

# ROBIN HOOD

A MYTHIC BIOGRAPHY



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## *Robin Hood of Hollywood*

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### *The Outlaw on Screen*

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#### **A Visual Image**

By the end of the nineteenth century Robin Hood, now at least five hundred years old, had taken many identities relating to the periods, contexts, and genres in which he had appeared. But whether he was bold yeoman, rueful lord, or rural gentleman, he had not so far been the focus of a major work of art. Each version of the outlaw hero had received at least one solid, lucid, and surviving representation, but there was no masterpiece to enshrine and to transmit the meaning of the hero, no Robin Hood equivalent of Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* or Tennyson's *The Idylls of the King*. Though that reduced cultural profile might suit the idea of an outlaw, eluding the fixity of great literature as much as the constraints of a sheriff and his jail, it also helped to make the tradition all the more flexible and mobile. Because something as ironic and insubstantial as Peacock's *Maid Marian* was for nineteenth-century writers the most authoritative source available, they felt all the more free to let their imaginations roam. So

they re-created the outlaw in terms of contemporary activities and liberties, from imperial military adventures to the inter-male delights of rural, and sometimes cruel, sport.

That fruitful flexibility and the related low profile of the Robin Hood texts changed in the twentieth century, as one medium became dominant and provided several technically powerful and highly popular re-creations of Robin Hood's story. Each of these tended to dominate the following versions and to pressure them into being either pale copies or deliberate, and sometimes forced, rejections of the dominant contemporary image of the hero.

The newly potent medium, was, of course, film, and then its junior relative, television. In these, a new and authoritative image of the hero was created, drawing on the earlier versions but clearly different in a number of ways. Less aggressive than the social bandit, more active than the displaced lord, more leaderly than the rural esquire, Robin Hood of Hollywood strides, smiles, leaps on and off his horse, brandishes his bow, speaks with large gestures and noble sentiments, and always, unlike both the social bandit and the distressed gentleman, dominates the scene entirely. Addressing his men from on high, swinging through the air to menace the Normans, taunting his enemies from a battlement, standing with arrow ominously poised, he is a theatrical figure, but one that the magic of cinema can make, in one swift cut, both potent at a distance and intimately exciting in close-up.

Robin Hood of Hollywood is an action hero. What in the novels was a matter of lengthy explanations of sieges and battles—scenes that only a skillful novelist like Scott could realize with real excitement—is in film a matter of images of speed and thrill. What in the plays is a slow-moving exchange of feeling, which can work well if the writing is poetical enough—as Munday's is occasionally and as Tennyson's is very rarely—in film is a tender two-shot, with symbolic foliage, emotive music, and appropriately low lighting. Film can combine the two aspects of Robin, not only an active man, a fighter, a leader of men but also gentle and understanding in personal relations with the poor, with his male friends, with Marian. Film, curiously, both elaborates and fulfills the implications of the very early ballads, which also operate by cut, montage, change of focus, by suggestive dialogue rather than novel-like elaboration. It is no accident that the



best comparison with the *Gest* is with the major films of the twentieth century, nor that a remarkable resemblance exists between the early and broadside ballads and the pacing and impact of a television series: each takes little time to experience, each deals with a few interlocking scenes, and each focuses on one aspect of the hero's identity and his relation with a few other characters.

Modern film and ancient ballad are both performance genres, devoted to telling a story to a substantial and wide-ranging audience. They do not expect the close attention of the novel-reader or the playgoer; they need to seize and to keep attention to transmit meaning through rapid movement and broad strokes, both by the hero and the artist. But what in ballad would have been added by voice, gestures, and probably by additional music from the performer, in film is created by various techniques—color, camera work, design, music, and the engaging presence of the actors.

The Robin of the twentieth century was re-created in film, and though Britain made a significant contribution, the outlaw focus moved from Sherwood to Hollywood. At the same time, Robin's name changed, subtly but decisively. While British people still call him Robin Hood, two words with equal stress, to North Americans he is Robinhood, with a firm stress on the first syllable: the metrics of the new name are the same as those of Hollywood itself.

More dramatic and memorable changes than that have come upon the hero in film. His body is now a central feature. Whereas the tights were originally deployed so that nineteenth-century actresses playing Robin could show their legs, the male body became the focus of display in the early films. In the 1922 film Douglas Fairbanks represents Robin Hood at first as a heavily armed, fully dressed nobleman. But after he returns from crusade and is outlawed, his body is liberated from the stiff concealments of robes and armor, and he wears an acrobat's revealing costume to match his darting leaps, slides, and triumphant salutes. With Fairbanks the protruding chest is as important as the legs and arms, but with Errol Flynn in *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) repeated emphasis is on powerful thighs, whether gripping his horse, poised suggestively close to Marian, or placed in direct, and sexually challenging, opposition to Prince John. Cinema and television have always selected men with figures

and features that are romantically exciting; as well as Fairbanks and Flynn, John Derek, who starred in the fairly unexciting *Rogues of Sherwood Forest* of 1950, and Patrick Bergin, of the 1991 *Robin Hood*, both have classic matinee-idol looks, while Michael Praed, who stirred many a heart with the 1984 television *Robin of Sherwood*, offers the most dramatic profile of all.

While the body of the sexualized Robin speaks directly to the audience, the plot of the films usually celebrates the gendered triangle story, both heterosexual and homosocial, which had developed in the nineteenth century and was passed on from the theatrical tradition. As Kevin Harty indicates,<sup>1</sup> at least three of the seven pre-1914 Robin Hood films had this story in some form. The 1912 *Robin Hood* made by Eclair has a Smith-de Koven based story about Guy of Gisborne's determination to marry Marian, which leads to his capturing Robin; getting tied to a tree is the interestingly phallic mode of capture (as well as a cowboy motif), and that is how Guy himself ends up. The 1913 *Robin Hood* by American Standard has a triangle based on Will Scarlet and Christabel, daughter of the sheriff; her name seems to descend from Egan. The British and Colonial Films *Robin Hood Outlawed* of 1912 has Robin rescue Marian "from an evil knight," as Harty's synopsis puts it (455). In the Fairbanks film the rival is Guy, played as a silent villain with black-rimmed eyes, lurching from violent threat to craven defeat. Though this film gives no suggestion that Guy and Robin have a close relationship mediated by Marian, the 1938 film depicts Sir Guy as an attractive alternative hero. As Sir Guy, Basil Rathbone is a villain with an admirable military stance, especially compared with the cowardly sheriff. Guy finally fights Robin Hood as an equal in a classic sword fight, which even involves near-embracing between the two well-matched males; the scene illustrates the feeling "between men" that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has outlined (see p. 128). The triangle's secondary, male-bonding, force—or perhaps in this and some other cases its primary force—recurs vividly in the television series *Robin of Sherwood*, in which both the sheriff and Guy of Gisborne are depicted as inherently gay. Both have a pronounced interest in the conspicuously handsome Robin; only the sheriff's lumpish and clearly undersexed brother, the abbot, has any interest in Marian, and that is merely for her money.



But a love triangle that includes male-male bonding is not the only emotional structure that is developed. Robin is also involved in a symbolic dysfunctional family, and “outlaw” can be read as if it means alienated child. None of the details surviving about the pre-1914 films seem to bear on this aspect of the story, but the 1922 film clearly constructs Robin at the start as a kind of son for King Richard. Wallace Beery, who usually played heavies and presumably was cast not to outshine Fairbanks physically, presents the king as a jovial if insensitive supporter of the boyish hero. After Robin defeats Guy in the opening tournament, the king insists that he obtain his prize from Marian, Queen of Beauty. Robin demurs; the caption reads, “Exempt me sire, I am afraid of women.” The remark has provided the title for a discussion of gender anxiety based on male homosociality in the tradition.<sup>2</sup> But Richard insists on “normal” gender behavior, like any father urging sexual maturity on the unwilling son, and in a bizarre sequence Robin nervously moves his head about until Marian finally manages to surround it with a crown. If this did not itself suggest unwanted entrapment, implicitly sexual, by women, he is then the center of a mob of young beauties who want him to wear their favors in battle. Escaping from this flapper riot, he dives into a river, only to surface facing a washerwoman; he thinks, “Another woman!”

The young Robin’s passage into heterosexual identity is pursued in the scene before the crusaders depart: all the other men seem to be in dark corners, making energetic farewells to their beloveds, while Robin is alone. But then he rescues Marian from Prince John’s unwanted overtures and sees her as something different: “I never realized a woman could be like you.” She is indeed different from the others, as she resists Prince John, calls Robin back from crusade to help save the people of England, even fakes her death to protect herself, showing a proto-feminist strength in Marian that has not been matched until very recently. This may be a testimony to Fairbanks’ sense of partnership with Mary Pickford (though she did not play the part), but may also generally indicate the new awareness of the role women could play when men were away at war.

This film brings a full-blown family drama, focused on Robin’s sexuality, into the tradition, and this recurs in different forms in the more serious versions. In the 1938 *The Adventures of Robin Hood* King

Richard treats Robin and Marian like children, and though his return brings sanction to their wish for marriage, in the final scene they escape from him. In a surely conscious replay of the early sequence in which Robin escapes from the hall full of Prince John’s soldiers, he and Marian elude the congratulating king and his men and like newly sexualized children, scamper out together, presumably to bed.

A different kind of family drama occurs in the 1991 film starring Kevin Costner. Here the sheriff rival is made ridiculous through Alan Rickman’s overacting, and he himself kills Guy of Gisborne. So although the sheriff goes through the Marian-stealing ritual, there is little actual tension and no contradictory rapport with Robin. A new Hollywood-style homosocial development emerges, however, in Will Scarlet’s strained relationship with the hero. The idea of an outlaw who is unwilling to accept Robin’s leadership goes right back to Little John in “Robin Hood and the Monk,” though the recalcitrant follower is also a standard feature of male action films, especially westerns and war stories. Here he is Will; tension exists because he and Robin are half brothers but Robin’s father abandoned their mother. Sibling rivalry simmers, sustained by Christian Slater’s skill with teenage sulking (his presence as a handsome deuterio-Robin and youth idol played a major part in the film’s success), and is not resolved until the end, where Robin can embrace Will and say, “I have a brother.” The family melodrama is resolved in masculine rapport, without even needing Marian in between. Again a paternal role is played by the king, but the producers kept secret in the titles the identity of the actor who played the king: it was the vigorously authoritative Sean Connery. Perhaps his name was suppressed to retain Costner as the unrivaled star, but part of Connery’s impact was that he was the actual father of someone who had recently played Robin Hood: Jason Connery took over the role from Michael Praed in the television series *Robin of Sherwood*.

These instances show how film has added a new element to Robin Hood’s identity: a set of personal and familial tensions that belong inherently to the film genre. The tensions have the effect of adding sensitivity—with partner, parent, and other men—to the hero and making his final triumph a personal success as well as a social one. Robin the twentieth-century individual, finding identity through



relationships as well as achievements—the archetypal Hollywood man—is realized in those structures.

But the twentieth-century filmic Robin has an identity wider than his attractive body and his sociosexual interactions; as in earlier versions his inherent resistance to some form of authority always gives his role a kind of political meaning. This varies considerably but in general charts an expanding role for the hero, so that twentieth-century Robin Hood of Hollywood becomes a political figure with concerns much broader than the local and regional significance of the late medieval figure; indeed, his impact transcends the English national significance that he developed in the nineteenth century.

A striking symbol of the 1922 film is realized in the historically conscious title sequence. We see at first lines from Charles Kingsley:

So fleet the works of men  
Back to their earth again;  
Ancient and holy things  
Fade like a dream.<sup>3</sup>

The initial meaning is a medieval-modern contrast: this fiction will reactivate the fleeting medieval world, and there is nothing inherently different from Scott's work in that. But as the film begins and continues, a quite different, America-focused form of renovation seems to be under way. First we see a ruined medieval castle, in England, on a hilltop. Then in a montage suddenly the castle appears as new. We are not just admiring the ruins of the past; we are seeing them rebuilt in America. This is more than a metaphor. The first set seems massive, and it was indeed, not just a small gatehouse and a matte, like the castle on a hill we see several times. Fairbanks's production team, including his engineer brother, built a ninety-foot-high castle entrance on Santa Monica Boulevard.<sup>4</sup> It long stood there, providing massive proof of the way in which America can, with both financial and technological power, create anew the grandeur of the past.

The same sense of splendor dominates the opening sequence, in which—unlike in almost all other Robin Hood films—we do not start in the forest. In fact, the film is nearly half over before Robin becomes an outlaw. The massive crowd scenes and the march of the

men to a tournament and off on crusade are all part of the grandiose style of early cinema that was very much connected with, and creative of, the myth of Hollywood. From D. W. Griffith to C. B. de Mille, and with Fairbanks's *Robin Hood* marking an important stage along the way, film realized the new American sense of power and splendor: the castle had been renewed only because it had (like many real castles) crossed the Atlantic.

But this splendor was not simple, either in its nature or its direction. As the crusaders marched off to war overseas, film watchers in 1922 must have been reminded of the American departure to fight in Europe only five years before. But the outcome in film is different. As the strongly gentrified Earl of Huntingdon, Robin is proclaimed Richard's second in command on crusade, but he returns home soon at Marian's request. He is branded a coward because of it; his royal father figure is much saddened by the apparent fault. Robin's decision to return must have contemporary political meaning: by 1922 the principle of American isolationism was well established, and the story tells us that, whatever the immediate opprobrium, it is right to sort things out at home, not engage in costly adventures overseas. This Robin is not only a Hollywood appropriation of masculine and aristocratic grandeur; he is also a true modern American. The film showed how new Robin could be, but it also indicated that Robin Hood pictures could make real money.<sup>5</sup> For that reason alone it was a crucial step in the re-formation of the outlaw as a twentieth-century and international hero, one to be widely imitated in film.

A political meaning for the outlaw myth is also to be found in the 1938 film starring Errol Flynn. Abandoning the idea of starting with a tournament (though as Behlmer shows, some at Warner Brothers thought an audience would expect it),<sup>6</sup> this plunges Robin from the start into resistance. The film opens with a peasant killing a deer, the Normans descending on him, and Robin resisting them and setting him free. The peasant-poacher motif is found in Henry Gilbert's 1912 retelling of the stories (see pp. 175–76), and this has become the standard opening in visual form; it is no doubt a major reason why many people now think the forest laws are a central part of the myth. Robin's resistance is clearly on behalf of such little people: the men who pass messages to meet Robin at the Gallows Oak are old, bowed



down, marked by suffering. Some commentators have felt that this is more than general good deeds. Ina Hark has argued that as Robin shows the increasingly sympathetic Marian around his base, and especially as a group of poor all praise and bless him, just away from the main feast, we are looking at a medieval version of a New Deal camp, those Roosevelt-inspired systems of public support for the unemployed in the mid 1930s.<sup>7</sup> Hark argues that this would not be contrary to the attitudes and even interests of the Warners themselves at this time, who were sympathetic to Roosevelt's program.

That interpretation provides a credible local meaning for Robin's resistance to oppression, but several commentators go further, suggesting that the Normans are represented in many ways like the storm-troopers who were causing so much legalized disruption in Germany at the time. The fact that Warner Brothers's own agent in Berlin had been beaten to death in 1935 for being Jewish makes this a credible argument, and events in Europe were certainly influential in many ways: Wolfgang Korngold's decision to stay in Hollywood and write the score was itself conditioned by Hitler's move against Austria.<sup>8</sup> The association with the brownshirts is easy to make when watching the film, and an antifascist Robin is an appealing idea; yet some of the scenes most suggestive of Nazism, such as the scene in which Norman soldiers smash up shops, are also found in the 1922 film. The antifascist interpretation may have more to do with the political context then and now than with any conscious plan on the part of the filmmakers.

Errol Flynn's fine rhetoric as a Saxon resister has a widely applicable democratic meaning, as in his statement to Prince John "We Saxons just aren't going to put up with these oppressions any longer" and in the oath he administers to the outlaw band:

You the freemen of this forest swear to despoil the rich only to give to the poor, to shelter the old and the helpless, to protect all women rich or poor, Norman or Saxon, and swear to fight for a free England, to protect her loyally until the return of our king and sovereign Richard the Lionheart, and swear to fight to the death against all oppression.

Such a vaguely right-thinking politics may be all that most people take away from the film; in many ways its greatest strength is as a



FIG. 14. Robin and Sir Guy of Gisborne, from *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, 1938

memorable re-creation of the Robin Hood of the modern period, firmly national, strongly natural, and more masculine even than usual, with Flynn's insouciant charm, powerful thighs, and masterful style with the beautiful if immobile Olivia de Havilland. But in terms of gender, the film also provides the strongest "between men" pattern of all, with Basil Rathbone, who often was the active heroic lead in films, playing Sir Guy of Gisborne with great power: the final sword fight vividly re-creates the special tension between the two men in a highly intimate encounter (figure 14).

Whatever the politics of the 1938 Robin—and at this distance they seem gendered rather than sociopolitical—the film has been long-lasting and deeply influential: more than sixty years later it still shows on prime-time television, and a remastered print was successfully released in cinemas in 1998. Flynn's Robin dominated the field for some time; in fact two later productions (in 1946 and 1950, starring Cornel Wilde and John Derek) presented their heroes as being



his son. And in what might seem a third case, *Son of Robin Hood* (1958), the son was actually a daughter. The John Derek film of 1950, *Rogues of Sherwood Forest*, avoided using the name Robin Hood in its title, but as if to clarify dependency it cast as Little John Alan Hale, who had already played the part in the Flynn and the Fairbanks films.

The dominance by the Flynn film was evident in the lackluster quality of a number of nevertheless fairly successful Robin Hood films of the 1950s and later. The first was Disney's *The Story of Robin Hood and His Merrie Men* (1952), which starred Richard Todd, better known then and since for playing modern military men. This film was made in Britain, as were others: inexpensive films with less than authoritative Robins were made by Hammer Studios, notorious for cheap but intense horror films. In these Robin Hood films the hero was an amiable, democratic, and rather unheroic figure, played by fairly obscure actors such as Don Taylor in *Men of Sherwood Forest* (1957) and Barrie Ingham in *A Challenge for Robin Hood* (1962). These films and actors were overshadowed not only by the Flynn vehicle but also by the version that most people remember from the 1950s—in the bulky shape of Richard Greene from the Associated Television series that began in 1955.

*The Adventures of Robin Hood* has always been felt to be a very English affair. Greene was a well-spoken, pleasant-looking officer type; he had in fact worked in Hollywood, as in the 1939 *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, but was best known for various forms of stiff-upper-lip British derring-do. Quaint as the series looks in black and white, with small sets, fixed cameras, and actors doubling up as in a repertory company, it was well written and well acted.

The sociopolitical meaning of the series derives from its period. Robin returns home from crusade and finds that his house has been taken and the country is in very poor shape under the greedy Normans. A relationship with the postwar British decision to dispense with Churchill and the Tory government seems close. The thrust of the series is to reject oppression against the ordinary people of England; corrupt tax collectors and legal officials misuse their authority, and Normans in general are represented as an oppressive class rather than a race. The ideology of postwar Britain seeking social reconstruction and personal liberty is strong, and Robin comes across

like one of the many ex-officers who won parliamentary seats for Labour in the 1945 election.

This might well seem a reclaiming of the English outlaw from the internationalism of the American films, but the actual situation is more complex. ATV had decided on Robin Hood as the topic of one of a set of drama serials they planned to produce, and they had access to some writers who were happy to work even for low British salaries; the writers had been blacklisted as a result of the collaboration between American studio owners, including Warner Brothers, and the House Un-American Activities Committee under the inspiration of Senator Joseph McCarthy.

The story of these events is still not fully told, but Ring Lardner Jr. is on the record as having written, with Ian McClellan Hunter, about twenty of the first year's scripts, using a number of pseudonyms.<sup>9</sup> Many of the first episodes were by an otherwise unknown "Eric Heath," and so the series appears to have been established by writers whose understanding of sheriff-like oppression was a good deal sharper than even the most liberty-loving English of the period. The situation of these writers has been imaginatively realized by Michael Eaton in his script for the semi-Robin Hood film *Fellow Traveller* (1991), and there is some irony in the fact that the return to England of a Robin Hood with a genuinely radical feel—albeit with the social position of gentleman—is due in large part to the internationalization of the story. The series was released in the United States at the same time as in Britain and was well received: the audience in the two countries was reported as thirty million people for each episode in the early part of the series, which included 143 separate stories.<sup>10</sup>

Most of the twentieth-century Robin Hoods of television and film are in some way a gentleman. The twentieth century may have been the century of the common man, but there is rarely anything lower-class about the hero. American versions might make him seem less lofty; Errol Flynn is named "Sir Robin of Locksley," which has a friendly, youthful (if inaccurate) ring to it, and Kevin Costner has a strongly democratic air to his character. But the implied consensus is that it is perfectly appropriate to have a man of noble birth leading a popular movement—and of course the leaders of the Democrats in America and the Labour Party in Britain would not contradict that view.



### Varying the Pattern

But if that was until the early sixties the mainstream pattern, it was soon to be questioned, and indeed much of the Robin Hood filmmaking in the later half of the twentieth century can be seen as resisting in some way an archetypal “Hollywoodized” Robin, that hero who is noble, handsome, gentlemanly, rashly brave, violent in the service of good, blandly representative of national and even international liberalism, devoted in a slightly distant way to his lady, leader of a loyal band of ready and lower-class fighters who are often comic and even a little oafish. Most of the films from the 1960s and later overtly or implicitly criticize at least some of those positions—in part just for filmic innovation, but also to express a range of ideas about other identities and values Robin Hood might have and other politics he might represent.

Some of these variations are simply carnival-like, such as cartoon representations, including Warner Brothers’s own *Rabbit Hood* of 1949 and *Robin Hood Daffy* of 1959. In the Disney version of 1973 Robin becomes a dashing fox with a suave English voice; in the 1981 Muppet version he is represented as “a bold and chivalrous frog,” equipped with his own Lincoln green skin. In both cases the filmmakers are essentially playing with and so effectively promulgating the archetypal Robin Hood of Hollywood, though neither film is without some sense of ideological value. Disney combines a sense of vigor, even vitality, in the Anglo-American voices that play the most robust parts and traces of racism and sexism in portraying the villainous figures as ugly and usually African animals, wearing frilly costumes. The Muppets movie is less politically dubious, locating in Miss Piggy what seems the first trace of feminism in the tradition: she rescues a less than bold Robin-Kermit by leading an army of gallant chickens against Sheriff Gonzo. Kermit’s embarrassed refusal to give her even one “kissy” in return, while usual in Muppet-dom, is at least an exposure of the woman-avoiding masculinism embedded in so many of the texts.

Warner Brothers’s *Robin and the Seven Hoods* from 1964 is in one sense a tribute to the outlaw tradition, but the title implies that the tradition could be updated to an American present, symbolized by a different meaning of the word “hood.” Two following visual versions

suggest more strongly that it is time for a break with the romantic heroics of the Hollywood outlaw. One is little known and hard to trace: released to cinema in 1973 as *Wolfshead*, it was made by Hammer Studios for London Weekend Television in 1969 as a pilot for a series presenting Robin as a yeoman who is involved in realistic and bloody rebellion against the Norman lords. Using the cinema vérité style of the day, with dark, rainy settings, realistic costuming and context, and offering a left-wing political agenda, this is a new reading of the hero, very clear in the darkly handsome but definitely rough and ready figure of David Warbeck.

Despite being little known, *Wolfshead* both marked a new phase of British Robin Hood realism and can be seen as a direct stimulus to a much better-known film, *Robin and Marian* (1976). This was directed by Richard Lester, with a script by James Goldman; Dudley Jones credits the latter with the unusual features of the film.<sup>11</sup> As Kevin Harty remarks, this is a “marked departure from other Robin Hood screen efforts” (437). Robin is very different in appearance, demeanor, and meaning from the Fairbanks-Flynn-Greene archetype. First, he is older: he has been on crusade for some twenty years and has returned tired and slow-moving. He is also no gentleman, a man of the people on a par with the equally big, tough, and battered Little John. Sean Connery and Nicol Williamson play the roles with robust relish, far from the smooth sophistication they so often had to don for the stage or screen.

But if the film celebrates a renewed resistance by senior citizens as Robin unwillingly responds to Norman oppression (personified by an equally soldierly and weary Robert Shaw as the sheriff), a bigger surprise is in store for the well-trained filmgoer. Robin does not survive: here is no happy ending with marriage and celebration, stoups of wine and merriness. The film follows the pattern of the *Gest* as Robin dies at the hands of the prioress—but there is a grand twist. The prioress, elegantly and touchingly played by Audrey Hepburn, is Marian herself, who has taken to a busy life as a nun and healer after Robin left her for crusading. With some initial reluctance, she rejoins the man who deserted her for war, but when, in a final combat with the sheriff, Robin is badly wounded, she decides that they should die together, and pours out a poisonous potion. The love-death from



*Tristan and Isolde* is grafted onto the outlaw myth in a powerful ending, well handled by Connery as a gruff, sergeant-like Robin Hood who realizes this is the best way to end, at his moment of triumph: "I'd never have another day like this, would I?" he acknowledges, after sharing the fatal cup with her.

Time, class, divided loyalties, and deep passion are for the first time woven convincingly into the Robin Hood story, along with the solid realism that *Wolfshead* brought forward: Sherwood Forest can be cold, Robin's band includes weak men and cowards, and battle is a slow, awkward, agonizing affair. But such a challenging Robin—a direct opposite to the Hollywood hero—was a risk, and this is the Robin Hood film that lost money, especially in America. Star casting, fine techniques, and strongly original scripting cannot make up for the fact that Robin Hood grows old and dies; the outlaw hero across time is essentially a figure of youthfulness and summer, not vulnerable to age, wounds, or, usually, women. The film's acceptance of all these negative forces was one step too far for the Robin Hood faithful, and this version of the myth was outside the biography that most people acknowledge for the forest hero.

But the impact of realism was not forgotten, merely diluted. *Robin of Sherwood*, the successful and influential television series made for Harlech Television, also dissented from the Hollywood myth but had enough of its own romanticism to be an acceptable new biography of the hero. Here Robin is a peasant boy whose innate resistance to the Normans who killed his father and burned his village is activated when Much kills a deer. Richard Carpenter, an experienced writer of action television series, including series for children, combines the innovatory force of *Wolfshead* and *Robin and Marian* with the shape and feeling of the Hollywood pattern. Instead of being distinctly mature, Robin is definitively young, and Michael Praed plays him like a student radical with swinging dark hair and casual clothes, always eager, adventurous, idealistically insistent.

The series offered other innovations. It reflected contemporary interest in the supernatural, with Robin magically confirmed as "The Hooded Man" by Herne, a horned nature god from the mists of Anglo-Saxon myth (and as Cernunnos, the Horned One, from Celtic myth before that). The sound track by Clannad, an electronic folk-

rock group, emphasized this element, and the action was fast; some of the first filming with handheld cameras followed the outlaws running through beautiful local settings. Young, roguishly handsome, committed to resisting the Normans, Robin himself was a figure of nature. In one scene, as the outlaws gloomily sit, after a setback in which two have been killed, the ever-aggressive Will Scarlet (played powerfully by the young Ray Winstone) asks why they are undertaking this seemingly futile resistance. Robin stands, spreads his arms to the green forest below them, and says, magnificently, if enigmatically, "For this."

If a vague ecological libertarianism is part of *Robin of Sherwood's* politics, another element, with equally unclear focus, touches on contemporary concerns. Relations with the Arab world had become an emerging theme, through the Arab-Israeli wars, the oil crises, and, most visibly, the influx of Arab buyers into Western property markets. In the feature-length pilot for the series *The Sorcerer* the worst villain is not the rather ineffectual, scheming sheriff or the bungling upper-class lout Guy of Gisborne but Simon de Bellême, returned from crusade with many bad habits, like a rogue officer back from Victorian India. His magic has enslaved a giant servant, whom Robin liberates as Little John, and the villain is, naturally, going to put the titian-haired youthful beauty Marian to all sorts of nameless indignities. Robin defeats him in his vile foreign lair—and then, at the end of the long pilot, as the outlaws, including Marian, shoot fire arrows to remember their dead colleagues, they are joined by Nazir, Bellême's Arab servant, who becomes a loyal member of the Sherwood band. Robin, like so many in the period, is both hostile and friendly to the Arab world.

Carpenter's scripts involved Robin in the traditional robberies and rescues, but also brought in medieval magical realism (Marian saves the outlaws from the "Witch of Eldon" by courage and supernatural assistance). In addition, the hero's power traced back to ancient Blakean myth and the sword of Albion. Most critics feel the series fell away after Praed left and Herne, with some convenience, crowned a new Robin in the Earl of Huntingdon, played by Jason Connery. As a whole, however, the series retains considerable impact. Still alive—in fact, very popular—on websites, *Robin of Sherwood* brought back youth and idealism to twentieth-century Robin, as well as a new manifestation of the



technical brilliance that helped empower the 1922 and 1938 versions. In terms of the tradition, the importance of the program may have been to show that the classical Hollywood image could be updated without dismaying the dreams of the audience. The potent mix of realism and romance in *Robin of Sherwood* seems to have influenced following versions, just as the success of the British show in the United States in the mid 1980s apparently persuaded several studios that real money could be made through investing in yet another major outlaw epic.

In the late 1980s the media forests were humming with rumors about Robin Hood projects; at least three had been mooted, and several major actors were connected with the role, including Alec Baldwin, Tom Cruise, and Mel Gibson. Eventually two films were made, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* by Morgan Creek in collaboration with Warner Brothers, starring Kevin Costner, and *Robin Hood* by Twentieth Century Fox, with Patrick Bergin in the lead. The Costner film, much more expensive at \$60 million and stronger in publicity, became one of the top-selling films of the 1990s; the Bergin film was only released to television in the United States. Commentators often have denigrated the Costner film, attributing its success to the star's personal following and even to the international success of the theme song, "Everything I Do, I Do It for You";<sup>12</sup> at the same time commentators often argue that the Bergin picture was more lively, more vigorous, and in some way more authentic.

In fact, though *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* does lack the lucid, well-paced drama of the 1938 film—director Kevin Reynolds mixes overly elaborate set pieces with languid human-scale scenes—the film is still a dramatic and often gripping version of the events covered in the Flynn film, with some interesting variations. As Robin, Costner does not seek the dashing trickster-like image of Fairbanks and Flynn; he is more serious, seemingly a little older, and he dresses in a credibly bulky and dull-colored costume rather than the stagy, body-revealing traditional outfit. Nevertheless, Costner is not unmasculine, and we, like Marian, are able to admire his naked form—or that of his body double—as he is bathing. In the same multiple way he cuts a more thoughtful figure than his predecessors; the earnest involvement of Costner's successful role in *Dancing with Wolves* is in part being reprised, and yet, as in the climactic scene in which he is cata-

pulted into the enemy castle, the hero retains an element of swash-buckling adolescence.

While in some ways the image of Costner's Robin is restrained, the film also offers a new level of intensity that sometimes borders on melodrama. The forest scenes are more detailed—Robin trains his men in a distinctly military way—but they are also broader. The battle with the Celts, for example, blends the cowboy tradition with some *Star Wars* touches. Character is also more boldly drawn than before: Tuck is a larger-than-life buffoon and Little John a less than sharp-witted English provincial; the previous major films gave Robin a group of supporters who were less able and exciting than he was, but still capable and sensible in their activities. Marian, though, is a stronger figure than even Enid Bennett played in 1922, and far more so than the only intermittently active Olivia de Havilland in 1938. In *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* Marian's first appearance is to fight Robin in armor, and to make a good job of it; the ballad "Robin Hood and Maid Marian" may well have been in the mind of the scriptwriter, Pen Densham. But in spite of early spirited moments, she becomes a prisoner in the villain's tower in a final scene very similar to that in the 1922 film, requiring a through-the-window rescue equally rich in daring and improbability. Her oppressor is the sheriff, but his attempt to marry Marian at the end stems from his lust for the crown (she is the king's cousin), not from any triangular sexual excitement, which would itself be excluded by his grotesque overacting. But this lack of homosocial excitement is compensated for by the strongly emotive fraternity of Robin and Will Scarlet.

Intense male melodrama is also found in the forest fight, where the outlaws' treetop fortress is burned and acrobatic heroics ensue, and in the final rescue of the outlaws about to be hanged. Both are typical Hollywood big-stage scenes, bringing to the long tradition of Robin Hood combats the remarkable skills of modern technicians, elaborating the outlaw myth as once did the waterworks, fireworks, animal displays, and scenery transformations of the Victorian theater. But the film also has a thoughtful side, a distinct position in terms of contemporary politics. The by now traditional quest for Saxon freedom is pursued in the spirit of international democracy—which does not extend to the Celts, who are crudely stereotyped as bestial



enemies. By this time, however, Arabs are seen in a light less simplistic than in traditional Orientalism, and from the start Robin is given a new partner, the wise, skilled Moor Azeem, with whom he escapes from a Saracen jail in the opening scenes and who stays with him throughout the film. The figure was perhaps suggested by Nazir from *Robin of Sherwood*, the Arab who leaves his evil master to support Robin. This new Little John represents a range of Eastern wisdom—science in his telescope and explosives, medicine in his skill with childbirth, as well as warrior skills and general wise advice. The Arab element of Azeem also has contemporary meaning: links with the Gulf War and Orientalism have been outlined by Kathleen Biddick:

Military images of the Gulf War invaded the film. . . . The missile-nose view of targets that became familiar to a television audience watching the trajectories of scud missiles translated into the film's signature special effect—arrow-nose views of "medieval" archery. . . . The presence of Azeem in the film can be read in a number of ways. He is the "good" ally like Syria or Kuwait and represents the "best" of Orientalism. . . . Others would read Azeem as a sign of the new Orientalism, governed by a new imperialism that pits progressive Arabs against Islamic fundamentalists.<sup>13</sup>

Azeem's internationalism has a domestic meaning as well, because the part is played in gravely distinguished mode by the African American actor Morgan Freeman; this black Muslim takes a role like Kicking Bird, the Sioux wise man in *Dances with Wolves*. The figure's meaning in terms of American race relations is emphasized by the sheriff's seizure of Robin's father at night, in a scene that includes torches and Ku Klux Klan robes, though the deer-killing peasant motif is also present, as usual, to initiate Robin's outlawry.

The other film of 1991 was less elaborate in production values and less wide-ranging in reference. It was simply called *Robin Hood*, though the film indicates that the hero's real name is Robert Hode and that he makes the mild change of name when driven to the forest by a breach with his friend the sheriff over—of course—a peasant killing a deer. Many viewers found Bergin more lively than Costner, with his bright, ironic eyes and his cheeky, almost self-bristling, moustache. The film

has a strong Marian in the already impressive person of Uma Thurman: the director permits her to ogle Robin coolly from galleries and windows. Her possession of the sexualized gaze transmutes into her own plan to impersonate a boy to join the band and to escape her unwanted suitor, Sir Myles de Falconet, played in highly inappropriate Prussian style by Jürgen Prochnow. Intriguingly—and alarmingly—this strong Marian seems to dredge up from the scriptwriter's unconscious the motif of female sorcery as Marian is impersonated to trap Robin.

This false Marian is played by the sheriff's mistress, as if her sexual nature itself makes her untrustworthy, and she calls to Robin in enticingly witch-like tones. The real Marian, as a boy, breaks the spell; this leads to an exciting chase when he/she and Robin escape. That might sound as if the unsexualized woman saves the hero from the dangers of sexualized femininity, but there is a twist: in triumph at their escape the "boy" kisses Robin—to his instant pleasure and nearly instant dismay. The scene at once supports and sophisticates the sexism that underlies the "false Marian" sequence: the dangerous kiss offers both homoerotic feeling and heterosexual release, just as in the traditional "between men" triangle.

This is as intricate as the film gets, moving toward contemporary notions of complex sexuality via the forceful heroine. It also includes apparent references to the politics of 1980s Britain, no doubt inserted by John McGrath, the radical Scottish playwright who reworked the American script, as well as a strong realism of setting and a concentrated vigor between Robin and Marian. But the film loses pace after the "false Marian" episode, and the conclusion, in which the outlaws seize the castle by impersonating carnival revelers, confirms the sense that the most significant thing about Robin is the twinkle in his eye and his boyish charm. In Flynn and the more mature Costner, by contrast, those qualities are used to combine credibly international liberalism with excitingly perilous fighting.

Not only the power of a star and massive funding made *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* the more successful and influential of the 1991 films. Though the Bergin film has, especially in its leading actors, the potential to renew the vigor of the myth, that possibility is never adequately developed. Liberal abroad and at home, maturely engaging and managerially skilled, Costner's Robin Hood resonates with the



1980s sense of frustration at the impact of right-wing governments in the West and established another major piece of filmmaking in the grand Hollywood tradition, both politically contemporary in significant ways and basically faithful to the persona and deeds of the hero's traditional biography.

### Alternative Screen Robins

While Hollywood was updating the hero in serious fashion, other visual versions were less respectful to the tradition—and in several ways responded with ironic directness to those new canonical forms. Whereas the 1960s mood had been for added realism, later dissent took ironic forms. *The Zany Adventures of Robin Hood* of 1984 was made by the people who had parodic success with vampires in *Love at First Bite*. George Segal plays an indecisive Robin with baggy tights, Morgan Fairchild gives an inspired reading of a Marian not at all happy to be a maid, and Janet Suzman plays Eleanor of Aquitaine, mother to Kings Richard and John, with controlled ironic comedy. Essentially the film mocks the pomposity of major versions, with moments combining farce with postmodern transgression, as when Robin rescues Marian from a castle with the welcome and efficient help of Israeli commandos.

Farce can have a slightly sharper critical edge and an even less imposing Robin, as in *Maid Marian and Her Merry Men*, a short series made for BBC television in 1988. The series in part parodied the romantic masculinity of *Robin of Sherwood*, and in part was simply British pantomime. Shown at children's viewing time, this cartoonlike feminist reversal of the traditional pattern was written by Tony Robinson, of *Blackadder* fame, who also chose what has become the plum part of the sheriff, and may have influenced Rickman toward burlesque villainy. Marian, a sensible, sleeves-rolled-up, provincial English lass, confronts the demented sheriff and to protect herself takes hostage the tailor who is designing Prince John's new (very large) underpants; any risk to these is unthinkable and she escapes to the forest. The tailor is one Robin of Kensington, a cowardly enthusiast for royalty and the enterprise economy; he is played by Wayne Morris, an actor whose



FIG. 15. Marian's merry band, from "Robert the Incredible Chicken" in the BBC series comic book *Maid Marian and Her Merry Men*, 1988, by Tony Robinson. By permission of Tony Robinson and Paul Cemmick.

long dark hair, deep dark eyes, and exaggerated profile were a deliberately chosen hyperbole of Michael Praed's good looks. So the band is established, and expands comically, to include an aggressive dwarf called Little Ron and Barrington, a marijuana-drenched London Rastafarian; it is conceivable that this wry city black might have influenced the concept and casting of Freeman in the Costner film.

Naively comic in the English "carry on" tradition, with a pair of London louts as Norman soldiers, this series both carnivalizes the contemporary claims of *Robin of Sherwood* and made a feminist statement that was essentially muffled by the farcical nature of the show; it went readily into cartoon form, rich in complication but well short of any complexity (figure 15). Yet the series and its structure did show that as soon as feminism had a voice in the tradition, the role of Robin was radically changed: this first cowardly Robin Hood falls into a stream through fear of the ferocious bridge defender (Little Ron), not through his manly sporting spirit. And when this motley band of outlaws goes to the archery contest, Robin is disguised not as a bold tinker, like Flynn, or a stalwart peasant, like Costner, but as a large chicken—and it is Marian who wins the contest. While some might find this degrading to the timeless hero, these are the first signs



of a major change of position in the whole myth, and the beginning of a decidedly new stage in Robin's mythic biography. This stage will be developed more strongly as writers of feminist fiction consider what they might contribute to the outlaw tradition.

Gender is also the starting point of dissent for *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*, directed by Mel Brooks and released in 1993. Responding directly and often in detail to *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, this is in the Brooks tradition of mocking an identifiable genre—as in his groundbreaking *Blazing Saddles*—and develops an idea that the young Brooks had written for Sid Caesar's parodic series *When Things Were Rotten* on 1970s television. It is a complete story: Robin rescues Marian from the sheriff of Nottingham (Roger Rees valiantly trying to parody Rickman's self-parody), is rescued himself from the gallows by the arrival of King Richard (Patrick Stewart as a cut-price Sean Connery), and finally marries Marian by the doubtful authority of Rabbi Tuckman (Mel Brooks playing himself). Throughout, Robin has the support of his outlaws, but this is of limited use as they are primarily a male chorus dressed for the centerpiece song and dance, "We're Men, Men in Tights." This foregrounds the homosocial, even homosexual, elements that have long lurked in the tradition, but the film is more cautious than its title might suggest. None of the outlaws is permitted to be actually gay; even Little John, though thoroughly cowed by Maid Marian's huge Germanic servant, accepts a heterosexual, if subservient, role with her.

This is not the only ultimately traditional feature of the film. Although it is full of parody and nonsense—Cary Elwes says, "I am the only Robin Hood who can speak with an English accent," and a tiresome running gag involves the blind outlaw Blinkin—it makes repeated reference to other Robin Hood films.<sup>14</sup> In a roundabout and ironized way, the film subscribes to the hero's standing, including his masculinity: only he will unlock Marian's chastity belt, with however much difficulty. Within the farcical structure of this film the core image remains of the dashing masculine, improbably theatrical hero who has intrigued audiences for six centuries; though small and often baffled, Cary Elwes is a perfectly formed Robin Hood who never quite loses his dignity.

This is not so clearly the case in *The New Adventures of Robin*

*Hood*, a television series made by a Franco-American consortium in Lithuania and released by Warner Brothers, "who," says Jeffrey Richards, "should really have known better."<sup>15</sup> Shown around the world in 1997–99, and drawing on the success of the television series *Xena: Warrior Princess* in combining antique fantasy with kung-fu style action, this promoted to hero standing in its first season Matthew Porretta, the actor who had played Will Scarlet O'Hara in *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*. His version of Robin is closer to soft-porn film than to outdoor adventure, with luxuriant mustache and tight clothing, and he has a leather-bikini-clad, stockily handsome Marian to reflect inactively the impact of Xena in living rooms around the world. The second season had a more mainstream Robin in John Bradley, whom Richards describes as "a muscle-bound WASP hunk."<sup>16</sup> Magic transformations and highly improbable fights with melodramatic villains made this an exotic mix combining the tones of modern fantasy fiction and nineteenth-century pantomime, even though it was filmed in Lithuania, presumably for financial reasons. But the personalized politics of Western modernity also appeared: in one second-season episode the outlaws are caught in a castle of their own fears, and only with Robin's stalwart aid against the oppression of negative thoughts (the internalized sheriffs of modern psychobabble) do they learn to believe in themselves enough to triumph over their own anxieties. The series pushed the hero close to bathos, and if his authority survived at all it may have had more to do with the long tradition of the outlaw myth than with the nature of this cheaply and often clumsily made series. And yet here too the hero's authority was remade, if in a banal way.

Even here and even in Brooks's hands, the myth survives. Whatever happens to Robin Hood in film, whether he is an acrobat, a slightly overweight officer type, a fox, a frog, a stylish coward, even the leader of a Californian burlesque troupe, Robin Hood still retains a certain heroic standing. Just as Robin Hood has given vigor to the cinema, so cinema has given him a face, a physique, action, drama, and extended politics both domestic and international. Essentially, Hollywood and its relatives in the visual fiction business have made Robin Hood a figure of international standing, yet his many changes and developments, even his vicissitudes at the hands of some film-



makers, have not radically changed the shape of the original hero. He remains noble but welcoming to all comers, physically powerful but never oppressive, serious but always to some degree smiling, sexually attractive but never fully or finally partnered with either gender, and, most important, in all but one case still alive.

### *Robin Hood in Fiction*

#### A Schoolchild's Hero

Nineteenth-century fiction, whether adult or juvenile, developed and amplified a fairly consistent figure of Robin Hood—active, gentlemanly, English and rural, settled deep in the forest among his male friends, only remotely connected with the politics of his time. In the twentieth century wider variations molded the hero's career in fiction, shaping him first as a fatherly figure for children, then as a more historical hero involved in more or less credible political and military maneuvers, and most recently as a figure seen from the double viewpoint of female authors and of a substantially strengthened Marian.

To study the range of Robin Hood's identity in the early part of the twentieth century is to be immediately struck by the extraordinary amount published for children in the first three decades. To some extent this is because the market for all children's literature expanded massively during this period as children's literacy and education became major social concerns. Stories about a boyish and English Robin Hood were felt to be appropriate reading for the young; the healthy activities of Robin and his friends, politically neutered as he largely was by his gentrification, were a model for young English boys and also, no doubt, girls. And if the coded phallic symbolism and the overt homosociality of the stories entertained the young readers in darker directions, that was hardly something that teachers were likely to be conscious of or blamed for in those days before depth readings of texts.

The Robin Hood materials had another appeal, descending persuasively from Scott's potent concept of Robin Hood as English; the world the stories enshrined was that of an ideal England,

unmodernized, nonurban, naively charming, ethically simple, free of the entanglements of modern civilization and contemporary moral complexity. It is hardly surprising that this pastoral Robin was popular in England, where antique forests and villages could still be visited, and where the booming motor and petroleum industries gave strong support to internal tourism (Shell led the way with its maps and handbooks). But the emergence of the same phenomenon in America, or at least the Eastern states, was less predictable. The English material was rapidly republished in America, and a good deal of local work was produced as well. Pyle's *Merry Adventures* became a significant forerunner to the patriotic pastoral Robin, and the great libraries of the United States are filled with plays, stories, and poetry anthologies of the same kind. The young Stephen Vincent Benét ventured a classically Georgian poem on the hero with the refrain:

There's many a forest in the world,  
In many lands leaves fall;  
But Sherwood, merry Sherwood,  
Is the fairest wood of all.<sup>17</sup>

The widest influence derived from the frequent reprinting of story collections, updatings of Pyle. Henry Gilbert's *Robin Hood and His Merry Men* of 1912 was an early and widely read version. It suggests liberal politics: the preface starts by saying, "Once upon a time the great mass of English people were unfree."<sup>18</sup> Gilbert's retelling combines a fairy-tale simplicity with an insistent sense of need for reform politics, and his hero has some of the strength of Hardy's Gabriel Oak added to Georgian pastoral:

His head of dark brown curls was covered by a velvet cap, at the side of which was stuck a short feather, pulled from the wing of a plover. His face, bronzed to a ruddy tan by wind and weather, was open and frank, his eye shone like a wild bird's, and was as fearless and noble. Great of limb was he, and seemingly of a strength beyond his age, which was about twenty five years. In one hand he carried a long-bow, while the other rested on the smooth bole of the beech before him. (12)

This young-old Robin is a yeoman with his own sizable farm, but he loves beyond his class: Marian is an earl's daughter. Robin becomes



tive statement of how a woman can play a role in history. But the sequel does not match the first novel's imaginative feminist rewriting of the tradition.

From Saxon revolutionary and warlord, through fatherly forester and rustic reformer, to strong woman's plaything and health professional's part-time assistant, Robin has come a long way in the fiction of the twentieth century. The extremes are a good deal greater than those to be found in visual form, as the special audiences of fiction can have sharper interests than the blurred-focus mass audience required for success on screens large and small. The preparation is not complete, however: in the world of fiction found their way to the world of Disney," with Robin Hood, daughter of Robin Hood informs us, her "dazzling" mission" to rescue her father, the John—who is seized and I unknown to history.

Attractions they looking like a B... the out-laws to r... distant fa-ther—a v... and is fi-nally uni... of outlaw feminism, Hood (in-cluding in... of *Thieves* indicates how... focused narrative has moved into the mainstream.

All of the twentieth-century outlaw fiction writers have imported to their view of Robin Hood some valued interest, from Marxism through chauvinism of both kinds to magic, good sex, and various forms of female power. Most of the texts make at least a respectable attempt to historicize the hero with factual material, and all of them have to varying degrees consciously redeveloped the myth and its fictional imaginings. But the period also included other voices. Just as the brutal social bandit and the effete distressed gentleman coexisted in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, so in the twentieth century Robin, both cinema star and novelist's hero, stood sensitive

cheek by sturdy jowl with a figure weighed down with facts, history, location, and his own elements of wishful thinking and values—the real Robin Hood of historicism.

## History and Myth

### Outlaw Identifications

Any formal talk, media interview, or even conversation about Robin Hood will generate the inevitable question "Did he really exist?" The question itself deserves interrogation. It is a modern one: Wynthoun and Bower, like other medieval writers, felt that entities existed if they were talked about and believed in, and for them Robin Hood, like King Arthur, Herne the Hunter, the devil, the saints, and even God himself all existed because of their manifold presence in human life and culture. That is not good enough for modern materialist people who seek empirical identity for all things, and so by implication for themselves. Reductive as this approach might seem to literary scholars, and vulnerable to parody as it can be—as in the U.S. *Sun* (see p. xii)—this intoxicatingly "real" Robin Hood remains a potent part of the hero's biography. Highly respectable historians as well as enthusiastic amateurs are enticed into this quest for a satisfying material identity at the core of the otherwise elusive and illusory myth.

Joseph Hunter's method of searching the apparent dross of the archives and finding a fourteenth-century Robin Hood (see p. 145) has been followed by some twentieth-century scholars, not with quite the striking results that he published but with a few specks of possible gold. In 1936 L. D. V. Owen published a report<sup>40</sup> of his discovery in the York assizes record for 1226 of a person called Robert Hood whose goods had been confiscated because he was a fugitive; that is, he had been declared an outlaw for nonappearance at court in answer to a summons in the previous year. The fact that St. Peter's church in York brought the case also seemed to fit with the early ballads. Either more puzzling or more supportive, depending on your point of view, was the fact that in the margin the name "Hobbehod" was written.



Some have thought that this is a variant outlaw name, to be associated with the recurring figure “Hobbe the Robber,” mentioned in *Piers Plowman* as well as the contemporary “John Ball Letters” of the 1381 Peasants’ Revolt.<sup>41</sup> Owen contends that this figure from 1225–26 is the actual person on whom the tradition became based. Such an argument is based on the location of York and the outlawing of this person—no more. There were in fact other people about with the same name: if historical priority is to be a guide, there might be a case for the Robert Hood who worked for the Abbot of Cirencester and killed a man called Ralph there between 1213 and 1216. Perhaps that is too far west (and in play-game, not ballad territory), and Robin the social bandit certainly did not work for the church—but this candidate is only a little less likely than Owen’s man.

Support for Owen’s case has come from two sources. David Crook, like Hunter a professional archivist, revealed in 1984 that he had found in the legal archives of Reading (a play-game town) two records on the seizure of property of a fugitive from justice, William, son of Robert Le Fevre (or in English, Bill Smith).<sup>42</sup> In 1261 he was simply mentioned under his own name; but when the justices looked again at the case a year later, his name was given as William Robehod. This change was the work of a clerk, and Crook interprets his action:

The fact that the fugitive’s father was named Robert, or Robin, must have suggested the alteration to him. The version of his name originally written down lacked the element “hood”, which was brought in when the name was changed. It is most unlikely that the person who changed it knew anything of the individual concerned and whether “hood” ever formed any part of any form of his name; he must have been drawing on whatever he had heard of Robin Hood. (259–60)

On this basis, Crook argues that the tradition of the hero already existed, and so Hunter’s early fourteenth-century man could not have been the real Robin Hood. In further support of that view he cites J. C. Holt’s extensive arguments for a thirteenth-century Robin Hood, based in part on the striking discovery of the name Gilbert Robynhood in Sussex in 1296.<sup>43</sup> To use the full name as a surname suggested to Holt that this man was identified with the hero—either for being

a bandit or for singing outlaw stories. Neither Crook nor Holt considers the more likely possibility that Gilbert derived his name from playing Robin’s part in a local play-game.

But Holt also argues for the thirteenth century as being the appropriate context because of the habits, institutions, and even equipment that are found in the *Gest* and other early ballads. In particular he asserts that the strong hostility to the sheriff, the idea of widespread and oppressive forest law, and the emphasis on archery all belong to the thirteenth rather than the fourteenth century, and he is skeptical about Hunter’s identification:

The one hard fact in it was that the king’s journey described in the *Gest* matched Edward’s progress of 1323. The rest was a hypothetical reconstruction. And it can be proved wrong. (47)

Holt points out that Hunter’s Robin Hood was only a royal servant, not an outlaw, and that there is only supposition in Hunter’s linking of this man with the Wakefield Hood family. Basically, Holt is saying that Robert or Robin Hood was not a very rare name, that finding the original outlaw requires evidence of crime, and so Owen’s man from 1226 remains “the only possible original of Robin Hood, so far discovered” (54).

Holt naturally welcomed Crook’s support for the 1226 York man, stating in a later essay, “The discovery of this evidence by David Crook in 1984 was decisive.”<sup>44</sup> The word “decisive” seems a little strong for the elaborate interpretation of one name in one document, and Holt went on to move this alleged fact into the realms of speculation: “This gives some credence to John Major’s date. It is further supported by the appearance of Robert Hood, fugitive, who failed to appear before the justices at the York assizes in 1225” (28).

History here has become remarkably stretched. The 1262 “Robehod” reference can indeed, as Crook argues, support the idea that York in 1226 saw a real Robin Hood. But how can a real Robert Hood who becomes an outlaw in 1226 also be the noble robber of Major in the 1190s? He has to be outlawed twice, the second time in advanced years. Holt is casting about for fragments to shore up the thirteenth-century outlaw argument, and as it does so often empiricist history merges into wish-fulfilling myth. Adding a note of sheer



improbability, Holt comments that Thomas Gale, Dean of York, “left among his papers a note of an epitaph which recorded that Robin died ‘24 Kalends December 1247.’” As has been suggested (p. 85), this is a nonsensical Latin date and apparently a joking reference to Christmas Day. Nevertheless, Holt offers 1247 as the death date of this now entirely imaginary Robin, though he does admit that this is “a somewhat tendentious reconstruction, and a shadowy biography” (28). The myth of historicist biography can hardly go further: there is an urgently felt need for a figure, and a gathering of scattered, unrelated details to suggest his existence. It is in fact extremely improbable that if there had been a developed myth of Robin Hood in the thirteenth century there would have been no references to it other than the 1262 one, itself of dubious weight. Historiographically speaking, the “real Robin Hood” historians have made life difficult for themselves by assuming that the outlaw of the ballads must be the original figure. It is far more likely that this social bandit is a special creation of a specific context, the towns of the Midlands and North, and that the play-game figure is the original Robin Hood, real only in the sense that he is the focus of a real myth.

Another experienced historian has challenged Holt’s argument about the thirteenth-century context on historical grounds. J. R. Maddicott, in a lengthy essay called “The Birth and Setting of the Ballads of Robin Hood” (1978), starts by noting the late medieval shape of much of the context of the ballad (which Holt concedes early in his essay).<sup>45</sup> Then Maddicott insists that arguments about an underlying thirteenth-century structure are historically wrong: he cites evidence concerning Holt’s allegedly thirteenth-century knights, sheriffs, and forests and asserts that they are in fact all represented in fourteenth-century forms. He concludes that “There is, then, nothing in the *Gest* or the other early ballads which would place them at all certainly in the thirteenth century.”<sup>46</sup> Maddicott’s essay is so far a professional historical discussion, bringing counterevidence to dispute Holt’s claim, and it appears to have the better of the debate. But we are only on page four, with eighteen to go. What we discover is that Maddicott’s purpose was not to speak about the fourteenth-century political or social meaning of Robin Hood, but to focus in a new way on Holt’s own dream of a biography for a real person. In the

rest of the long essay Maddicott discusses in close detail people who, he feels, might have become characters in the outlaw tradition. Empiricism runs rampant through contenders for sheriff, abbot, prioress, and a number of real outlaws—but no mention of Robin Hood. Although Maddicott’s rebuttal of Holt’s thirteenth-century basis would appear to reestablish Hunter’s man of the early 1320s, Maddicott shows no interest in that figure. To his own satisfaction he places the birth of the tradition in the 1330s, but, as he finally admits, “the central figure is still missing” (254). He prefers to imagine Robin as being “a blend of fact and fiction” (254), based on one of the several outlaws he has been discussing. It is quite true that Hunter’s man gave no sign of criminality, but he did have the right name, he did exist within Maddicott’s period, and he did have dealings with King Edward in the right part of the country: a rigorous historicism should surely discuss him. But Maddicott is more independent, more original, more mythic than that. The individual who is in fact constructed in historicist empiricism appears to be not Robin Hood but the wished-for identity of the historian himself.

Yet the tradition of Hunter has not been entirely overlooked or rejected. In 1952 J. W. Walker, a medical man and prolific amateur historian from Wakefield in Yorkshire, published *The True History of Robin Hood*; this has a title much like that of a chapbook, and like many of them is a gathering together of disparate materials. Walker uses real or invented ballad titles for his chapters; thus Hunter’s material on Robin as a Contrariant supporting Thomas, Earl of Lancaster, against Edward II is entitled “How and When Robin Became an Outlaw.”<sup>47</sup> Other chapters use ballad titles and retell their stories, with ample quotations. The format, titles, and general tone of Walker’s booklet neatly indicate how “true history” is part of a mythic structure, a feature that is effectively concealed—or perhaps subtly emphasized—in the cool prose of a Hunter or a Holt, but which is essentially understandable as a quest for human identity that both realizes and ratifies the identity of the writer who traces it.

A less elaborate version of post-Hunter scholarship has been produced by Percy Valentine Harris. His booklets have appeared in many editions, but they all purport to tell *The Truth about Robin Hood*, a truth appealing to Yorkshire, not Nottingham, accepting Hunter’s



identification of Robin as a Wakefield man. Harris's booklets also go further into empirical identifications, finding Roger of Doncaster who lived near Kirklees and a dubious nun called Alice le Raggede at Kirklees in 1315.<sup>48</sup> Hunter's tradition has been re-enshrined finally in the techniques of modern scholarship by John Bellamy, whose book *Robin Hood: An Historical Inquiry* follows a trajectory very similar to Maddicott's but places Hunter's man at its center. The book is particularly useful for its survey of all the discussions about the "real Robin Hood," but the narrative then vanishes into the heavy undergrowth of archival identifications, with more than a hint of the *Sun's* fetishization of fact.<sup>49</sup>

But at least Hunter and Bellamy deal in terms of identities with evidence, a myth technically based on empiricism. In *Robin Hood—The Man behind the Myth*<sup>50</sup> Graham Phillips and Martin Keatman start by accepting Hunter's Wakefield connection but lurch off into the Bermuda Triangle style of suppositional argument by linking that Robert Hood with the Knights Templar, largely through the alleged cross on his alleged tomb, supported by his habit of wearing red (for which the evidence is both thin and late). In seeking an alternative real Robin, they are tempted by the Fitz Odo family, who owned the Warwickshire village of Loxley. They then touch another note of popular excitement in suggesting that there was an even earlier Robin Hood, whom they call "The Third Man." Deeply improbable as this argument is, it is less extreme in supposition than Phillips's opinion in *The Search for the Grail* that Robin was identical to Fulk Fitz Warren and that Marian was originally nothing less than the chalice of the Holy Grail in Fulk's possession.<sup>51</sup> At this stage of fantastic elaboration, historicism gazes at its own mythic creation in its own mirror.

### Outlaw Politics

There is, however, more to history than historicism. Several historians, more interested in social forces than in identification of a displaced self via archives, have tried to establish what were the original politics of the figure of Robin Hood in the ballads, and what kind of audience would have been centrally interested in him and his

resistant values. This approach was rejected by F. J. Child, who insisted that Robin Hood "has no sort of political character,"<sup>52</sup> though a number of writers, from the nineteenth century back to Bower in about 1440, had associated Robin with various public manifestations of resistance. Those writers had done so, however, without calibrating that resistance against any scholarly sense of the actual dates and nature of the ballads' production.

The first person to put politics and the history of the texts together was Rodney Hilton, a distinguished analyst of medieval labor. In his essay "The Origins of Robin Hood," published in 1958 in the British historical journal *Past and Present*, he states that Robin Hood's "historical significance does not depend on whether he was a real person or not" and he reviews and effectively dismisses "the recurring effort to manufacture an authentic, documented individual called Robin Hood."<sup>53</sup> Through the references and events of the early texts Hilton seeks contact with medieval political events. He interprets "yeoman" as a form of servitor, not necessarily a serf, sees the sheriff as an agent of government and the abbot as a representative of landlords, and attributes a thirteenth- or fourteenth-century origin to the ballads. He then relates all of these elements to the "agrarian discontent" that "was endemic through the country" (207). He sees the 1381 Rising as the focal point of this discontent and relates the texts to that movement's forceful spirit of resistance to authority, within respect for the king.

This revolutionary Robin Hood has occasionally been seen in the twentieth century as in Trease's *Bows against the Barons*, Jack Lindsay's unpublished *Robin of England*, performed by Unity Theatre in London in 1946, and Sir Michael Tippett's ballad opera *Robin Hood* of 1933, but Hilton's intervention was a drastic remodeling of the hero among scholars, and it met resistance. Maurice Keen, another left historian, agreed with Hilton in 1961,<sup>54</sup> but in a 1962 essay published in *Past and Present* J. C. Holt disagreed completely.<sup>55</sup> Holt's essay made a number of telling points, many of them through the careful attention to the texts that has always been a feature of Holt's work on the outlaw. He pointed out that agrarian issues in fact play no part in the story of any of the early ballads; there are no laborers among the outlaws, and the only dispute over land is caused by the knight's son killing a man. Holt showed that the early ballads made no reference



to robbing the rich to give to the poor, a point missed by many (including E. P. Hobsbawm in his influential book *Bandits*).<sup>56</sup> He also noted that the 1381 Rising was largely confined to the South, while the ballads are set in the North.

Holt also challenged Hilton over the meaning of the word “yeoman”: he asserted that it can also refer to the lower levels of the landowning class. Centrally, he argued that the ballads have a higher social level of audience than Hilton identified. Holt saw their themes as expressing the discontent of modest landowners and those who aspired to those levels, all of them identifying in the outlaw story their own sense of a need for resistance to royal law and to clerical oppression.

The strength of Holt’s argument is that it deals with the texts and understands that an audience’s interests in a text may depend on a crucial difference between audience and text. However, this view takes no account of the role of town and forest in the texts and does not explain why the ballads remained so popular with urban audiences through the seventeenth century. It therefore seems unnecessary for Maurice Keen to have recanted his pro-Hilton position in order to espouse Holt’s views.<sup>57</sup>

A more nuanced response to both the limits of Hilton’s account and to Holt’s range of arguments was offered in 1985 by Peter Coss, a sociocultural historian. Coss has a strong sense of the multifarious nature of texts in the period, both their availability at many levels and the variety of responses to them. He feels “The *Gest of Robyn Hood* carries within it the social crisis of late fourteenth-century England though not perhaps in quite the way Hilton once envisaged.”<sup>58</sup> He sees the *Gest* as responding to a world of social dissolution and opportunistic oppression, as envisaging in the forest a better world:

a secular commonwealth of the free bereft of (corrupt) administrators and of the religious, where there is free access to the beasts of the forest and the “foules of the ryvere”, where status distinctions are considerably reduced and where the king is dutifully and courteously acknowledged as lord—but not to the extent of compromising one’s freedom. (340)

It is a view derived from the issues and symbols of the text, and one that seems valid for a good deal of the Robin Hood narratives, including the films of the twentieth century.

Coss’s general reading of the symbolism of Robin is parallel to a more specific but also basically “Utopian” reading of the texts, “The ‘Mystery’ of Robin Hood: A New Social Context for the Texts” by Richard Tardif (1983). Tardif sees the forest not as a distant romantic escape but as a nearby and available place of freedom, real and imagined. Through tracing contemporary movements in England and France, he argues that urban journeymen, skilled tradesmen who had no means to set up a business but had to hire themselves out as workers, were the prime audience of the texts; his title links the mastery of a trade to the puzzle of Robin Hood’s political-historical meaning and context, and he sums up:

It seems that there were two somewhat contradictory images of collective action available to the class of urban-serving-men seeking wealth and power—that of the fringe-dwelling gang, and that of the suppressed journeyman. . . . A gap has opened up between their actual lives and the dominant ideological forms in their society, which no longer accounted adequately for those lives. The array of associations that arise from the Robin Hood band and are constituted in the Robin Hood ballads form a network of paths traced across this gap.<sup>59</sup>

Like Hilton’s connection with 1381, Tardif’s localization of the point of origin of the ballads may be too precise to account for all the developing features and all the popularity of the ballads; Henry VIII was imitating Robin within a few decades (see p. 46). But Tardif is the only commentator who has understood how literary genres develop—in a gap of collective self-consciousness that must be both ideologically and generically filled. He also is the only commentator who has given any account of the role that towns might have played specifically in the development of the ballad outlaw Robin Hood as different from the benign local hero of the play-games. Whereas some historians have produced some of the most limited and intellectually self-centered of the accounts of the hero’s biography, others have



generated searching accounts of just what Robin Hood might have stood for as the stories were created, and what he might still in various ways represent today.

### A Forest Spirit

The historians always thought there was either a real person or real politics at the foundation of the myth. But for many writers and commentators, Robin Hood was in no way so concrete an identity. The mythic Robin Hood—that is, a figure whose myth is actually mythic, not nationalist, or masculine, or historical, or political—has been a recurring and potent figure, especially in the twentieth century. In a true outlaw moment (see p. xiii), Sir Sidney Lee described him in the individualistic fortress of the *Dictionary of National Biography* as “a mythical forest elf.”<sup>60</sup> Lee’s view was repeated at some length in the very influential eleventh edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica* in 1910,<sup>61</sup> was central to the fairy context of several of the Georgians, notably Noyes and Drinkwater, and was buttressed by the assertions of folklorists such as Robert Graves (“the founder of the Robin Hood religion”)<sup>62</sup> and Margaret Murray (“the god of the Old Religion”).<sup>63</sup>

A less excitable mythic reading was given by Lord Raglan in his well-known book *The Hero*, which treats Robin as a version of “the Traditional hero.” Raglan identifies him as “Robin of the Wood,” a fertility figure, and feels that his stories, like those beneath some Celtic narratives, “are suggestive of an ancient system by which the king reigned from one May-day till the next, when he had to fight for his title, if not for his life, and in which the queen became the wife of the successful combatant.”<sup>64</sup> The reference to May Day is a weak point, however, and unless the appearance of Marian in a few of the play-games, as at Kingston in 1509, is a trace of a queen-marriage motif, it is noticeable that the restoration of the king (not of Robin) and the hero’s marriage tend to appear only in twentieth-century materials—not that such a leap across time would deter a determined mythicist.

From being a figure promulgated in canonical reference books

early in the twentieth century, the elf Robin seems to have largely disappeared for half a century in the face of the human patriotic hero of the films and fiction—though there are still playful, semi-magical elements to his tricks, disappearances and sudden amazing feats. But he resurfaces in *Robin of Sherwood*, via the mystical magic of the Herne sequences, and is firmly realized in John Matthews’s book *Robin Hood: Green Lord of the Wildwood* (1993) which confidently asserts:

Robin Hood and his followers are not only the bearers of a single part of the greenwood tradition—they are not the entirety of that tradition. Yet in their diversity and vitality they kept the belief in the Green Man and the Green Lady alive in the land. In the end May indeed triumphed . . . preserving sufficient of the old ways to keep them alive into the present time.<sup>65</sup>

In his final chapter, “In the Heart of the Forest,” indicating with an epigraph from Noyes’s verse-play “Robin Hood” his contact with the Georgian mythicists, Matthews sums up:

Robin is really a Springtime aspect of the Green Man—he who holds the land in thrall, breaks free of his more ancient, darker aspect, adopting the light guise of Green Jack. His marriage to Marian, Queen of the May, is a whole-hearted celebration of life and creation, of burgeoning sexuality, and of the creative urgency of nature itself. (164)

In these terms, only the gentrified narratives, which include the wedding of Robin and Marian, really fit the mythic interpretation, and they are not medieval, where Matthews locates the origin of this green outlaw. Few filmgoers or novel readers, let alone those who just understand a headline about Robin Hood or immediately identify the iconic bow and green hat, would take such a firmly mythic view of the hero’s identity. His general meaning, worldwide as well as domestic, has much more to do with resisting the sheriff. And yet it is not easy to see why a limited English tradition, located in particular places and a restricted set of activities, would have become first national and then worldwide in its appeal without deeper forces that can operate in terms of pure myth as well as politics. Lorraine Stock has recently summarized the material available and argued for a “Green



Man” element in the hero;<sup>66</sup> the topic deserves more attention and more systematic analysis than it has received.

A good start in this direction is a little-noticed essay by the folklorist Joseph Nagy, a reading of the figure in structural anthropological terms as “not so much a figure who exists outside society as one who exists *between* culture and nature, and several other opposed pairs of categories as well.”<sup>67</sup> Finding liminality in pairs such as town-forest, human-divine, man-woman, human-animal, stealer-giver, ruler-anarchist, and classed-cross class, Nagy concludes that:

The Robin Hood narrative tradition originated in medieval English society, but the values which these narratives communicated were relevant in the post-medieval world as well, and the liminal context in which they were expressed continued to exert fascination. (425)

Reading myth in Levi-Straussian terms as a set of ways in which people interpret their world, and so can cope with it, Nagy’s account of the mystic tone of Robin Hood is both less exotic and less improbable than that of the hard-core Green Man theorists, and is also a good deal more flexible. In the absence of any purposive or fully developed Freudian, Marxist, or gender-based interpretations (all of which might be possible, but have so far made only fragmentary appearances),<sup>68</sup> only Nagy—and the other mythicists, if they can be believed—have offered the kind of deep explanation of the power of the tradition that might explain at least some of the appeal of the forest hero in so many contexts and cultures.

### How Many Robin Hoods?

Killer and gentleman, myth and everyday hero, village symbol and international liberal, joker and rebel, nature lover and fierce hunter, boyish charmer and father figure to children, man among men and helper to strong women—Robin Hood’s identity seems to undergo endless variations in verbal and visual texts. And yet there are other Robin Hoods, figures stranger and yet more intimate than those which are, so far, recorded.

Danny Spooner, an English folksinger living in Australia, liked to preface his performance of “The Death of Robin Hood” with a story, told in sad, serious tones.

Robin Hood was dying, in Kirklees Abbey. The Prioress it was, his own cousin, who had betrayed him. Little John held him in his arms.

“John,” Robin whispered, “John, bring me my bow, and wherever the arrow lands, bury me there.”

John brought the bow and Robin, growing weak now, drew back the string as far as he could, pale fingers holding the arrow. He glanced in pain at John.

“Where the arrow lands . . . bury me.”

So they buried him on top of the wardrobe.

The irreverence somehow added to, rather than ruined, the plangent sadness of the ensuing song.

Another piece of Robin Hood apocrypha is a “Test Your Character” story that was going around offices worldwide in the 1980s, before e-mail and the Internet existed. In photocopied form it has surfaced in several places. First you read a story:

Robin was captured by the Sheriff, who decided to hang him in the morning. Marian went to the Sheriff and begged for Robin’s life. The Sheriff said he would free Robin if she would sleep with him.

She agreed, and did so, and the Sheriff freed Robin. Next morning, as they were riding away from the castle Robin asked Marian how she saved his life, and she told him. He was appalled and abandoned her in disgust. Little John rode up beside Marian; he said he had always loved her and asked if she would be willing to become his partner.

She agreed, and they rode off together.

After reading the story, your task is to list the four characters in the order in which you value their behavior, best first. You then can turn to the responses that identify your character. Discussing the matter is liable to cause chaos at dinner parties, especially between couples.

That puzzle shows clear signs of feminist relativism, but male chauvinism still exists in the myth. Though Robin Hood never came



to Wales (the national bandit is the sixteenth-century anti-Tudor trickster Twm Sion Cati of Tregaron—Tom Jones, son of Katie), Welsh culture includes something that sounds much like play-game activity. In Barry, a moderately tough South Wales port, an annual carnival takes place in early summer. Robin Hood and his men appear, like Morris Dancers. They caper through the streets, and occasionally their leader blows a horn. When this occurs, the men all gather around an attractive woman, shouting and jumping. Then the horn is blown again, and the men dance away; the leader brandishes a set of lacy lingerie.

Heroism burlesqued, gender-prejudice explored, gang-rape celebrated as carnival—Robin Hood in the modern popular mouth is hardly a mild flavor. If a modern F. J. Child were to ransack the English-speaking countries—and very likely others as well—an encyclopedia of Robin Hood apocrypha would no doubt testify both to the extraordinary richness of the popular imagination and to the deep-laid perseverance of Robin Hood as a channel for many varied forces. These forces range from the beauty of nature to the violence of oppression and in the myth combine with many varied reflections on gender, race, politics, time, and even the supernatural.

Robin Hood's biography is mythic in that the multiform figure does not have physical identity—and it seems highly improbable, or at least unprovable, that a Mr. R. Hood ever existed. But his biography is also mythic in that it has the scope, variety, and dynamic continuity of a myth. Yet a study of the elements of the myth indicates that this is not itself natural; there is no cosmic law that there must be a Robin Hood. What has happened is that elements of the myth have interested creative minds in different periods in different ways, and each has driven the myth in a new direction—essentially, driven it onward, given it new vigor.

When somebody—associated with guilds, perhaps—turned the antiauthority pranks of the festive village fertility figure into the basis for a town-forest myth against oppression, and the Robin Hood ballads were born, a major step was taken: the outlaw moved from fugitive organic experience into recoverable culture. Without those narratives that can live on paper and in the mouth, away from the performance of the village green, the myth would have died with other communal

medieval practices. And when Renaissance writers, from John Major on, gentrified that tradition, they gave it a new social level and glamour, which has made it more acceptable, from the stage to star-loving Hollywood. Finding backing for a Sir Robin film has been easier than obtaining funding for, say, one about Tom Paine. And again, if the Romantic writers had not meshed, through the medium of Ritson's crucial edition, the biography of a lord with the excitement of a bandit's deeds, the myth would never have extended to the present in so strong a form.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there can be little doubt that the international power of the outlaw myth is based not on the intriguing novels, comics, and school-play readers, but on the striking suitability of the Robin Hood story for the screen. And the more technically subtle the visuals become, the more potent the myth becomes. At the same time, however, the magic fighting of *The New Adventures of Robin Hood* may take the technical possibilities one step too far into burlesque, and the moral weight of the hero has generated sardonic responses in *Time Bandits* and *Shrek*.

Like all myths, that of Robin Hood survives both across time and through time; it is constantly remade and varied in ways that authors, directors, actors, and even readers and audiences feel—rather than think—is appropriate to their own contexts. The intensity of this attachment appears to vary over time, however. It is noticeable that there have been several periods of high activity in the Robin Hood tradition. The 1980s, the years between the two World Wars, and the 1820s—as well as perhaps the 1840s—were all periods of high Robin Hood activity. Drawing similar conclusions about earlier eras is more difficult, but evidence suggests another period of busy production in the 1660s and 1670s, as well as perhaps the 1590s, the early 1500s, and even, conceivably, the late fourteenth century.

What is notable about these periods of increased Robin Hood activity is that they are all times when government has been overtly and consciously repressive. It is easy to see how the Robin Hood stories of the 1980s, including the films of 1991, are aware of the political character of the Reagan-Thatcher years and respond to it with vigor. The Robin Hood myth has operated in times of political stress as a means of expression for people conscious of kinds of oppression,



including the postwar conservatism of the 1820s, the witch-hunting Restoration of 1660, even against the increasing paranoia of the late Elizabethan period and the growing repressive bureaucracy of the world of Henry VII. Thus, the “rhymes of Robin Hood” that Langland spoke of may be ultimately, if indirectly, related to the disturbances of the sociopolitically very troubled late fourteenth century. Hilton’s speculation about Robin Hood and 1381 was too specific and too unliterary to receive full assent. But to read the tradition over time makes it seem likely that Hilton, most of the literary commentators from Child to Ohlgren and among the historians Maddicott, Bellamy, and, essentially, Dobson and Taylor, are right to think that this symbol of resistance to oppression originated in a century both terrible and magnificent—when in social, economic and literary terms England and its culture began to separate from the legacy, and the shackles, of antiquity.

To study Robin Hood is to study over five hundred years of the development of modern concepts of heroism, art, politics, and the self. It is an exciting and enthralling domain of study, that can in itself become a guide to the changing patterns and dynamics of society and culture over that enormous period. Robin Hood is always there, lurking at the edge of court culture, slipping through the forests of Romanticism, jumping over the wall of bourgeois fiction, cartwheeling into the visual carnival of film and television.

Biographies like to find one feature—preferably a scandalous flaw—that provides the key to interpretation of the life of the subject. In the case of Robin Hood, concepts such as flexibility, multiplicity, dynamism, and endurance are all applicable but inadequate because they refer only to the technical structure of the myth. The key feature in the biography of Robin Hood is in its own way scandalous, because it insists on confrontation, if sometimes of a muffled kind, with the conservative forces of any period, political or financial, and is a feature that is usually revealed only in fugitive glimpses.

Robin Hood always represents resistance to authority; he is always a threat to somebody who has power. That may be powerfully euphemized, as when he resists only a bad king or when he is very much a self-helping gentleman, kind to the poor and to women, but also representing unchanging social order, as in Thomas Love Peacock

or as played by Errol Flynn. Robin may be more overtly a threat to existing social order, as in the social bandit ballads in which killing the sheriff seems the right way to proceed (shades of 1381 there) or in *Robin of Sherwood*, in which working-class organization against an oppressive state seems the key feature—and, not surprisingly in 1984, the year of the defeated British miners’ strike, needed some magic to make a success of it.

But Robin is no more than a focus of a dream of resistance; he is not the figure on the banners of revolution. The myth contains no plans for genuine redistribution, no new electoral system, no models of political organization that might actually work better. The Robin Hood myth does not surface in E. P. Thompson’s exhaustive study on *The Making of the English Working Class* because that was a different kind of struggle: that was class war, fought out in discussions, planning, in hand-to-hand conflict with hegemonic law, not the simpler morale-boosting escapades that the Robin Hood tradition can provide. When the myth goes through periods of dynamic activity, it may indeed operate as a safety valve, as the reflex of genuine political resistance to oppression.

But that is not to say that the concept of resistance, however euphemized and carnivalized in ballads and plays, fiction and films, is not important both to people’s concepts of freedom, and to the volatile history in which they live and which they remake. The concept of outlaw resistance has utopian exchange value, however it may be contained or even reversed in particular contexts. And one of the most striking—and perhaps even encouraging—aspects of the Robin Hood myth is that it is in fact increasingly worldwide; the figure has provided an internationally comprehended figure who stands for resistance to wrongful authority whether he is Ravi in India or Robin des Bois in France. As commerce and industrial production is international, so Robin Hood is a figure who can, on a worldwide basis, imply resistance or at least restraint to any forces that are inclined to operate like sheriffs on behalf of the monarchic power of international capitalism.

When Langland first mentions Robin Hood, he is an example of what a slothful person is interested in instead of his proper priestly duties. But neither in person nor as a myth could Robin Hood be accused of sloth. He combines vigor, movement, and youthfulness with



his key feature of resistance to wrongful authority; and though there is certainly more to reform, restitution, and redistribution than running and jumping and looking good in tight clothing, the idea that such energies should be committed to some form of resistance is at once the central idea, the basis for endurance, and the strongest value of Robin Hood's mythic biography.



54. G. P. R. James, *Forest Days: A Romance of Old Times*, 3 vols. (London: Saunders and Otley, 1843).

55. "G. F.," review of *Robin Hood and Little John*, by Pierce Egan, *London and Westminster Quarterly* 33 (1840): 425–91.

56. Ritson did know the fragment of this ballad held in the British Library; he transcribes it in his introduction, 1:lxvii–viii, and comments that it appears to be part of an outlaw story earlier than the *Gest*, but it was too fragmentary to reprint. The ballad was first printed by Robert Jamieson in *Popular Ballads and Songs*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Constable, 1806), 2:54–72, and then, a little less inaccurately transcribed, in C. H. Hartshorne, ed., *Ancient Metrical Tales* (London: Pickering, 1829), 179–97. An accurate version, corrected by Sir Frederick Madden, was added at the end of the second edition of Ritson's collection (London: Pickering, 1832), appendix 8, 221–36. Only in J. M. Gutch's edition of 1847 (see note 58), who called it "A Tale of Robin Hood," did the ballad become widely known.

57. See F. J. Child, ed., *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 5 vols. (Boston: Barker, 1904; reprint, New York: Dover, 1965), 2:412–15; as Child notes, 2:412, Mrs. Brown of Falkland, the celebrated ballad-transmitter, appears to have adapted "Willie and Earl Richard's Daughter" to provide a ballad about Robin Hood's birth. Child suggests she was prompted by the presence of a character called "Brown Robin" in the related ballad "Rose the Red and White Lily" (2:415–24). Gutch published the latter ballad as being about Robin Hood.

58. Child, ed., *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 3:170; the ballad is reprinted in Knight and Ohlgren, ed., *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 628–32.

59. J. M. Gutch, ed., *A Lyttel Gest of Robin Hode, with Other Ancient & Modern Ballads and Songs Relating to this Celebrated Yeoman*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, 1847), 1:i.

60. Joseph Hunter, "The Great Hero of the Ancient Minstrelsy of England: Robin Hood, his period, real character etc., investigated," in *Critical and Historical Tracts*, vol. 4 (London: Smith, 1852), 28–38; see in particular 35–39.

61. Thomas Wright, "On the Popular Cycle of the Robin Hood Ballads," essay 17 in *Essays on the Literatures, Superstitions, and History of England in the Middle Ages*, 2 vols. (London: Smith, 1846), 2:164–211.

62. Stocqueler, *Memoirs of a Journalist*, 53; though the first book publication, this is an "enlarged, revised edition" because the memoirs first appeared in the newspaper and were elaborated in book form.

63. C. W. Brooks, C. L. Kearney, and Joachim Stocqueler, *Robin Hood and Richard Coeur de Lion in Plays* (London: Fairbrother, 1859).

64. F. R. Goodyer, *Once Upon a Time or A Midsummer Night's Dream in Merrie Sherwood. A Fairy Extravaganza* (Nottingham: Allen, 1868).

65. John Oxenford and G. A. MacFarren, *Robin Hood: An Opera* (London: Cramer, Beale and Chappel, 1860); *New and Original Grand Christmas Pantomime—Robin Hood* (Manchester: Theatre Royal Press, 1851).

66. See Marcus Smith and Julian Wasserman, "Travels with a Green Crayon," in *Robin Hood: Medieval and Post-Medieval*, ed. Helen Phillips (Cambridge: Brewer, forthcoming).

67. Henry Thoreau, "Walking," in *Excursions* (Boston: Tickner and Field, 1880), 164.

68. In chapter 8 of *Tom Sawyer* Tom leads an imitation of "Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne," and he plays a version of "The Death of Robin Hood."

69. Alexandre Dumas, *Robin Hood: Prince des Voleurs* (Paris: Levy, 1872), and *Robin Hood le Proscrit* (Paris: Levy, 1873).

#### IV. Robin Hood of Hollywood

1. Kevin Harty, *The Reel Middle Ages: American, Western and Eastern European, Middle Eastern, and Asian Films about Medieval Europe* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1999).

2. Thomas Hahn and Stephen Knight, " 'Exempt Me Sire, I Am Afeard of Women': Gendering Robin Hood," in *The Outlaw Tradition: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. Helen Phillips (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming).

3. As Kevin Brownlow notes in *The Parade's Gone By* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968), 290, this is from Charles Kingsley's "Old and New." The original text is in two long lines, not four short ones; see Charles Kingsley, *Poems*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1884), 2:99. The full text is:

See how the autumn leaves float by decaying,  
Down the wild swirls of the rain-swollen stream.  
So fleet the works of men, back to their earth again;  
Ancient and holy things fade like a dream.

Nay! see the spring-blossoms steal forth a-maying,  
Clothing with tender hues orchard and glen;  
So, though old forms pass by, ne'er shall their spirit die,  
Look! England's bare boughs show green leaf again.

I am indebted to Jeffrey Richards for the Brownlow reference.

4. See Brownlow, *Parade's Gone By*, 285, and Richard Schickel, *Douglas Fairbanks—The First Celebrity* (London: Elm Tree, 1976), 75.

5. Brownlow records that the film cost Fairbanks \$1.4 million dollars and took in \$2.5 million; see *Parade's Gone By*, 290.

6. Rudy Behlmer, "Robin Hood on the Screen: From Legend to Film," in *Robin Hood: Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism*, ed. Stephen Knight (Cambridge: Brewer, 1999), 441–60; see in particular 448.

7. Ina Rae Hark, "The Visual Politics of *The Adventures of Robin Hood*," *Journal of Popular Fiction* 5 (1976): 3–17; see in particular 6.

8. See Behlmer, "Robin Hood on the Screen," 456.



9. Lardner's comments on this at a public talk were reported in the *Melbourne Age* on March 22, 1991; see Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 235.

10. See Jeffrey Richards, "Robin Hood on Film and Television since 1945," *Visual Culture in Britain* 2 (2001): 65–80; see in particular 67.

11. Dudley Jones, "Reconstructing Robin Hood: Ideology, Popular Film, and Television," in *A Necessary Fantasy? The Heroic Figure in Children's Popular Culture*, ed. Dudley Jones and Tony Watkins (New York: Garland, 2000), 111–35; see in particular 125–28.

12. The song was used very little in the film, but clips from the film were used heavily in the song video. This suggests that the song gained from the film, rather than vice versa.

13. Kathleen Biddick, "The Return of Robin Hood," a section of the essay "English America: Worth Dying For?" in *The Shock of Medievalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 74–75.

14. For a discussion of this film's perhaps surprisingly full relation to the tradition, see Stephen Knight, "Robin Hood: Men in Tights: Fitting the Tradition Snugly," in *Pulping Fictions*, ed. D. Cartmell et al. (London: Pluto, 1995); reprinted in Knight, ed., *Robin Hood: Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism*, 461–67.

15. Richards, "Robin Hood on Film and Television since 1945," 67.

16. *Ibid.*, 77.

17. Charles A. Fenton, *S. V. Benét: The Life and Times of an American Man of Letters, 1898–1943* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), 35–36.

18. Henry Gilbert, *Robin Hood and His Merry Men* (Edinburgh: Jack, 1912; rev. ed., Ware: Wordsworth, 1994), v.

19. J. Walker McSpadden and Charles Wilson, *Robin Hood and His Merry Outlaws* (London: Harrap, 1921), 9.

20. Roger Lancelyn Green, *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (London: Puffin, 1956).

21. *The Oxford Book of Ballads*, ed. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910). For a discussion of the origin of this spurious ballad, see chap. 3, n. 53.

22. Geoffrey Trease, *Bows against the Barons* (London: Lawrence, 1934), 21.

23. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1948.

24. Carola Oman, *Robin Hood* (Dent: London, 1939), iv.

25. Antonia Pakenham, *Robin Hood* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1957; rev. ed., London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1978), 18.

26. Jay Williams, *The Good Yeomen* (London: Macdonald, 1965), 26.

27. The idea is mistaken: the Old English word was "heafod" and the "u" in the Middle English "heued" was pronounced as a "v."

28. Nicholas Chase, *Locksley* (London: Heinemann, 1983), 3.

29. Parke Godwin, *Robin and the King* (New York: Morrow, 1993), 8.

30. David Lampe, "The Heirs/Errors of *Ivanhoe*," in *Robin Hood in Popular Culture*, ed. Thomas G. Hahn (Cambridge: Brewer, 2000), 129–39; see in particular 136–39.

31. T. H. White, *The Sword in the Stone* (London: Collins, 1938); reprinted as the first book of *The Once and Future King* (London: Collins, 1948).

32. Robin McKinley, *The Outlaws of Sherwood* (London: Macdonald, 1989), 300.

33. Jennifer Roberson, *Lady of the Forest* (New York: Kensington, 1992), front cover.

34. Jennifer Roberson, *Lady of Sherwood* (New York: Kensington, 1999).

35. Roberson, *Lady of the Forest*, 746.

36. Gayle Feyrer, *The Thief's Mistress* (New York: Dell, 1996), 37.

37. Lampe, "Heirs/Errors of *Ivanhoe*," 138.

38. Theresa Tomlinson, *The Forestwife* (London: MacRae, 1993), back jacket.

39. Theresa Tomlinson, *Child of the May* (London: MacRae, 1998).

40. L. D. V. Owen, "Robin Hood in the Light of Research," *Times Trade and Engineering Supplement* 38, part 864 (1936): xxix.

41. J. C. Holt discusses the references in *Robin Hood*, 2d ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 156–57.

42. David Crook, "Some Further Evidence concerning the Dating of the Origins of the Legend of Robin Hood," *English Historical Review* 99 (1984): 530–34; reprinted in Knight, ed., *Robin Hood: Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism*, 257–61.

43. See Holt, *Robin Hood*, 52.

44. J. C. Holt, "Robin Hood: The Origin of the Legend," in *Robin Hood: The Many Faces of That Celebrated Outlaw*, ed. Kevin Carpenter (Oldenburg: Bibliotheks- und Informationssystem der Universität Oldenburg, 1995), 27–34; see in particular 28.

45. J. C. Holt, "The Origins and the Audience of the Ballads of Robin Hood," *Past and Present* 18 (1960): 89–110; reprinted in Rodney Hilton, ed., *Peasants, Knights, and Heretics: Studies in Medieval English Social History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 236–57, and in Knight, ed., *Robin Hood: Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism*, 211–32; see in particular 211–12.

46. J. R. Maddicott, "The Birth and Setting of the Ballads of Robin Hood," *English Historical Review* 93 (1978): 276–99, reprinted in Knight, ed., *Robin Hood: Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism*, 233–55; see in particular 237.

47. John W. Walker, *The True History of Robin Hood* (Wakefield: West Yorkshire Printing, 1952), 8.

48. Percy Valentine Harris, *The Truth about Robin Hood* (Mansfield: Linney, 1951); see enlarged edition (1975), 78–79.

49. John Bellamy, *Robin Hood: An Historical Inquiry* (London: Croom Helm), 1985.

50. Graham Phillips and Martin Keatman, *Robin Hood—The Man behind the Myth* (London: O'Mara), 1995.

51. Graham Phillips, *The Search for the Grail* (London: Century, 1995), chaps. 14 and 15.

52. F. J. Child, ed., *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 5 vols. (Boston, Barker, 1904; reprint, New York: Dover, 1965), 3:48.

53. Rodney Hilton, "The Origins of Robin Hood," *Past and Present* 14 (1958):



30–44; reprinted in Knight, ed., *Robin Hood: Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism*, 197–210; see in particular 197 and 199.

54. Maurice Keen, "Robin Hood—Peasant or Gentleman?" in *Past and Present* 19 (1961): 7–15; reprinted in Hilton, ed., *Peasants, Knights and Heretics*, 258–66.

55. Holt, "Origins and the Audience."

56. Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 1985).

57. When Hilton reprinted the Robin Hood essays from *Past and Present* in *Peasants, Knights and Heretics*, Keen, in an afterword (266) to his essay (see note 54), changed his support from Hilton to Holt, saying, "I do not believe that any attempt to relate the Robin Hood story to the social pressures of the Peasants' Revolt will stand up to scrutiny."

58. Peter Coss, "Aspects of Cultural Diffusion in Medieval England: The Early Romances, Local Society, and Robin Hood," *Past and Present* 108 (1985): 35–79; reprinted in abbreviated form, concentrating on the Robin Hood sequences, in Knight, ed., *Robin Hood: Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism*, 329–42; see in particular 341.

59. Richard Tardif, "The 'Mystery' of Robin Hood: A New Social Context for the Texts," in *Words and Worlds: Studies in the Social Role of Verbal Culture*, ed. S. Knight and S. Mukherjee (Sydney: Sydney Association for Studies in Society and Culture, 1983); reprinted in Knight, ed., *Robin Hood: Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism*, 345–61; see in particular 360.

60. "Robin Hood," in *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee (London: Smith Elder, 1885–1910), vol. 26 (1891): 421–24; reprinted in Knight, ed., *Robin Hood: Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism*, 379–84; see in particular 379.

61. J. W. Hales and F. J. Snell, "Robin Hood," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th ed. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1910), 421.

62. Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London: Faber, 1948), 350.

63. Margaret Murray, *The God of the Witches* (London: Faber, 1931), 35–36.

64. Lord Raglan, "Robin Hood," a chapter in *The Hero* (London: Methuen, 1936); reprinted in Knight, ed., *Robin Hood: Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism*, 385–91; see in particular 389–90.

65. John Matthews, *Robin Hood: Green Lord of the Wildwood* (Glastonbury: Gothic Image, 1993), 100.

66. Lorraine Kochanske Stock, "Lords of the Wildwood: The Wild Man, the Green Man, and Robin Hood," in *Robin Hood in Popular Culture*, ed. Hahn, 139–49.

67. Joseph Falacky Nagy, "The Paradoxes of Robin Hood," *Folklore* 91 (1980): 198–210; reprinted in Knight, ed., *Robin Hood: Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism*, 411–25; see in particular 411.

68. Rodney Hilton's account of the audience is primarily a Marxist reading, and Richard Tardif's essay is a more nuanced account in that mode; Stuart Kane has

offered a gender-based reading in "Horseplay: Robin Hood, Guy of Gisborne, and the Neg(otiation) of the Bestial," in *Robin Hood in Popular Culture*, ed. Hahn, 101–10. In the same volume the outlaw tradition is seen from a feminist viewpoint in Sherron Lux's "And the 'Reel' Maid Marian," 151–60, and Evelyn Perry's "Disguising and Revealing the Female Hero's Identity: Cross-Dressing in the Ballad of *Robin Hood and Maid Marian*," 191–96. The essay by Thomas Hahn and Stephen Knight (see note 2) also operates in the field of gender. Though they and Kane are aware of the possibility of Freudian readings, no full-scale interpretation following Freud or his successors, including Lacan, appears to have yet been offered, which seems surprising in the context of so much suggestive and potentially symbolic material.