

(dis)Abling Masculinity: Compulsory Abled-Bodiness in “Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne”

The ballad “Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne” offers much to say about how the male homosocial bond functions in relation to violence and queer intersectionality shall act as a way to examine these elements. I take the term “homosocial” from Eve Sedgwick who coins the phrase “male homosocial desire” as a way to examine “the structure of men’s relations with other men” (696). Sedgwick argues that there is a continuum between homosocial and homosexual desire in the form of male bonding. In this ballad, the homosocial bond offers a way to achieve male desire, a desire of sex with men and power over other men; however, this bond creates a toxic environment, causing much violence, destruction, and oppression to those involved. Through queer intersectionality, I seek to provide an understanding of the homosocial bond in “Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne” as a form of destructive power. Below, I detail the ways in which I am using a queer intersectionality to read “Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne.”

“Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne” possesses a compulsory able-bodied environment in which the threat of disability controls the lives of the men. Robin and Guy of Gisborne are in a constant struggle to prove their ability and there are many times the men fail in and out of the disabled/abled dichotomy. The ballad begins with Robin Hood awakening from a dream in which he has been beaten by “two wight yeoman” who took his bow (173). In his dream, Robin is disabled in a few ways: he is emasculated by the men, losing his masculinity; and, he is aroused by them, losing his heterosexuality. The dream causes Robin to “seeke yond wight yeomen,/In greenwood where the bee” (173) in order to regain his masculinity and heterosexuality and escape disability, but also in this quest he is able to achieve sexual desire expressed through violence. Disability threatens Robin’s status as a leader. If he does not represent all that is normal, then he cannot be the “true outlaw” in which the tradition acknowledges him. However, Robin’s pursuit of a “wight yeomen” has direct ties to homosexual desire. As he is driven by “unnatural” desire, he is in a state of internal disability. Robin resolves his state of disability by evoking physical violence on the yeomen he seeks.

Robin’s attraction to Guy of Gisborne is conflicting because it is mixed with a desire for sexual pleasure and a desire for power over another man. In the men’s exchange with each other, there is a focus on the body and ability. When Robin first sees Guy of Gisborne “cladd in his capull-hyde [horse skin],/Topp and taylor and mayne” (174), this “bestial play,” as Kane argues, positions Guy as a desired body, and, what I add, a disabled body. Because Guy appears to be disabled in the sense of “playing” non-human, Robin sees Guy as a body he can conquer. Guy’s play also has ties to homosexual attraction for “in the later Middle Ages, desire for or sexual contact with animals was the conceptual equivalent of homosexuality... (Kane 107). The focus on body and ability relates to the violence the men inflict on each other. Violence acts as a way to for the men to make abled bodies disabled. Along with the homosexual undertones, violence also acts as a way to achieve sexual pleasure. For instance, once the two men are alone, Guy notices Robin’s bow: “Methinkes by this bow thou beares in the hand,/A good archer thou seems to be” (176). Guy recognizes Robin for his archery abilities, seeing him as a worthy fighter and a desired masculine body, which threatens Guy’s

able-bodiedness. Once it is revealed that Guy was sent by the Sheriff to kill Robin, Robin denies his identity and offers “let us some other pastime find”(176) and they engage in an arrow shooting contest. After this test of physical ability, the two reveal themselves to each other and begin fighting. In the physical engages between the two, they both go in and out of able-bodiedness. Through the arrow shooting contest and fight, they are able to negotiate power.

During the fighting, Robin stumbles on a tree root: “Robin was reachles on a roote,/And stumbled at that tyde,/And Guy was quicke and nimble with-all/And hitt him ore the left side” (178). Here, Robin is temporarily physically disabled and he able-bodiedness briefly is taken away, while Guy’s is regained. Robin calls on the Virgin Mary to give him strength and he is able to give an “awkwarde” stroke that decapitates Guy. The way the Robin conquers Guy’s body is quite queer in itself. Robin calls on a feminine force that gives him power to defeat his challenger. It must be noted too that when Robin gives that fatal blow to Guy he is in a state of disability (indicated by the “awkwarde” stroke). In Robin’s most “masculine” and “able-bodied” moment, he relies on femininity and disability for strength. What’s more, after Robin decapitation Guy, he puts on his disguise: “Robin did his gowne of greene, On Sir Guye it throwe,/And hee put on that capull-hyde,/That cladd him topp to toe” (178). One then begins to question whether or not Robin becomes what he desired—class, masculinity, power over a man—through putting on this disguise. Homosexual desire must also be considered for Robin taking on Guy’s disguise could also act as a symbol for fulfilled sexual desire. The possibility of sexual fulfillment is accomplished in a coded kiss when “Robin sett Guyes horn to his mouth,/A lowd blast in it he did blow...” (178). Robin’s “kiss” signifies sexual expression; however, it is not explicit.

The homosocial bond in “Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne” functions as a space where power among man can be shared and taken away. This compulsive environment creates a space that is toxic to all of those involved. Robin spends all of the ballad trying to secure his masculinity, sexuality, class, and his ability. The only way for him to maintain this is through violence to a male body that he also desires. The conflicting themes between desire and power are both achieved through violence and death of the desired subject.