart from the other Muslims; unlike his countrymen, he is safe for white people like Robin.

Azeem also exists as a foil to Mortiana. His goodness shines against her evil, his Blackness against her unnatural whiteness, his physical fitness against her disability and frailty. While Robin, Marian, and the Sheriff may play the most important parts in the film, Azeem and Mortiana's visible 'Otherness' proves the most important in understanding how the movie constructs the present via the past. Ultimately, I argue, the bodies of Mortiana and Azeem signal a larger problem with the movie's treatment of injustice: disability and race together here metaphorize injustice as an individual rather than a social and systemic phenomenon—just as the problems caused by absent Angevins result in individual rather than systemic solutions.

### **Azeem: Modern Blackness in Robin Hood Times**

*Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* is hardly the first version of the legend to introduce racial or ethnic conflicts. Indeed, ever since Sir Walter Scott set the trend with *Ivanhoe* in 1819, Robin Hood texts have often featured clashes between the newcomer Normans and the resident Saxons. In *Prince of Thieves*, the camera's slow, Ken-Burns-style pan over the Bayeux Tapestry promises a now-familiar Robin Hood trope that never materializes. This nod to the Battle of Hastings is the closest the film ever comes to highlighting Norman/Saxon conflicts. In contrast, the 1938 *Adventures of Robin Hood* makes much

of the division between these two groups. Esther Liberman Cuenca (2023) argues that this film uses the imperialist, colonialist dynamics of the Norman Conquest to portray racial strife as an innate characteristic of human society. As Lauryn Mayer (2019) observes of the Flynn vehicle, ‘Despite being set in 1191, one hundred [and] twenty-five years after the Norman Conquest, the film makes a sharp division of the population of England between the decadent, predatory Norman invaders and the downtrodden but valiant Saxons, who are called the “true English”’ (12). This division fits in with 1930s constructions of race, in which certain European immigrants were excluded from whiteness and its associated privileges. By the late 1980s, however, distinctions among the various European ethnicities mattered less to US constructions of race than they had half a century earlier, as Irish, Italian, and eastern European immigrants had slowly become white.<sup>3</sup>

In 1991, then, Kevin Reynolds’s version of the story follows in the footsteps of *Robin of Sherwood* to replace the Norman/Saxon conflict with clashes between whiteness and Blackness, Christianity and Islam (and pagan druidic witchcraft as a contrast to both). In this sense, *Prince of Thieves* is very much of its time, released only four months after the conclusion of the Gulf War. Still, as Kris Swank (2022) notes about Arthurian TV shows and films, ‘the mere presence of characters of color in these texts does not necessarily signal an egalitarian or progressive point of view. From a postcolonial perspective, the persistence of these limited roles for non-white characters into the twenty-first century reveals a tendency to reify traditional power structures’ (532).<sup>4</sup> This reification comes into play in *Prince of Thieves*. Lynn Ramey (2014) has similarly pointed out that the movie was created ‘during a high point in American multiculturalism’, albeit a high point that emphasized ‘colorblindness’ as a goal (112–13). This kind of multiculturalism explains the deeply embedded racism and Islamophobia that remain in the movie, despite clear efforts to portray Azeem as a hero.

As the movie transitions from the credits to the start of the action, we move visually from the Bayeux Tapestry to title cards to a muezzin on a minaret. The music changes from the cheerful horns of the overture to something more muted and minor-key during the two title cards. As the second title card informs us that ‘most of the young English noblemen’ who fought in Jerusalem ‘never returned home’, the voice of the muezzin overlays this somber description of the casualties of war, implicitly blaming the sad deaths of young English aristocrats on Islam itself (Reynolds, 1991). An auditory match-cut then takes us to a dungeon, where a man is screaming in pain as he is tortured. The

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<sup>3</sup> See, *inter alia*, Ignatiev (1995) and Dunbar-Ortiz (2021) for examples of how this conversation has developed since the 1990s.

<sup>4</sup> Many thanks to Kris Swank for sharing with me the page proofs of this article before the book was published.



message is clear; the song of the muezzin leads to the torture of prisoners. One of the torturers confirms this with the first English line in the movie: ‘Show them the courage of Allah’ (Reynolds, 1991). (Mysteriously, everyone in this dungeon converses entirely in fluent English.) Then the man who had been screaming gets his hand cut off—and another of the guards smiles in glee as the hand comes away. Pain, torture, and sadism characterize these Muslims.

When the guards turn to the weakened Peter (Liam Halligan), Robin volunteers to take his friend’s place. He rests his own hand on the beheading block. As the guards move into place, Robin says, ‘This is English courage’, and then he yanks the guard’s hand onto the block as the sword comes down (Reynolds, 1991). English courage, implicitly white and Christian, naturally wins. In the ensuing chaos, Robin manages to escape with Peter and Azeem, leaving behind the rest of his Crusader comrades. Peter tells Robin not to trust Azeem—‘He’s a Moor’—but Robin, desperate to escape, cuts Azeem’s bonds (Reynolds, 1991). Here we see the colorblind ideology of the film clearly. Peter is the ‘racist’ one; Robin chooses to believe Azeem (and therefore is not racist). Azeem then swears to follow Robin because he owes Robin a ‘life-debt’, a concept more accurate for the Wookiees in *Star Wars* than for Muslims. This casual white Christian supremacy permeates the film. *Prince of Thieves* makes Azeem an exception, the only good Muslim among dozens of sadistic, barbaric caricatures.

Moreover, the creation of this life-debt places Azeem in Robin’s power, as Mayer (2019) has noted. The emphasis on Azeem’s choosing this debt also evokes the myth of the contented slave: ‘With the specter of exploitation thus laid to rest by Azeem’s own words, and the audience’s guilt assuaged, Azeem can assume his place in the narrow racial narrative confines that have entrapped Black actors since *The Birth of a Nation* (1915): the loyal recipient of white paternalism; the “magical Negro”; or the brutish criminal’ (Mayer, 2019: 13). This obliviousness to the power dynamics between Robin and Azeem forms a key part of the colorblind ideology of the movie, which simultaneously exalts Azeem’s virtues and upholds white supremacy. Indeed, Azeem’s choice to subject himself to Robin signifies his virtue. He even volunteers later to pose as Robin’s slave. ‘In your country, am I not the infidel?’ he asks. ‘It seems safer to appear as your slave, rather than your equal’ (Reynolds, 1991). Leaving aside the tangled legal question of slavery vs. villeinage in 12th-century England, this moment clearly draws on the belief that white supremacy has been naturalized throughout history, instead of having been invented in the early modern period to justify the transatlantic slave trade.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Heng (2018: 182–4) argues that whiteness was a late medieval invention, but she never argues that systemic, institutional white supremacy was.

Whether or not a Black Muslim in 12th-century England would really have been safer posing as a slave, in Robin Hood Times white supremacy has always existed alongside Christian supremacy.

Indeed, Robin almost immediately begins acting like he really does own Azeem. As they flee Marian's house and escape from the Sheriff's men by taking shelter in Sherwood Forest, Azeem draws his sword at an eerie noise. The source, Robin points out, is a set of windchimes high in a tree. 'You scare easily, my painted Moor', he says (Reynolds, 1991). The condescension lies not only in the accusation of cowardice but also in the casual possessive pronoun, which cannot be taken lightly after the earlier conversation about Azeem's enslavement.

Furthermore, Robin uses the same language about Azeem—'painted'—that Mortiana had earlier. In her introductory scene, she is casting runes to tell the future. At the end of her predictions, she gives a screech. 'I have seen our death!' she proclaims. 'The painted man. He haunts my dreams, adorned with strange foreign markings!' (Reynolds, 1991). Here, although ambiguity remains, there seems to be a distinction between being 'painted' and 'marked'. Azeem has a pattern of brown dots across his cheeks and nose that may be either tattoos or scars. If the latter, their careful arrangement sets Azeem against the Sheriff, whose facial scar results from a wild slash of Robin's sword. Azeem's tattoos or scars decorate him; the Sheriff's disfigures him. However, even this decoration sets Azeem apart. His Black skin is *painted*, while his tattoos *mark* him as both strange and foreign. After this, the motif of Azeem's having been 'painted' persists throughout the film. In addition to 'my painted Moor', Robin calls Azeem a 'painted old dog' (Reynolds, 1991). Later, in Sherwood Forest, a child asks whether God 'painted' him. 'For certain', he replies, smiling: 'Allah loves wondrous variety' (Reynolds, 1991). This sentiment not only confirms the association between his 'painted' skin and his race, but also supports Ramey's (2014) argument that the movie reflects a late-80s colorblind multiculturalism. Variety may be 'wondrous,' but in this paradigm whiteness remains the default, the natural state, and Blackness must be 'painted' on.

This attitude leads the narrative toward familiar and tired tropes of Blackness, especially that of the Magical Negro. Nnedi Okorafor has defined this trope as 'the subordination of a minority figure masked as the empowerment of one' (2004). 'Subordination masked as empowerment': this dynamic drives the characterization of Azeem. Always helpful, never threatening, Azeem uses his scientific and technological knowledge only to benefit Robin. Indeed, that knowledge appears in the film as Azeem's version of magic, a presentist triumph of science over Mortiana's satanic superstition. At the beginning of the film, he is imprisoned and awaiting execution. As educated

and intelligent as he is, he (improbably) still needs a white character to save him. We never learn why he was sentenced to death, except that a woman named Yasmina was somehow involved. Azeem's background is a blank slate. When he reaches England, he has no material wealth and must rely on Robin for his livelihood. In this way, he is figured as a dependent who needs Robin more than Robin needs him. In addition, Okorafor (2004) notes that the Magical Negro is usually 'wise, patient, and spiritually in touch'—all qualities that characterize Azeem. In fact, Robin extorts Yasmina's name from Azeem by refusing to tell him which way is east for sunset prayers. We never see Robin praying or attending church for any reason but to seek support from Marian or the bishop, but Azeem's observance of Islam makes several appearances in the film.

Moreover, although Azeem has no literal magic, the technology and scientific knowledge that he brings along are treated as magic. He uses a spyglass, performs advanced obstetric techniques, and creates gunpowder. John Aberth (2003) points out the unlikelihood 'that a twelfth-century man, even if he is a more civilized Muslim, has a knowledge of Caesarean births, optical telescopes, and gunpowder' (190). Still, Azeem is portrayed as more enlightened than Robin, and Robin even calls the telescope 'sorcery' (Reynolds, 1991). Azeem's technological sorcery ultimately triumphs over Mortiana's witchcraft. His alignment with the trope of the Magical Negro joins the stereotypes of Muslims to illustrate the problems with depictions of race in *Prince of Thieves*. Beyond this, it also reinforces an inherently conservative view of race, in which characters of color can only be good if the narrative keeps them 'in their place'.

Morgan Freeman's star image plays an important role here. In 1991, Freeman's star was on the rise. He had roles in four critically and commercially successful movies released in 1989, including *Glory* (dir. Edward Zwick), *Driving Miss Daisy* (dir. Bruce Beresford), and *Lean on Me* (dir. John G. Avildsen). He also voiced Frederick Douglass in the 1990 documentary that made Ken Burns famous, *The Civil War*. Although these roles vary widely, the two for which Freeman garnered Academy Award nominations rely most on stereotypes of Black masculinity: his breakout role as Leo 'Fast Black' Smalls, a volatile pimp, in *Street Smart* (1987), and Hoke Colburn, the deferential chauffeur in *Driving Miss Daisy*. Mayer (2019) claims that by 2020, although he had played Nelson Mandela, 'Freeman's filmography ha[d] already primed the twenty-first century audience to understand that 1991's *Prince of Thieves* will not be a threat to white supremacy' (14). Even audiences in 1991, though, might have recognized Freeman's 'safe' reputation. Despite widespread acclaim for his performance in *Driving Miss Daisy*, some critics at the time pointed out the tired clichés in the film. For example, Candice Russell (1990) described it in the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel* as 'one scene after another of a pompous old lady issuing orders and a servant trying to comply by saying "yassum"'.

Freeman was building a star image that was dignified, respectable, and non-threatening. Thus, he became the perfect choice to play the role of Azeem: wise, honorable, and ultimately subservient.

Azeem fits neatly into a pattern that Eric Martone (2009) has identified in Muslim characters in Robin Hood legends since the 19th century. Martone observes two distinct elements of this pattern. First, he argues, the Muslim characters in these different texts really function as variations on the same single character; second, this character tends to be depicted as either ‘the treacherous “Saracen”’ or ‘the integrated Muslim’ (Martone, 2009: 54). Tracing the development of Robin Hood as a national myth, Martone points out that it takes on a central role in national identity in concert with the tumultuous events of the late 18th and early 19th centuries: ‘The medieval past became a battleground between competing visions of what the nation had been and what it should be’ (2009: 56). The introduction of a Muslim character serves to define English national identity more clearly, first via villainizing the Muslim in one of the classic forms of Orientalism and then, in an increasingly integrated postwar England, via partially assimilating the Muslim into the band of outlaws. As Martone (2009) notes, ‘In the forest utopia, all are equal, regardless of skin color or religion, as members of English society’ (63). Except, of course, that they are *outlaws*, and therefore excluded from English society.

What happens to Azeem after the movie ends? Does Nottingham welcome him? Do the former outlaws? We know from archaeological evidence that Africans migrated to England during the Roman period, and in 2010 the BBC series *History Cold Case* featured the skeleton of an African from present-day Tunisia who was buried in a friary in Ipswich sometime in the 13th century.<sup>6</sup> It would not be outrageous to think that Azeem could make a home in England. However, as Swank (2020) points out, his treatment in the film suggests a continued process of ‘Othering’. The outlaws accommodate Azeem’s religious practices, but he remains marked as an outsider by his clothing, tattoos (or scars), and accent (Swank, 2020). Although full assimilation might not be the ideal goal, the image of Azeem standing alone while everyone else at Robin and Marian’s wedding kneels to King Richard seems simultaneously defiant, principled, and lonely.

In 2018’s *Robin Hood*, Otto Bathurst would return to the character of the Black Muslim sidekick. Jamie Foxx’s character, Yahya, even has similar facial markings to

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<sup>6</sup> The archaeologists from the University of Dundee, including prominent forensic archaeologist Sue Black, dated the skeleton to 1190–1300; the priory where he was buried was constructed in 1278–79. See ‘Ipswich Man,’ *History Cold Case* (UK: BBC2), airdate 6 May 2010.

Azeem. However, Yahya plays a more active role in the narrative of Bathurst's *Robin Hood* than Azeem does in *Prince of Thieves*. Yahya meets Robin in the midst of a dusty, sandy battle clearly evocative of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Robin has led his men into an ambush, and Yahya nearly kills him. Robin's men come to his rescue, and Yahya loses his right hand in the process. After Robin tries (but fails) to save Yahya's son from a war-crime execution, Yahya stows away in the 'hospital ship' that returns Robin to England. He then appoints himself Robin's mentor and teaches Robin how to overthrow the tyrannical, exploitative Sheriff. Mayer (2019) examined online reviews of the Bathurst film, arguing that Yahya's active role has led to a particular pattern in bad reviews: 'Yahya is the will and Robin is the instrument ... . This phenomenon is what infuriates viewers who are much more comfortable with Black bodies acting as the instruments of white will' (Mayer, 2019: 19). For Mayer, then, Yahya—who tells Robin to call him John, thus making him the first Black version of Little John on the big screen—has the real power in the narrative, even though Robin is ostensibly the hero.

Mayer's analysis of the reviews persuades me more than her analysis of the film does. Her reading of Yahya's empowerment generally overlooks the intersection of his race with his disability. It seems like the film needs Yahya to be disabled so that he remains subordinate to Robin. While Bathurst's narrative shows more sympathy to the Muslims being invaded than *Prince of Thieves* does, it still needs to tell a story in which the Black Muslim primarily concerns himself with Robin's safety. Even if Yahya spends most of the movie bossing Robin around, in the end Robin gets the hero treatment, thanks to Yahya's mentorship. In the vague, transhistorical setting of the film—somehow simultaneously the Middle Ages, the Industrial Revolution, the 1930s, and the War on Terror—even a competent, eloquent, skilled Black character must be surpassed by the white hero.

### **Mortianna: Whiteness, Witchcraft, and Disability**

While Azeem stands alone as the only person of color in *Prince of Thieves*, Mortiana exists in a nexus of white supremacist characters (including the Sheriff and his druids), of whom she is the whitest. Her skin and hair are paper-white, as is one eye. The unmotherly mother of the Sheriff of Nottingham, she lives in a secret lair in Nottingham Castle. She practices divination by casting runes in the mysteriously bloody albumen of an egg; her lair is full of 'witchy' animals, including snakes, toads, and mice. An altar with an upside-down crucifix, human skulls (including two that appear to be goblets), a pig's head, and a black candle proclaim her devotion to the devil. The overall aesthetic

comes straight out of the Satanic Panic of the 1980s.<sup>7</sup> In addition, it presents a view of witchcraft that would not become dominant in Europe until the 16th century.

Popular culture loves to locate witches in the Middle Ages (c. 500–1500), but the age of greatest witch paranoia was, in fact, the early modern period (c. 1500–1750). As Ronald Hutton (2017) points out, the medieval understanding of witchcraft differed significantly from the early modern understanding (see also Cohn, 1975; Kieckhefer, 1976 and 2022; Flint, 1991; Bailey, 2003, 2006, and 2007; Behringer, 2004; Page, 2004; and Page and Rider, 2019). In the 14th century, some prosecutions for sorcery did indeed take place, and there were even accusations of ‘diabolism’ (Hutton, 2017). However, Hutton argues, the image of the witch as a committed worshipper of Satan who makes a pact with the devil and attends ‘sabbaths’ originated in the 1420s, turning up in records of accusations in the Pyrenees, the western Alps, and Rome (173–4). Twelfth-century England, on the other hand, seems to have had few fears about maleficent witchcraft, and none of the accounts that do focus on evil female magic are connected with the devil or devil worship (Hutton, 2017: 161). Additionally, he observes that legal records from the 12th century feature only two trials for magic: one in 1168 and one in which the accused woman was acquitted in 1199 or 1209 (161). Thus, *Mortianna* reflects not 12th-century perceptions of witchcraft but rather the legends of the satanic witch that would not take firm hold in Europe until after the advent of the printing press.

As it turns out, *Robin Hood Times* has a gravitational pull strong enough to draw in early modern phenomena as well.<sup>8</sup> *Prince of Thieves* is not the first Robin Hood adaptation to include evil witchcraft. As Aberth (2003) notes, *Mortianna*’s character represents another borrowing from *Robin of Sherwood*, a show that he describes as ‘a Robin Hood for the growing Wiccan market’ (187). This show not only introduced conflicts with ‘witches, sorcerers, devil-worshippers, druids and enchantresses’, but also featured a Robin supernaturally anointed by Herne the Hunter (Richards, 1999: 437; see also Aberth, 2003: 188). The series thus depicts magic as a tool used for both good and evil. In *Prince of Thieves*, on the other hand, the Sheriff of Nottingham is first introduced as leader of a group of ‘druids’ who kill Robin’s father (Brian Blessed) on trumped-up charges of devil worship. This emphasis on magic and Satanism is unusual for Robin

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<sup>7</sup> From the 1980s into the present, popular media has represented the Satanic Panic with upside-down crosses, pentagrams, candles, dead animals, and human body parts. For further analysis of the role of tabloid media in the Satanic Panic, see Sarah A. Hughes (2021), *American Tabloid Media and the Satanic Panic, 1970–2000* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan).

<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that another early modern innovation also frequently makes its way into representations of the Middle Ages: the rack. Torture in general featured much more heavily in the early modern period than in the Middle Ages, and yet the stereotype of the ‘Dark Ages’ conveniently allows both torture and witch trials to be consigned to Nasty British And Short Times.

Hood stories, which more often feature forest capers and roguish trickery. The magic in *Prince of Thieves*, however, serves an important function—it positions Mortiana as the evil foil to Azeem, her ‘black magic’ (I use the term advisedly) contrasted with his enlightened technology.

Thus, the two main villains, the Sheriff and Mortiana, have the closest ties to both white supremacy and some version of a pagan religion that at least tolerates Mortiana’s satanic witchcraft. The links here between paganism and witchcraft align with the long-discredited theory proposed by Margaret Murray (1921) that the early modern push to persecute witches was, in fact, a widespread effort to stamp out a pre-Christian pagan religion.<sup>9</sup> The effect of connecting white supremacy most closely with paganism instead of Christianity reinforces the film’s interest in casting it as a phenomenon that is both individual and passé, despite Christianity’s long history of forcibly imposing systemic white supremacy on indigenous and enslaved peoples and, in the US, using the Bible to justify both enslavement and segregation.<sup>10</sup> In this effort, *Prince of Thieves* showcases a major pitfall of its colorblind approach to multiculturalism.

Along similar lines, the Sheriff hires mercenary ‘Celts’ to attack the outlaws in the forest. Though these characters appear only briefly, they too link the Sheriff to a ‘primitive’ and pagan history of whiteness and colonization. The movie depicts the Celts as savages; unlike the other white characters, they wear furs and, notably, use face and body paint. Yet they are never called ‘painted’ like Azeem is. The movie wants to have it both ways with this group. They need to be white to perpetuate the ‘colorblind’ logic (look, there were white savages too!), but they still need to be ‘Othered’ because of longstanding rationales supporting English colonization of Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. As Geraldine Heng (2018) has noted, ‘English depictions of Celtic barbarity and subhumanness [...] were standard ideological tropes in England’s self-justification for its enterprise of occupying its neighbors’ (37). Indeed, the barbarity of the Celts dominates this depiction. They appear on a hilltop in Sherwood Forest, bellowing inarticulately: the subtitles read, ‘AAH! AAH! AAH!’ (Reynolds, 1991). They fight without apparent strategy. When the outlaws retreat to the trees to use their longbows

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<sup>9</sup> See Margaret Murray (1921), *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). For debunkings, see just about every history of witchcraft to date since then, with the exception of Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English (1973), *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* (New York: Feminist Press). However, in the new introduction to the second edition (2010), they too disavow Murray.

<sup>10</sup> See Eric Arden Weed (2017), *The Religion of White Supremacy in the United States* (Lanham, MD: Lexington); Kristopher Norris (2020), *Witnessing Whiteness: Confronting White Supremacy in the American Church* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press); J. Russell Hawkins (2021), *The Bible Told Them So: How Southern Evangelicals Fought to Preserve White Supremacy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press); Marcia Pally (2022), *White Evangelicals and Right-Wing Populism: How Did We Get Here?* (New York: Routledge).

to mow down the Celts more effectively, the Celts just rush forward heedlessly. One of them attempts to rape one of the forest women in the middle of the battle. Their retreat looks just as headlong as their advance had. In contrast, the Sheriff's English forces wait for the Celts to retreat before they shoot flaming arrows into the outlaws' elaborate wooden and thatched treehouses. The Sheriff may adhere to some sort of pagan, druidic religion and claim the Celts as allies, but he holds himself separate from and superior to their savagery, even while he encourages and benefits from their violence.

The Celts represent an undifferentiated mass of 'Otherness', white and yet not white at the same time. We might think of them as the midpoint on a spectrum of racialized 'Otherness', with Mortiana at one end and Azeem at the other. The contrast between these two characters manifests in their bodies as well. Azeem, both 'painted' and 'marked', is an outsider. So is Mortiana—exiled to a liminal secret lair below Nottingham Castle—and she too is set apart by her whiteness, 'dangerously Othered to the point of monstrosity,' as Lorraine Stock and Candace Gregory-Abbott note (2007: 210). Her skin is chalky white, her white hair long and straggling, the iris of one eye eerily white as well. Even though the whiteness of this eye suggests blindness, the filming choices imply that it gives her supernatural foresight. In moments of prophecy, close-ups of her face make her eye a focal point: first, when she predicts that Azeem will kill them, and later when she predicts that Marian would conceive if the Sheriff forced himself on her (Reynolds, 1991). This conflation of disability and super-ability serves as one of the most common disability tropes, which Sami Schalk (2016) calls the 'superpowered supercrip narrative' (81). Perhaps most culturally visible in 'disabled' Marvel superheroes like Daredevil (who is ostensibly blind but granted super-ability by the toxic waste that blinded him), this trope 'is primarily a fiction, television, or film representation of a character who has abilities or "powers" that operate in direct relationship with or contrast to their disability' (Schalk, 2016: 81). Many fictional and historical witches fall into this category; Scott Eaton (2020) has compiled a catalogue of early modern disabled and deformed witches. As with other villainous superpowered supercrips, these witches' magical abilities become even more sinister in contrast to their physical disabilities. Mortiana's extreme, even corpselike, whiteness draws attention to the film's constructions of both race and disability.

In addition to her uncanny white eye, Mortiana's figure is stooped, and especially in her first scene she looks like she has a spinal deformity. Her bowed figure signifies her 'witchiness'. She serves as a classic example of what David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (2000) have called 'narrative prosthesis'. This concept lies at the foundation of literary disability studies. It illuminates how disability almost always functions in narrative: 'first, as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic



metaphorical device' (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000: 47). In other words, as Mitchell and Snyder have shown, disability exists in literature to differentiate characters from a 'norm' and make abstract concepts more concrete by turning disability into metaphor. Consequently, 'while stories rely upon the potency of disability as a symbolic figure, they rarely take up disability as an experience of social or political dimensions' (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000: 48). These concepts thus contribute to wider stereotypes about disabled people, that they embody the negative or blandly 'inspirational' tropes attached to them in literature and film. Meanwhile, stories by and about disabled people themselves (rather than the nondisabled people around them) remain few and far between.

Reynolds's interest in disabled and disfigured characters is all the more striking given the increased visibility of the disability rights movement the summer before *Prince of Thieves* was filmed. In early 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) had stalled in Congress despite bipartisan support. Conservatives and evangelical Christians opposed it because of the cost to businesses and churches. On 12 March 1990, disability rights activists gathered in Washington, DC, for the Wheels of Justice March. This event ended at the west stairs of the US Capitol Building, where many disabled protestors abandoned their wheelchairs and hauled themselves or relied on others to help them up the 83 steps. The Capitol Crawl, as it came to be known, and a second protest the next day produced results. On 26 July, President George H.W. Bush signed the ADA into law. On 6 September, *Prince of Thieves* began filming. The national coverage of the Capitol Crawl had spotlighted disabled people and their quest for equality, accessibility, and civil rights, showing them to be proactive and impassioned. The determination of real-life activists, however, had little impact on the hackneyed tropes used in *Prince of Thieves* (and most other disability narratives since).

In addition to Mortiana, the film includes another disabled character: Duncan, the loyal manservant to Robin's father. When the Sheriff attacks Locksley Castle, Duncan is purposefully blinded. Guy of Gisborne, the Sheriff's cousin, performs the mutilation, 'with the Sheriff and his witch looking on', as Duncan tells Robin (Reynolds, 1991). Together with the demonic authority that Mortiana seems to have over the Sheriff, her presence at Duncan's blinding suggests that her bodily monstrosity cannot be contained. Wounds and disablement spread to those she encounters. Even the Sheriff joins the ranks of Hollywood villains with facial scars. Thus, while Mortiana epitomizes the disabled villain, her body marking her evil nature, Duncan embodies the common disability trope of the tragic, even naïve, victim. When Robin finds him, Duncan is lurking in the ruins of Locksley Castle, stumbling around in the dark. His blindness provides the pretext for a couple of important moments: one focusing on Azeem's race

(‘What kind of name is Azeem?’ Duncan wonders, after having just cursed ‘Moors and Saracens’), and the other precipitating the climax of the plot (Reynolds, 1991). Duncan is loyal and simple, and, ultimately, he is killed during the outlaws’ forest battle with the Sheriff and his men. His death is part punishment for having failed to protect both Robin and his father—Duncan led the Sheriff’s men to the outlaws’ camp, unaware that he was being followed—and part tragic motivation to galvanize Robin into action. Once disabled, Duncan can only conceive of himself as a ‘burden’ (Reynolds, 1991); he becomes a plot point and a symbol of the Sheriff’s cruelty, a clear example of narrative prosthesis.

Mortianna’s disabled body, meanwhile, also serves as a metaphor for the evils of white supremacy, which this movie argues is located in specific, wicked people. Her monstrously white skin, frizzy white hair, stooped posture, and mysteriously white eye signal her villainy just as much as the anachronistic upside-down crucifix does. Her son the Sheriff and his torch-carrying, white-hooded druids introduce us to England in a scene that strongly evokes the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). From Duncan’s account of his blinding, we must surmise that Mortiana is one of these druids. They encircle the entrance to Locksley Hall and send in a peasant to lure out Lord Locksley. ‘Join us’, says the Sheriff. When Locksley refuses, the Sheriff says, ‘Join us... or die’ (Reynolds, 1991). It’s never quite clear what they will be joining together to do, but Locksley’s battle cry suggests that their mission would oppose ‘God and King Richard’ (Reynolds, 1991). The vagueness of their evil plan also encourages parallels with the KKK. As Locksley rides out, the group encircles him. The next time we see him, his rotting corpse is in a cage hanging from the ruined rafters of Locksley Hall. It’s hard not to read this as the filmmakers’ version of a medieval lynching.

Given these invocations of the KKK, it is worth pointing out that in 1991 David Duke, former Grand Wizard of the KKK, had been serving in the Louisiana House of Representatives since 1989 and was trying to move his political career to the national stage with a United States Senate race in 1990 and a campaign for governor in 1991. Despite his losses, he still performed strongly. In the Senate race, he won 44% of the vote. When he ran for governor of Louisiana, he defeated the incumbent, his fellow Republican, by nearly 81,000 votes (Louisiana Secretary of State, 1991a). In the runoff—the famous race that set the corrupt Edwin Edwards against Duke, inspiring bumper stickers such as ‘Vote for the Lizard, Not the Wizard’—he still earned 39% of the vote (Louisiana Secretary of State, 1991b). His performance demonstrated how much power overt white supremacy could still exert. As *Prince of Thieves* illustrates, it is easier to blame specific people for white supremacy than to consider how its principles are

engrained in social, cultural, and political power structures, not to mention common narrative tropes about, for example, the exotic cruelty of medieval Muslims.

A similar example of the power of white supremacy also took place in 1991: the beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police officers after a traffic stop. George Holliday, an ‘amateur photographer’ (according to the *Los Angeles Times*), recorded the beating from his balcony when he and his wife saw the situation worsening. Crucially, he then sent the tape to local news station KTLA (Fiore and Gollner, 1991). Widespread outrage catapulted the story into national attention.

The 1st April 1991 issue of *Time* focused on police brutality in its cover stories. Tellingly, Lance Morrow begins the first of these, ‘Rough Justice’, by invoking the imagined exotic cruelty of *contemporary* Muslims. The first sentence of the article reads, ‘Every city has a kind of evil twin that looks like Beirut’ (Morrow, 1991: 16). The casual racism, Orientalism, and Islamophobia of Morrow’s introduction takes one’s breath away. Beirut becomes the nadir of human existence, the ‘shadow self’ to US cities, ‘the awful promise of what will happen when the worst transpires,’ when ‘[c]ivilization [comes] unstuck’ and ‘[a]narchy [breaks] loose at last’ (Morrow, 1991: 16). That April, Beirut was just starting to rebuild after the havoc of the Lebanese Civil War, which—in the broadest strokes—pitted western-aligned Christians against Soviet-aligned Muslims. But for Morrow, the complexities of the war mattered less than the chaos it caused. Even this article meant to illuminate the realities of US police brutality, especially against Black people, portrays the transformation of police into a ‘paramilitary tribe’ (tribe!) as a savage devolution to barbaric, brutal Beirut (Morrow, 1991: 16). Morrow’s ultimate solution to the problem of police brutality reads, ‘It takes a strong, poised character to wade against the currents of group will. Those cops who witnessed the Los Angeles beating, not participating but not objecting either, allowed themselves to be borne passively along by the stream of violence’ (Morrow, 1991: 17). Even though Morrow explicitly compares the King beating to a lynching, his solution to police violence lies in individuals who must stand up against the ‘few leaders [who] incite the rest’ (1991: 17). If only Beirut had ‘strong, poised characters’ to stand against ‘the stream of violence’! For Morrow, as for Reynolds, no more systemic change is necessary.

This Orientalism also recalls the original lyrics to the opening song of Disney’s *Aladdin* (1992), ‘Arabian Nights’, which describes the Arabian setting as a place ‘Where they cut off your ear / If they don’t like your face / It’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home’ (Fox, 1993). These lyrics are hardly the only racist element of the film. Most of the Arabs in Agrabah have thick ‘Arabic’ accents and dark skin; Jasmine and Aladdin have US accents

and light skin. Moreover, the merchants and guards of Agrabah repeatedly threaten to cut off body parts. In a review for *Cinéaste*, Jack Shaheen (1993) points out the film's preoccupation with amputation: 'In this "family entertainment," what impression of Islam is conveyed when a street vendor insists that the standard penalty for stealing is chopping off one's hand? How will children judge a society in which hideous guards ... threaten to cut off Jasmine's hand for taking an apple to give to a starving child?' (49). Disney responded to protests by changing the lyrics to 'Arabian Nights' before the release on home video, but the other racist details remained the same (Fox, 1993). In the wake of the Gulf War, Hollywood seems to have had intense anxiety about the harm that Muslim societies might wreak upon people's bodies.

In the context of David Duke's political campaigns, the aftermath of the Rodney King beating, and the Islamophobia in *Aladdin*, Mortiana's monstrous whiteness demands serious racial analysis. *Prince of Thieves* sets the most racialized bodies in the film in opposition to each other. Mortiana's monstrous physicality contrasts with Azeem's fitness and valor in battle. While Mortiana's magic brings harm and impairment, Azeem's 'magic' represents scientific and medical advancement. Mortiana enables the Sheriff's sexual assault of Marian; Azeem performs lifesaving obstetric medicine on Fanny. Mortiana and her son participate in the medieval KKK; Azeem teaches tolerance to the outlaws in the forest. Through these oppositions and more, the film tries to show that race doesn't have to 'matter', since a white character can be evil and the Black character is good. Yet the message goes astray in the same way as other forms of colorblind multiculturalism do: it focuses too much on the individual, tries to ignore larger patterns, and fails to consider how social structures perpetuate inequities without (and sometimes in spite of) individual conscious choices.

Ultimately, the power dynamics of King Richard's England remain unchallenged, and the conclusion of this fantasy of Robin Hood Times gives us a forest community that is reincorporated into the same configurations of power as before, but with Robin substituting for the Sheriff as the local authority. Richard and Robin return to their seats of power, and presumably the Sheriff's cancellation of Christmas will itself be cancelled. The peasants and outlaws will return to Nottingham, only now they will also have a Black friend. It is a very 1990s way to 'solve' racism.

## Conclusion

*Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* was a major blockbuster, out-earned in 1991 only by *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. It made tens of millions more that year than did *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Dancing with Wolves* (BoxOfficeMojo, 2022). Its sensational medievalism invokes a specific version of Merrie Olde England, in which forest vigilantes can

redistribute the wealth of the rich without overthrowing or even reforming any of the social structures that lead to economic inequality in the first place. It similarly posits a response to white supremacy that locates the solution in individuals instead of broader systems of power, prejudice, and policy. The wars in the Middle East (whether the Third Crusade or the Gulf War) need not be questioned, except inasmuch as they affect white men. In the film, Muslims remain suspect as a group, even if an individual Muslim can be presented as tolerable when sufficiently deferential, and social problems can be solved when corrupt individuals die. Most importantly, the film replaces the power of the Angevin state with the restoration of the aristocratic family. Richard's role as a good king consists entirely of blessing the marriage of Robin and Marian. In the Reagan and Bush years, even a king can't be allowed to lift peasants out of poverty or to make grand promises of a free and fair England; he can only restore the previous landowning status quo for a sort of 'trickle-down' justice.

Although Azeem is held up as a figure of virtue, the narrative and visual language of the film uses Orientalist and racist tropes to incorporate him into what is considered a traditionally English, or even Angevin, folktale. His 'sorcery', as Robin calls it, comes from technological superiority: a spyglass, medical expertise, and gunpowder (Reynolds, 1991). Azeem deploys this 'sorcery' as he does his battle skills, entirely in Robin's service. Even after he discharges his debt, he chooses to stay in England. He will presumably continue to perform his scientific sorcery for Robin, even if he eventually leaves Robin's service. The Sheriff and Mortianna have been defeated, but Robin's Magical Negro figure remains, a simplistic and individualistic victory of 'multiculturalism' over outright white supremacy.

The Sheriff, Mortianna, and their fellow druids embody the overt racism of the KKK while disavowing its equally overt Christianity. Mortianna, in fact, derives her power from Satan, her practices and lair reflecting a view of witchcraft that characterizes the early modern period and the 1980s Satanic Panic more than the medieval. A remaining question is why popular culture so desperately wants to attribute this sort of witchcraft to the Middle Ages instead of the era of greatest paranoia: the 16th and 17th centuries. Amy Kaufman and Paul Sturtevant (2020) suggest that whenever we link barbarous practices, such as witchcraft, with the medieval period,

we can imagine that 'civilized' cultures left torture and religious persecution behind in the Dark Ages. We can pretend that torture was a phenomenon cured by science and the Enlightenment—completely ignoring the torture and executions still going on today, such as the 'enhanced interrogation' practiced by the United States. (10)

Rooting white supremacy in the Middle Ages accomplishes the same end. If the ‘knights’ of the KKK is a medieval holdover—if the evils of colonization start during the Crusades—then we see a twofold justification of the status quo. White supremacy becomes an intractable problem that has been plaguing European society for thousands of years; simultaneously, and paradoxically, we have already left behind those barbaric prejudices, for we are modern, not medieval.

Disability and race often work together to produce a profound and compound exclusion from society. In this film, the contrasting nonstandard bodies of Mortiana and Azeem personify the battle over who gets included or excluded in Angevin England. Mortiana’s monstrous whiteness, hidden away in the foundations of Nottingham Castle, embodies the sinister violence at the heart of white supremacy. When Azeem kills her at the end, we are meant to see the triumph of multicultural goodness over wicked prejudice. But the film never acknowledges either the lair that remains in the foundations of the castle, or the systemic racism built into the foundations of the modern state. *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* includes elements that could be reforged into a sharply pointed commentary on systemic injustices. Class, race, and disability all come together in the film in the bodies of the characters, from Robin’s soft hands signifying his wealth to Azeem’s ‘painted’ skin to Mortiana’s white eye and Duncan’s mutilated ones. However, the movie implies that the solution to injustice is not systemic, but individual. Unlike previous Hollywood adaptations, this *Robin Hood* ignores the potential for institutional reform in favor of punishing or rewarding particular characters. The return of the absent Angevin restores order, virtue, the Locksley lands—and the status quo.

The Robin Hood story has revolutionary potential when it features an idyllic forest community practicing mutual care and taking action to address poverty. But Reynolds’s version of Robin Hood Times, with its absent ruling family, chooses a less compassionate path, killing off the disabled characters and depicting Azeem as separate from but equal to the rest of the peasants. By centering the Locksley legacy instead of the outlaws in Sherwood Forest, *Prince of Thieves* reinforces conservative ideologies of the limited state, neoliberal ableism, and ‘colorblind’ racism instead of the utopian promises of equity that the greenwood could provide.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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