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PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

<https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/conflicting-masculinities-9781838608163/>

PUBLISHER

Bloomsbury

VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

This book chapter was published in the book *Conflicting Masculinities: Men in Television Period Drama*. The publisher's website is at: <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/conflicting-masculinities-9781838608163/>

LICENCE

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REPOSITORY RECORD

O'Callaghan, Claire. 2018. "pride Versus Prejudice: Wounded Men, Masculinity and Disability in Downton Abbey". Loughborough University. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/13187501.v1>.

Chapter Ten

Pride versus Prejudice: Wounded Men, Masculinity and Disability in *Downton Abbey*

Claire O'Callaghan

Dominant conceptions of masculinity have long been intertwined with ideals of physical 'normalcy'. As the disability scholar Jenny Morris puts it, 'the social definition of masculinity is inextricably bound with a celebration of strength [and] perfect bodies' because 'to be masculine is not to be vulnerable.'¹ In this questionable gendered equation, notions of hegemonic masculinity – that is, a culturally idealised form of manhood that celebrates men's dominance and apparent 'natural' toughness – govern understandings of the male gender, with able-bodiedness and physical strength perilously accepted as *the* benchmark by which all masculinities are validated. Consequently, both historically *and* in the present day, disabled men and 'non-normative' expressions of maleness are rendered as Other, derided as inauthentic and supposed weak. How and in what ways, then, do men with physical differences negotiate the seemingly oppositional categories of 'masculinity' and 'disability'? And how is this experience represented in British costume drama?

With their focus on historical representation, period dramas are often caught in a quandary between representing the past authentically, which may mean reflecting questionable ideals and pejorative attitudes, particularly towards issues such as disability, while speaking to

¹ Jenny Morris, *Pride Against Prejudice: Transforming Attitudes to Disability – A Personal Politics of Disability* (London, 1991), p. 93.

more ‘enlightened’ approaches to socio-cultural topics.² This dilemma becomes especially apparent with regards to representations of male disability onscreen. Take, for example, the inclusion of Joseph Carey Merrick (played by Joseph Drake) in BBC’s *Ripper Street* (BBC/Amazon, 2012–16). Although Merrick is better known today as the Elephant Man (a phrase that emphasises his biological sex), *Ripper Street* constructs him as freakish. Merrick is feminised repeatedly by his socio-cultural positioning in London’s Whitechapel, a notion emphasised when he is bullied and beaten by the ruthless Inspector Jedediah Shine (Joseph Mawle) who is keen to gain Merrick’s silence as a witness to the policeman’s involvement in the heroin trading taking place in and around the city.³ Sadly, the notion of male disability as ‘freakery’ can also be found in BBC’s *Call the Midwife* (2012–), in particular through a controversial episode in Series Three which focused on the relationship between Jacob Milligan (played by Colin Young), a young man with cerebral palsy, and his love interest, Sally Harper (played by Sarah Gordy), who has Down’s Syndrome. The show poignantly rendered the tender romance between the young couple and was intended to highlight the treatment of people with physical and intellectual disabilities in the 1950s. But, also in keeping with the period setting – a

² For more on calls for the diversity of disability onscreen see Scott Jordan Harris, ‘The BBC’s plans to show more disabled people on TV are good – but they should be better’, *New Statesman*, 13 August 2014. Available at <http://www.newstatesman.com/media/2014/08/bbc-s-plans-show-more-disabled-people-tv-are-good-they-should-be-better> (accessed 29 October 2016).

³ For more on conceptions of disability and freakery in neo-Victorian period drama and especially the portrayal of Joseph Merrick in *Ripper Street*, see Helen Davies’s *Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freakshow* (Basingstoke, 2015).

time in which subjects with disability were often incarcerated in mental health hospitals – the show represents how such love has, historically, been deemed unnatural and inappropriate. Moreover, the ‘inappropriateness’ of this couple’s love is not only emphasised through the focus on their respective disabilities, but particularly on Jacob’s inability to be a ‘real’ man. Finally, the incompatibility between masculinity and disability has been repeatedly emphasised onscreen in the various remakes of D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928), in which the veteran Clifford, who, post-war, requires the use of a wheelchair, deems himself inadequate for being unable to satisfy his wife sexually and/or produce an heir. Interestingly, the actor who played Clifford in the BBC’s 2015 adaptation, Jed Norton, acknowledged the gloss that is often placed on the onscreen relationship between masculinity and disability. In an interview promoting the show, Norton noted that although the public does ‘hear about post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in a generalised way’, very rarely is any detailed insight given to the complex, gendered adjustments that take place ‘when a young man comes home from Afghanistan or Iraq either with PTSD or a serious injury’ or what this means in terms of the individual’s experience of identity politics.⁴ As Norton indicates, ‘It was glossed over in Lawrence’s day and it’s pretty much glossed over now.’⁵ Importantly, his words echo Jessica Meyer’s observation that the

⁴ Annabelle Fenwick Elliot, ‘It’s 2015! People have sex!’, *Daily Mail*, 1 September 2015.

Available at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-3217419/Lady-Chatterley-star-James-Norton-defends-raunchy-BBC-adaptation-relevant-claims-encourage-youngsters-read-classics.html> (accessed 29 October 2016).

⁵ Ibid, n.p.

position of ex-servicemen, especially if they are disabled, is ‘not an easy one.’⁶ As Meyer puts it, ‘while reintegration into postwar society’ is a struggle for ‘all ex-servicemen’, the disabled man faces ‘particular hurdles as their experiences of disability often directly’ challenge the ‘expectations of the masculine roles they had anticipated inhabiting upon their return to civilian life.’⁷

Importantly, such politics of representation have also been a prominent feature in ITV’s popular, award-winning drama, *Downton Abbey* (2010–15). Over six series, the Abbey has played host to numerous physically impaired men, mostly, like *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928), in the guise of ex-servicemen and wounded soldiers. Matthew Crawley (Dan Stevens), for instance, the heir to the Grantham estate, returned from World War I with a suspected spinal cord injury that confined him to a wheelchair. His paraplegia, however, which I will discuss in the course of this chapter, is temporary, since Matthew rises ‘like Lazarus’ from his wheelchair, suddenly able to walk again, and his injury is declared a misdiagnosis.⁸ Likewise, Lady Edith Crawley’s (Laura Carmichael) former fiancé, Sir Anthony Strallan (Robert Bathurst), who meanly jilted Edith at the altar, also returned from the war with permanent paralysis in his right arm. In contrast, the Abbey’s malevolent footman, Thomas Barrow (Robert James-Collier)

⁶ Jessica Meyer, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain* (Basingstoke, 2009), p. 97.

⁷ Ibid, p. 97.

⁸ Sarah Crompton, ‘Dan Stevens: Why I left *Downton Abbey*’, *Telegraph*, 7 March 2016. Available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/downton-abbey/9765334/Dan-Stevens-Why-I-left-Downton-Abbey.html> (accessed 3 June 2016).

allowed himself to be shot in the hand so he could escape the trenches. More poignantly, the plight of Lieutenant Edward Courtenay (Lachlan Nieboer), a soldier whose blindness from chemical weapons and associated depression led to his suicide, provided the catalyst for the Abbey to transform temporarily into a convalescent home. During this transition, the audience also met Patrick Gordon (Trevor White), a soldier with extensive burn injuries whose facial disfigurement leads him to pass as Patrick Crawley, the rightful heir to the Abbey who was presumed dead on the sinking of the RMS Titanic. But it is the beloved figure of John Bates (Brendan Coyle), Lord Grantham's (Hugh Bonneville) trusted valet, who permanently required the use of a cane to support a limp arising from shrapnel wounds he gained in service, whose narrative gravitated consistently around debates concerning masculinity and dis/ability.⁹

Importantly, the show's creator, Julian Fellowes, has stated that he wrote Bates specifically as a disabled veteran to 'make him more vulnerable.'¹⁰ In other words, Fellowes situates centrally the very concern that Morris's earlier comment made apparent: that 'disability' and 'masculinity' are at odds with one another. What, then, are the ideological and ethical implications of Fellowes's need to make Bates and the other men described above 'more

⁹ As Julie Anne Taddeo's chapter describes, the Abbey also witnessed the decline of Henry Lang, a short-term valet to Lord Grantham who suffers from shell shock or PTSD as it is now termed. Lang had been 'invalided out' from service during the war and struggles to adjust to life back home following his experience on the front line.

¹⁰ Anon., 'The Unlikely Cult of Mr Bates', *Evening Standard*, 3 November 2010. Available at <http://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/the-unlikely-cult-of-mr-bates-6531833.html> (accessed 28 January 2016).

vulnerable' through disability and, what conclusions does *Downton Abbey* offer on the relationship between masculinity and physical 'normalcy'?

Taking these questions as a starting point, this chapter debates the extent to which *Downton Abbey* successfully portrays the relationship between masculinity and able-bodiedness to interrogate what Russell Shuttleworth, Nikki Wedgwood and Nathan J. Wilson term the 'dilemma of disabled masculinity'.¹¹ Recognising that Fellowes's period drama is 'driven by a desire for [an] "authentic" and trustworthy view of the past' (in other words, nostalgia for a traditional, elitist, Conservative English society), there are limits to the diversity of gendered representations that *Downton Abbey* can accommodate.¹² However, as I have argued elsewhere, *Downton* nonetheless mirrors 'contemporary culture albeit [...] channelled through the fortunes of one family and their country house estate.'¹³ Throughout the accompanying scripts to the show, Fellowes makes such connections himself, thus revealing, as Katherine Byrne has persuasively argued, how *Downton* 'self-consciously adapts and responds' for a contemporary audience 'through a range of strategies'.¹⁴ Accordingly, in consideration of the portrayal of

¹¹ Russell Shuttleworth, Nikki Wedgwood and Nathan J. Wilson, 'The Dilemma of Disabled Masculinity', *Men and Masculinities*, 15/2 (2012), p. 174.

¹² Katherine Byrne, 'Adapting Heritage: Class and Conservatism in *Downton Abbey*', *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 18/3 (2013), p. 316.

¹³ Claire O'Callaghan, 'The Downturn at *Downton*: Money and Masculinity in *Downton Abbey*', in H. Davies and C. O'Callaghan (eds), *Gender and Austerity in Popular Culture: Femininity, Masculinity and Recession in Film and Television* (London, 2016), p. 45.

¹⁴ Byrne, 'Adapting Heritage', p. 312.

disabled masculinity, I contend that *Downton Abbey* not only reinforces a narrow model of masculinity defined by hegemonic masculine ideals, phallogentric logic and able-bodiedness but that it falls too often on outdated ideologies and clichéd ideas about disabled masculinities which suggest that masculinity is ‘compromised’ by disability.¹⁵ While accepting that the popular period drama does – on occasion – attempt to open a discursive space to generate empathy, understanding and tolerance of masculinity and bodily difference, I argue that its political endeavour falls short of its potential value by endorsing a binary opposition between the able-bodied and disabled male subject, which privileges physical ‘normalcy’ as a requisite of ‘real’ masculinity. In unfolding this argument, this chapter begins first with an exploration of the critical issues at stake in conceptual approaches to disabled masculinities before attending to the political and ethical representation of these matters onscreen.

The Dilemma of Disabled Masculinity

As a field of scholarly enquiry, disability studies explore the way in which disability often serves as a form of social oppression through prejudice and discrimination. In this respect, disability studies shares an important corollary with feminism, which also focuses on the restriction and barriers faced by women in their campaign for equal rights, access to education and employment, and fair treatment in society and culture.¹⁶ However, across the field there are different

¹⁵ Aaron Richmond, ‘Disabled at Downton’, in William Irwin (ed.) *Downton Abbey and Philosophy: Thinking in That Manor* (Chicago, Illinois, 2016), p. 71.

¹⁶ Tom Shakespeare, ‘The Sexual Politics of Disabled Masculinity’, *Sexuality and Disability*, 17/1 (1999), p. 54.

conceptions of what the term ‘disability’ means. The medical profession, for instance, binds disability to impairment by pathologising bodies in a reductive ‘normal’ vs. ‘abnormal’ dichotomy that seeks to ‘correct’ unusual variations of embodied normality, a perspective known as the medical model of disability. In contrast, the social model of disability articulates how society and culture socially and discursively constitute cognitive and physical difference and create social and structural barriers that disadvantage and disable those with physical impairments. Similarly, the social relational approach posits that disability is constituted differently within and across socio-cultural and historical contexts that shape experience and activity (something we shall see is important in the context of a British period drama). And, more recently, the human rights model of disability moves from viewing disabled persons as passive objects without rights by elucidating the economic and social processes that constitute disability in the first place. While this brief gloss identifies the important differences between conceptions of ‘disability’ and ‘impairment’ in disability studies, these approaches commonly articulate how the personal is political for disabled subjects. Moreover, they gesture to how disability is, for many men, often a ‘lived and embodied dilemma’.¹⁷

Downton’s preoccupation with wounded and/or physically impaired servicemen provides a useful means of analysing the seemingly competing concepts of masculinity and disability, while also revealing something important about the configuration of particular bodies as ‘different’. Disability, in this context, as David A. Gerber indicates, can take many forms; it can describe those ‘injured or [who] become chronically ill’ in combat, but also those whose wounds constitute ‘physical or mental injury or illness’ beyond combat and whose service may be

¹⁷ Shuttleworth et. al, ‘Dilemma’, p. 174.

‘foreshortened’.¹⁸ ‘Impairment or disfigurement’ and ‘partial or complete loss of [bodily] function’ may be a feature of masculine disability in this context, or the wounds may not be visible at all, with disability taking shape instead in more ‘muted forms’.¹⁹ Irrespective, as Tom Shakespeare explains, there is ‘a particular crisis’ for the able-bodied man who suddenly ‘loses physical prowess’, for one reason or another, precisely because ‘so much of [masculinity] is constructed on the basis of strength and invulnerability’.²⁰

Gerber also notes that since the twentieth century, disabled veterans have become ‘a major project of the modern state, which endowed them recognition as a group worthy of

¹⁸ David A. Gerber (ed.) *Disabled Veterans in History* (Michigan, 2000), p. 1.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 2.

²⁰ Shakespeare, ‘Sexual Politics’, p. 63. Shakespeare writes eloquently in this context of the case of Christopher Reeve, who starred in a series of *Superman* films in the 1980s before becoming a quadriplegic following a riding accident in 1995. It is also worth noting here the extensive body of cultural work on male bodies and the Great War that resides alongside the field of disability studies. Joanna Bourke has examined the cultural implications of maimed male bodies on discourses of masculinity. Likewise, Lisa Herschback and Roxane Panchasi have both discussed the development of the post-World War I prosthetic limb industry that emerged for ex-servicemen that sought to ‘reconstruct’ the male body. Erin O’Connor has examined the development of medical discourse on the social meaning of amputations for men, although she situates her argument across the period 1851–1914. Finally, both Mark S Mirale and Ben Shephard have discussed the discourses of emotional ‘disability’ – i.e. shell shock and ‘war hysteria’ in relation to discourses of post-war masculinity.

continuing assistance, and with entitlements in the form of advanced medical care and prosthetics, pension schemes, vocational rehabilitation, and job placements.’²¹ Sadly, this was not always the case, and with its early twentieth-century period setting *Downton Abbey* represents masculine disability at a time when gender norms were more rigidly entrenched and society less accepting of physical difference. The period following World War I, in particular, as many historians and cultural critics have demonstrated, was one in which disabled individuals not only faced ‘widespread ability-based discrimination’ but were discouraged from participating in society, with many being ‘institutionalised’.²² A figure like Mr Bates, then, would have been unlikely to receive employment in a country house like Downton, something vocalised when Lord Grantham sacks Bates in Series Two (temporarily) after a trial period with him as his valet.

Today, there is increased legislation to protect individuals from discrimination on the grounds of disability and a much greater cultural understanding of the effects of prejudice more broadly by the able-bodied majority. However, I suggest that period dramas like *Downton Abbey*, whose plotlines of social justice have continued relevance in the present moment, have an ethical responsibility to not only ‘uncover the hidden history of disabled people’ but to ‘raise awareness of the unconscious attitudes and values embedded in media images’.²³ Indeed, despite the gains made in equality, access and the visibility of disabled people in society, prejudice, negativity and

²¹ Ibid, p. 3.

²² Richmond, ‘Disabled at Downton’, p. 71. Also, see Jessica’s Meyer’s *Men of War* cited earlier.

²³ Paul K. Longmore, *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability* (Philadelphia, 2003), p. 146. This quotation is also cited in Richmond, ‘Disabled at Downton’, p. 71.

awkwardness towards them prevail. As a 2014 report from the UK charity Scope found, prejudice towards disabled individuals in the UK remains widespread: 67% of the British public felt ‘uncomfortable talking to disabled people’, 36% of people believed that disabled individuals are ‘not as productive as everyone else’, and 21% of people aged between 18–34 actively avoid ‘talking to disabled people’.²⁴ Interestingly, Scope also found that men ‘aged 18–34 are the group least likely to interact with disabled people and most likely to hold negative attitudes’ about disability.²⁵ One might ask why this is the case. Clearly, a full answer to this question is beyond the scope of this chapter, but in what follows I want to suggest that dominant ideas about men, masculinity and physical ‘normalcy’ set in contrast to pejorative notions of disabled male subjectivity contribute to the problem. And, as I will now show, many of these ideas can be traced onscreen in *Downton Abbey*.

‘Think of me as dead’: Matthew Crawley’s Disabled Masculinity

Matthew’s transition from elite army officer to paraplegic focuses obsessively on disabled masculinity as connoting a lack of manhood. While Dr Clarkson (David Robb) emphasises that Matthew ‘will regain his health’ and that disablism does not signal ‘the end of his life’, Lady Mary Crawley (Michelle Dockery) remains skeptical: ‘Just the start of a different life’, she remarks, her words foregrounding Matthew’s altered physicality and its consequences; he and

²⁴ Hardeep Aiden and Andrea McCarthy, *Current Attitudes Towards Disabled People*. (London, 2014), p. 3. Available at <http://www.scope.org.uk/Scope/media/Images/Publication%20Directory/Current-attitudes-towards-disabled-people.pdf> (accessed 20 June 2016).

²⁵ Ibid, p. 7.

his life are now ‘different’.²⁶ In Matthew’s eyes, meanwhile, he is now an ‘impotent cripple, stinking of sick’.²⁷ As he sees it, ‘No one sane would want to be with me as I am now.’²⁸ Thus, he rejects his fiancé, Lavinia Swire (Zoe Boyle), advising her that she should ‘think of [him] as dead’ and to ‘remember me as I was’, words which dwell upon disability as an affront to masculinity and therefore life itself.²⁹ Underpinning Matthew’s questionable view is the implicit sense that ‘having a disability [is] seen as synonymous with being dependent, childlike and helpless’, for seemingly, that is contrary to ‘all that is embodied in the ideal male: virility, autonomy and independence’, something which chimes with similar comments made by Clifford in D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* in which he too perceives of himself as a child-man for his dependency on others.³⁰ Matthew’s story, then, may reflect the problematic historical truism that disabled individuals were ‘discouraged from seeking relationships’, but such ideas are dated and work only to reveal how the disciplines of masculine ‘normalcy’ are predicated on able-bodiedness and heterocentricity and ‘not only enforced but internalised’ by society.³¹

²⁶ Julian Fellowes, *Downton Abbey: Season Two – The Complete Scripts* (London, 2013), p. 272.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 300.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 299.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 285.

³⁰ Adrienne Asch and Michelle Fine, ‘Introduction: Beyond Pedestals’, in M. Fine and A. Asch (eds), *Women with Disabilities: Essays in Psychology, Culture and Politics* (Philadelphia, 1988), p. 3.

³¹ Richmond, ‘Disabled at Downton’, p. 71; and Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (London, 1996), p. 88.

Sadly, this notion is likewise reinforced in the storyline surrounding Sir Anthony Strallan's abandonment of Lady Edith. Despite Edith's assurance that she loves Anthony 'in spite of your needing to be looked after', as Strallan tells Lord Grantham, it is difficult 'just... because of all this', he says, pointing to his lame arm.³² For him, 'it's wrong' to marry Edith and be happy, 'so terribly happy', as she says, because it equates to Edith throwing 'away your life', which is something he 'can't let' happen so that she does not 'waste yourself on me.'³³ More destructively, this notion is reinforced by the Dowager Countess (Dame Maggie Smith) who tells Edith, 'Let him go. You know he's right. Don't stop him doing the only sensible thing he's come up with in months.'³⁴

Downton also represents the reductive notion that masculine disability is emasculating since it equates to a lack of manhood, something implied through reference to sexuality and reproductive capacity. Matthew's perceived spinal cord injury renders him impotent, itself a clichéd screen and fictional narrative. Lord Grantham, Mary and Lavinia receive the news that Matthew may never walk again together, but Dr Clarkson draws Lord Grantham aside to speak privately. The script reads:

Out of the women's hearing, Robert looks shocked.

ROBERT: You mean there can be no children?

CLARKSON: No anything, I'm afraid.³⁵

³² Julian Fellowes, *Downton Abbey: Season Two*, p. 151.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 182.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 183.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 272.

This exchange – man-to-man – about Matthew’s newfound ‘lack’ infers emasculation, with Dr Clarkson’s use of the indefinite pronoun affirming his patient as ‘less manly’ because, as per narrow medical norms, penile function equates to masculinity. In the original script, Matthew’s disability is also coupled with urinary dysfunction, thus doubly disqualifying Matthew as a ‘real’ man since his body is now an affront to masculine norms, with his physicality, genitals and sexual and psychological health all functioning ‘abnormally’ to the detriment of his gender. Sadly, as Aristotelis Nikolaidis points out, ‘discriminatory perceptions of people with disabilities’ all too frequently return to ‘the idea of asexuality, sexual inadequacy or impotence’, and its effect is to displace physically different individuals ‘as subjects’ while concomitantly fetishizing them ‘as objects in the context of the medical tragedy model.’³⁶

But there is a secondary implication, too, at stake in Dr Clarkson’s words about masculinity and disability that illuminate the gendered, class *and* cultural implications of Matthew’s impairment. His reproductive incapacity means he cannot continue the hereditary line of inheritance on which aristocratic estates like Downton rely. Erectile failure and exclusion from sexual activity aside, then, Matthew is socially and culturally disabled by the tradition of heritage. In preventing Matthew from fulfilling his particularly aristocratic patriarchal ‘obligation’, Fellowes renders visible here the pejorative way in which dominant ideas about masculinity in relation to class are (and remain) reliant on patriarchal *and* heterosexual ideology as much as effective sexual function for meaning. Indeed, as Series Three problematically

³⁶ Aristotelis Nikolaidis, ‘(En)Gendering Disability in Film’, *Feminist Media Studies*, 13/4 (2013), p. 760.

suggests, the absence of a male heir is conceived of in terms of failure such that Lord Grantham feels disabled by his own inability to provide a male heir to the Grantham estate.

This narrow conception of masculine disability also suggests that heterosexual and patriarchal ideologies are oppressive to men, too. Unsurprisingly, with regards to Matthew's impotence, the show fails to embrace (or even allude to) a broader range of sexual practices beyond traditional penetrative sex, because as Matthew tells Lavinia, 'we could never be properly married.'³⁷ In this way, *Downton* conceives of masculinity solely in phallogentric terms. It is hugely important, therefore, that this view is counteracted by alternative and more sensible voices of reason, and both Lavinia and Mary protest Matthew's ill-thought view. But, in the notes to the script, Fellowes explicitly rejects the idea that disabled men *can* have healthy sex lives, declaring 'You do see dramas where the suggestion is that men can be paralysed, but still sexually active. This is not true; certainly it was not true during the First World War, and we try to make that clear.'³⁸ Historical inaccuracy aside, Fellowes's absolutist comment endorses the false belief that disabled men are *always* 'excluded from sexual activity'.³⁹ Yet, as numerous disability scholars and activists have argued, while 'paralysis often impacts people's sexuality, including changes in physical functioning, sensation and response [...] the range of sexual options may be different [but] physical attraction and sexual activity are realistic expectations –

³⁷ Fellowes, *Downton Abbey: Season Two*, p. 284.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 273.

³⁹ Shakespeare, 'Sexual Politics', p. 58.

no matter the level or completeness of paralysis.’⁴⁰ *Downton*’s medicalization of masculinity through male sexual dys/function, then, is not only ‘oppressive and undermining’ to disabled men but distinctly archaic.⁴¹

Disabled Masculinity: The Case of Mr Bates

Like Matthew, Mr Bates is a wounded veteran, but while Matthew transitions from able-bodied to disabled in the course of the show, the audience meets Bates as disabled from the outset. This is important since it brings corporeality back into focus in the ideological critique of hegemonic masculine ideals. Aaron Richmond has argued that in comparison to Matthew, Bates *is* a more positive representation of disabled masculinity not least in the way that his narrative debunks many of the reductive ideas articulated through Matthew’s paraplegia. But, I propose that the representation of Bates’s disabled masculinity too, is not without its problems.

Alongside a medical perspective on disability, Bates’s narrative also elucidates the social model of disability; he is constructed as Other by the Crawley family and fellow servants alike. One of the first images of Bates onscreen gives primacy to his disability, with the audience following lady’s maid Miss O’Brien’s (Siobhan Finneran) gaze via camera angles that move from Bates’s cane to his face and to his cane again. Moments later, when Bates leaves the room, O’Brien speculates, ‘I can’t see that lasting long’, condemnatory words that reinforce Scope’s

⁴⁰ Anon., ‘Sexual Health for Men’, *Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation*, n.d.. Available at <https://www.christopherreeve.org/living-with-paralysis/health/sexual-health/sexual-health-for-men> (accessed 15 August 2016).

⁴¹ Shakespeare, ‘Sexual Politics’, p. 58.

finding that able-bodied subjects do not view disabled persons as effective as others.⁴² Moreover, it is significant that the ‘that’ which O’ Brien is referring to here, posits Bates’s inclusion among the service staff at *Downton* as something of a temporary recipient of charity, rather than a fully-fledged employee.

Via Bates, persistent attention is given to disabled masculinity as frail and limited by physical restriction, with the valet consistently negating charges of vulnerability and weakness. Mary, for example, ponders how a servant can ‘do his work when he’s lame?’, while Mrs Patmore (Lesley Nicol), the Abbey’s cook, wonders whether Bates can manage ‘because we’ve all got our own work to do’, the implication being that the able-bodied are unable to compensate for Bates’s physical inabilities.⁴³ Bates, it is suggested, needs to support himself with minimal assistance from others. Yet, these attitudes go on to manifest more troublingly as bullying by O’Brien and Barrow.

O’Brien, on one occasion, kicks away Bates’s cane so that he falls to the ground as the servant staff line up outside the house awaiting the arrival of an important guest in the series’ opening episode. This act is done out of pure maliciousness and designed to humiliate Bates and remind the Crawleys of his apparently ‘weak’ status. Meanwhile, Barrow’s hostility to Bates stems primarily from jealousy at being ‘passed’ over for the role of valet by ‘Long John Silver’.⁴⁴ In other words, Barrow’s able-bodied masculine identity is affronted by the presence of disabled masculinity (something that, nonetheless, Barrow draws on to his own advantage in

⁴² Julian Fellowes, *Downton Abbey: Season One – The Complete Scripts* (London, 2012), p. 18.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 38 and p.17.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 21.

Series Two when he deliberately courts a German sniper to shoot his hand to be returned home from the front line). But Barrow is also suspicious of what he perceives as Bates's misplaced arrogance, his stoic masculinity in the face of physical impairment. As a result, Barrow undermines Bates by feminising him at all opportunities. He rejects Bates's offer, for instance, to help move some suitcases upstairs, telling Bates tenderly, 'I couldn't ask that of you, Mr Bates, not in your condition', a sentence that 'poses as care' but is actually 'an insult' by feminising disability.⁴⁵ Later he laughs in the valet's face when threatened with physical violence for bullying another member of staff. Barrow mocks Bates's display of violence when he throws him up against a wall, asking: 'Is this supposed to frighten me, Mr Bates? Because, if it is, it isn't working.'⁴⁶ Here, *Downton* points to the senseless idea that able-bodied men are 'naturally' superior to disabled males. Barrow's words, in both instances, reinforce the notion that Bates is not a 'real' man because he does not have access to 'natural' masculine physical strength in a conventional manner. Accordingly, *Downton* reminds us of the unjust way in which, as Tom Shakespeare points out, disabled men do not 'enjoy the power and privileges of non-disabled men'.⁴⁷ Of course, through these scenes, Fellowes rightly shows how men are not always the oppressor but can be victims, too, of oppressive gender/sex ideologies.⁴⁸ It is also interesting that despite Barrow's own wounded male body from a gunshot, Fellowes suggests that it is his

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 49.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 221.

⁴⁷ Shakespeare, 'Sexual Politics', p. 61.

⁴⁸ William Sewell, 'A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency and Transformation', *American Journal of Transformation*, 98/1 (1992), p. 4.

homosexuality that serves to truly disable the footman. Nonetheless, the show fails to follow this up with imagery of how prejudicial attitudes towards disabled subjects can reconstitute discriminatory social structures. With regards to Bates, he is shown as attempting to ‘normalise’ his physical difference through the purchase of a limp corrector.⁴⁹

The device that Bates purchases is described as ‘a kind of caliper, with iron struts and straps on and an adjustable foot platform at the bottom’ that is ‘extremely uncomfortable’.⁵⁰ But in the scenes in which Bates is shown wearing the brace, notions of male bravery and the rejection of weakness are upheld as the vanguard of masculinity. Bates is shown visibly distressed, ‘breathing deeply’ and crying ‘out in pain’ at the discomfort caused by this ‘vicious implement’ but he nonetheless protests that he is ‘fine’, words that not only deny the corporeal reality of his situation but also reject weakness, frailty and emotion and thus emasculation.⁵¹ In the notes to the script surrounding these scenes, Fellowes comments that:

The great moral triumph of being different, so brilliantly illustrated by the Paralympics, is to accept your difference which of course empowers you, but there is, I suspect, often a period that you have to go through when you’re trying to be the same before you can get to that. I didn’t want Bates to be too much of a saint on a monument. He’s settling in, he likes Anna more and more and understandably wants rid of his limp [...]. He wants to go

⁴⁹ There is a body of literature that has examined the rise of the post-World War I prosthetic limb industry and its relationship to discourses of masculinity. As noted earlier, Lisa Herschback and Roxane Panchasi are particularly valuable in this regard.

⁵⁰ Fellowes, *Downton Abbey, Season One*, p 145.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 145.

back to normal. He is also brave enough to subject himself to considerable pain in his efforts.⁵²

Fellowes's attitude here is overtly gendered even as he speaks ostensibly to celebrate physical difference. His comment is notably free of condemnatory language and clearly he does not seek to belittle disabled men, but the inference of a constricting binary opposition between the able-bodied and disabled male is paramount. Bravery – the archetype of the warrior – is valued as the preserve of 'real' men. Fellowes's inexplicit register privileges masculine 'normalcy', failing to accommodate the para-Olympians whose physical difference he evokes, thus reinforcing disability and specifically masculine disability as at odds with one another.

[Insert Fig. 10.1]

[Caption: 'Mr Bates, a shadow of a man?']

Paul Darke has questioned whether the normalisation of disability as 'different' is positive when normality and conformity are validated and disability is, as Fellowes infers above, posited as something to be overcome.⁵³ Sadly, *Downton Abbey* falls into this trap too. Mr Bates discards of the limp corrector by throwing it into the lake, vowing (to housekeeper, Mrs Hughes) that he will 'never again try to cure myself' and will 'spend my life happily as the butt of others'

⁵² Ibid, p. 144.

⁵³ See Paul Darke, 'Understanding Cinematic Representations of Disability', in T. Shakespeare (ed.), *The Disability Reader: Social Science Perspectives* (London, 1998), pp. 181–97.

jokes and I will never mind them.’⁵⁴ The inference of this scene is that Bates ‘overcomes’ his seeming ‘inadequacy’ through moral strength and integrity. Yet Fellowes couples this with further measures to valorise Bates’s masculinity, not least in how Bates is portrayed as a ‘super-crip’, that is, super cripple.

Coined by John Clogston, super-crip is a phrase to describe someone who is either deviant and overcomes their ‘incompleteness’ *in spite of* their disability, or who is idealised and romanticised for achieving ‘normalcy’ in the face of gendered and physical adversity.⁵⁵ Fellowes’s conception of Bates encompasses both of these traits. In Series One, we learn that when Bates returned from the second Boer war he was an unhappy, injured man who was an unpleasant husband to his then wife, Vera, and whose discontent manifested as alcoholism. Recognising the error of his ways, however (and after a spell in prison), Bates sought a ‘better’ life for himself at Downton and ‘turned his life around’ by embracing the romanticised and idealised super-crip image via hypermasculinity.

Leonore Manderson and Susan Peake have explained that disabled men often perform hypermasculinity as a means to reclaim and validate their identity because sadly it helps to

⁵⁴ Fellowes, *Downton Abbey: Season One*, p. 184.

⁵⁵ See John Clogston, *Disability Coverage in 16 Newspapers* (Louisville, 1990). Sayantani DasGupta also reads Bates as representing the super-crip stereotype. See DasGupta’s blog: ‘Masculinity and Disability on *Downton Abbey*’, *Stories are Good Medicine Blog*, 25 January 2011. Available at <http://storiesaregoodmedicine.blogspot.co.uk/search?q=disability> (accessed 13 July 2016).

‘normalize’ a sense of self.⁵⁶ In the show, Bates articulates hypermasculinity through heroism. Before he is romantically involved with Anna, for instance, he brings her food and flowers in secret when she is poorly to make her ‘feel better’ and then tucks her up in bed (thus taking on the role of romantic hero, too). Likewise, he tenderly comforts housemaid, Gwen (Rose Leslie), whom he finds crying because she fears she’ll be stuck in service and fail to become the secretary she desires to be. Bates repeatedly displays honour and integrity when refusing to name Thomas as a petty thief for stealing wine from the Abbey’s supplies, for example, even though he tries to set up Bates as the thief to protect himself. Later he displays honour and humility by leaving Downton of his own volition to stop Vera from exposing Mary’s scandalous past to the press – that she took the Turkish Ambassador’s son as a lover and he died in her bedroom. As Lord Grantham describes it, ‘Bates fell on his sword to protect the reputation of my family’, words which endorse a sense of chivalry in the valet’s actions.⁵⁷

Exalted by such gallant plotlines, it is unsurprising that one servant observes how ‘everyone talks of him [Bates] as if he were a King’, and that the women of the house should find him ‘a romantic figure’.⁵⁸ Indeed, such was the effect of Fellowes’s writing and Brendan Coyle’s performance as Bates, that these sentiments were also echoed in the UK’s popular press.

⁵⁶ See Lenore Manderson and Susan Peake, ‘Men in Motion: Disability and the Performance of Masculinity’, in C. Sandahl and P. Auslander (eds), *Bodies in Motion: Disability and Performance* (Michigan, 2005), pp. 230–42.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 73.

⁵⁸ Fellowes, *Downton Abbey: Season Two*, p. 17 and p. 226.

The *Evening Standard* newspaper, for instance, described the phenomenon of ‘The Cult of Mr Bates’, with one reporter noting that

[...] he is ‘somber’, ‘manly’, ‘dignified’– with a gorgeous speaking voice and sex appeal that goes off the scale. Who are we swooning about? Johnny Depp? Brad Pitt?

Wrong. It’s Mr Bates in *Downton Abbey*. Who would have thought a lame valet would have us all going hot under the collar? ⁵⁹

The derogatory attitude masquerading as flattery here reinforces Clogston’s conception of the ‘super-crip’, since even a ‘lame footman’ can ‘overcome’ his disability to have sex appeal.⁶⁰

However, to underscore Bates as ‘super-crip’, Fellowes situates the valet in a series of plotlines that equally constitute him in a pity-hero dichotomy. Such narratives are, in a dramatic sense, extreme, because they must pull on the audience’s heartstrings so that Bates can be pitied and, latterly, applauded for his gallantry. Aptly, for much of Series Two and Three, Bates is wrongly convicted and imprisoned for Vera’s murder, only to later receive a reprieve. But troublingly this dramatic device also extends to the portrayal of his wife’s sexual assault in Series Four, for not only is Bates deeply tormented about the physical and emotional horror his wife is subjected to (and we see him crying after he finds out), but his disability is perniciously invoked as *the* reason that underlines such sexual violence in the first place.

Anna’s rapist, Mr Green, a valet to another of the Crawley’s houseguests, arrives at the Abbey and quickly turns from being friendly with Anna to violent. In the scene that culminates in the attack, Green callously says to her: ‘You look to me like you could do with a bit of real fun

⁵⁹ Anon, ‘The Unlikely Cult of Mr Bates’.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

for once [...]. You're not telling me that that sad, old cripple keeps you happy?'⁶¹ Anna's reply is firm and her offence evident: 'If you must know, yes, he keeps me very happy.'⁶² However, Green greets this with doubt and further aggression, 'Perhaps you've just forgotten what you're missing', he says maliciously, before violently punching Anna in the face and then assaulting her.

Elsewhere I have written of my concerns regarding the portrayal of Anna's rape in *Downton Abbey*.⁶³ Here, in the context of debates about masculinity and disability, it is apparent that disabled masculinity is being deployed pejoratively as a vehicle to render visible sexual violence against women. As feminist critics have vehemently argued, rape is never about sex, but about power, and here Green's words work to overpower and belittle Anna. But, with regards to masculinity and disability, there is a derogatory inference that disabled men cannot 'satisfy' an able-bodied woman because the disabled man is not a 'real' one. This false 'logic' and primetime television imagery is deeply problematic and begs the question: why should Bates's disability be invoked as symptomatic of a gendered inadequacy that provides *the* underlying 'cause' for his wife's rape? The answer, tragically, is simple. As Fellowes's comment cited at the beginning of this chapter indicates, for him, disability makes Bates 'more vulnerable' because it calls into question his masculinity, and to deploy a rape narrative in relation to Bates's wife makes him

⁶¹ Julian Fellowes, *Downton Abbey: Season Five*, episode four, n. p.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Claire O'Callaghan, 'Rape at Downton Abbey', *Feminist and Women's Studies Association Blog*, 17 November 2013. Available at <http://fwsablog.org.uk/2013/11/17/rape-at-downton-abbey/> (accessed 13 June 2016).

especially vulnerable.⁶⁴ The ‘philosophy’ underpinning this premise insinuates that disabled masculinity is not only weak and inauthentic but, as *Downton* goes on to suggest, must be reconciled through empowerment. In gendered terms this means that Bates must ascribe to hegemonic masculine ideals. Put another way, the disabled male subject must adopt a warrior persona and ‘fight like a man’, something, of course, Fellowes gestures to when Bates threatens to kill Mr Green.⁶⁵

Conclusion: *Downton* and Masculine Disability

Tom Shakespeare reminds us that it is ‘important not to buy into screen myths and models of masculinity which are inappropriate to the majority of men, let alone disabled men.’⁶⁶ Yet *Downton Abbey* fails to contribute to this endeavour by dispelling derogatory stereotypes concerning disabled masculinity.⁶⁷ Despite the ways in which *Downton* exposes many of the reductive ideas associated with patriarchal discourses of masculinity, nonetheless the period drama always seems to reach the conclusion that able-bodied masculinity *is* superior to disabled masculinity. Through its representation of the lived experience of male physical impairment, prejudice and discrimination, and the sexual politics of disability, *Downton Abbey* suggests that disabled men *can* have a life, but a distinctly different one to ‘normal’ men. Its plotlines conclude by suggesting that disabled men *should* compensate for their ‘lack’ by performing (and perhaps over perform) traditional masculine norms.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Shuttleworth et al., ‘Dilemma’, p. 185.

⁶⁶ Shakespeare, ‘Disabled Masculinity’, p. 63.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 63.

A respondent to the Scope survey cited earlier commented that: ‘We need a more realistic view of disabled people – we’re not all heroes or villains, even though I love stories about disabled people becoming heroes, overcoming adversity. But we all have the right not to climb a mountain!’⁶⁸ British costume drama, however historicist in truth, needs to provide more sophisticated insights into the experiences of disability and physically different men that challenge essentialist conceptions of hegemonic masculinity. Without them period dramas run the risk of impoverishing the fields of masculinity and disability studies, and therein social justice and equality.

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⁶⁸ Aiden and McCarthy, *Current Attitudes*, p. 16.

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