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Imagining Robin Hood

THE LATE-MEDIEVAL STORIES IN
HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A. J. Pollard



Robin Hood: yeoman of the forest. This image, a late-fifteenth-century woodcut, was recycled both to illustrate Robin Hood in Chapman and Myllar's printing of the *Gest* in 1508 and to represent the knight's yeoman in Pynson's edition of *The Canterbury Tales* in 1491.

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PL — James Gairdner, ed., *The Paston Letters*; (6 volumes, London, 1904)

Potter — 'Robin Hood and the Potter', in Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*, pp. 125–32

Rot Parl — *Rotuli Parliamentorum* (6 volumes, London, 1767)

Statutes of the Realm — *Statutes of the Realm* (11 volumes, London, 1810–28)

TRHS — *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*

All quotations from and references to the early stories of Robin Hood are from the Dobson and Taylor edition, cited in italics (see *Death, Gest, Guy, Monk, Potter* above). However, the constituent elements of the *Gest*, which I have identified as 'Robin Hood and the Knight', 'Robin Hood and the Sheriff', 'Little John and the Sheriff', 'Robin Hood and the King' and 'The Death of Robin Hood' are cited in inverted commas. All other late-medieval texts are cited in italics.

Extracts from Julian Barnes, *England, England* are reproduced by kind permission of the author.

Texts and Context

Everyone knows about Robin Hood is a myopic formula which makes an historian's hackles rise. Everyone knows, alas, what everyone knows. But the pearl richer than all his tribe is *You can't start messing around with Robin Hood*. What, my dear Jeff, do you think History is? Some lucid, polyocular transcript of reality? Tut, tut, tut. The historical record of the mid- to late-thirteenth century is no clear stream into which we might trillingly plunge.¹

So pontificates Dr Max, a parody of a media don, in Julian Barnes' novel, *England, England*. The novel is a dystopia in which a media magnate, Jack Pitman, unmistakably based on Robert Maxwell, has turned the Isle of Wight into a themed heritage park encapsulating the quintessence of England. 'Robin Hood and his Merrie Men' came seventh in a worldwide survey (results adjusted by Sir Jack) of what people associated with Englishness, and so it becomes one of the main attractions, a team of actors performing 'Robin Hood and the Sheriff' daily at 4.00 p.m. to huge crowds.²

This book follows Dr Max's path and messes about with Robin Hood. On the other hand, it disagrees with his judgement that

the stories of Robin Hood provide a historical record of the mid-to late thirteenth century. It begins with the premise that the earliest surviving written version of the stories of Robin Hood dates from the fifteenth century, and probably the second half of that century. And it follows with the deduction that therefore they talk to us from and tell us about that century. Certainly history is no lucid, polyocular transcript of reality, and the book would not have been undertaken if I believed that everyone knew what I wanted to write. But history is nothing if not messing about with the past.

Everyone knows the story of Robin Hood. The Anglo-Saxon earl of Huntingdon, Sir Robin of Locksley, has been evicted from his estates by the Normans and outlawed. He lives by highway robbery and poaching. England is under the corrupt and oppressive rule of the wicked Prince John, regent while his brother the king, Richard I, is on crusade. Prince John is in league with the Sheriff of Nottingham and with Guy of Gisborne. They are terrorising the people. Locksley has taken to Sherwood Forest, and, as Robin Hood with his merry men leads the resistance of free-born Englishmen to the alien rule of the Normans, Robin runs rings round the sheriff. After many adventures, including an archery contest in Nottingham and fighting free of arrest, he triumphs. King Richard returns to England in disguise, observes what is amiss and discovers that Robin is his true subject. Prince John and his allies are removed. Locksley is restored to his lands, gets the girl (Maid Marian), good government is reinstated and freedom restored. This, with many variations on it, is the story that twentieth-century cinema and television audiences knew.

It is not, however, the story that was familiar to fifteenth- and early-sixteenth-century audiences. In fact, to begin with, they knew several stories, for Robin Hood the forest outlaw was a stock character on which different adventures were hung. One can

identify as many as eight surviving stories, or 'rymes' as they were called, of Robin Hood set down in writing by c.1500, or containing elements which can be reasonably identified as of that time. We can look at them like episodes in a twentieth-century adventure series in 'comics', on radio, in film and on television, woven around stock characters – the hero, Little John, the sheriff, the monk, the king – in which the hero has various adventures, triumphing against the same set of villains in an infinitely changing set of circumstances. Plot lines, actions and incidents are endlessly repeated and varied. Outlaws go into Nottingham in disguise and fool the sheriff, there are archery contests, daring rescues and pitched battles between Robin's and the sheriff's men. In the eight 'stories' on which this study focuses the sheriff dies twice, a monk is robbed twice, the king intervenes twice. There were probably many more in circulation than have survived in writing. We have the testimony of the Scottish chronicler Walter Bower writing in c. 1440 to this effect. He wrote of Robin Hood and Little John and their companions: 'These men the stolid commons remember, at times in the gay mood of comedy, at others in the more solemn tragic vein and love besides to sing of their deeds in all kinds of romances, mimes and snatches'. He then proceeded to summarise a story, which has not itself survived.³ Robin Hood was originally a popular (in the senses of both 'of the people' and 'enjoyed by many') late-medieval hero, about whom many tales were told. The survival of a number of different stories about him is the principal feature that separates Robin Hood from the other outlaw heroes of late-medieval England, such as Gamelyn or William of Cloudesly, about each of whom there survives but one self-contained narrative.⁴

The earliest stories of Robin Hood nevertheless contained features which everyone does know and which have survived the messing about of the centuries. Robin Hood is an outlaw. He is accompanied by his merry men, among whom are Little John (his

principal lieutenant), Will Scarlet (or Scarlock) and Much the Miller's son. There is no Friar Tuck among his merry men, but there is a friar Tuck in a surviving play fragment. There is no Maid Marian, but Robin is devoted to the Virgin Mary. They reside in Sherwood Forest (but also float freely northwards to Barnsdale in south Yorkshire). They poach the king's deer, they hold up travellers through the forest whom they always invite to dine before they rob them. They are skilled archers, most of all Robin Hood, who can split the wand, the peg on which the target is hung in an archery contest. Robin in more than one story goes into Nottingham in disguise to take part in an archery contest, and in one he is recognised, betrayed and fights his way out. His arch-enemy is the Sheriff of Nottingham, who is frequently humiliated as well as killed twice. He is particularly unenamoured of monks, especially the Benedictine monks of St Mary's Abbey, York, who feature in two stories. He robs from the undeserving and helps the deserving, but he does not rob from the rich to give to the poor. He professes loyalty to his king, who in one story pardons him and in another condones his behaviour, but this is a King Edward, not Richard I. He is not an Anglo-Saxon, let alone a dispossessed earl. He is a plain yeoman.

A most significant moment in the development of the Robin Hood story was the drawing of five of these separate tales together in the fifteenth century into a compilation called the *Gest of Robyn Hode*, in which a single connecting narrative was supplied. One of the stories woven together is about 'Robin Hood and the Knight', sometimes known as the 'sorry knight' because of his plight. This provides the central thread. A second is about 'Robin Hood and the Sheriff' in which the hero goes into Nottingham to participate in an archery contest, is betrayed and fights his way out. A third is 'Little John and the Sheriff', in which Little John disguises himself as Reynolde Grenelefe and enters the sheriff's service and leads him into a trap in the forest. A fourth is 'Robin Hood and the King',

which tells how the king pursues Robin, only catching up with him when he is disguised as a monk and is waylaid, and then pardons him and takes him into his service. And the last is 'The Death of Robin Hood' which tells how Robin, having abandoned the court and fled to the forest again, is finally killed through the treachery of the prioress of Kirklees, in Yorkshire.

After a few introductory stanzas, the narrative begins with Robin Hood's men waylaying the knight, who tells his sorry story. Robin lends him money to help redeem his mortgaged lands from the abbot of St Mary's, York. He goes with Little John to York, revealing that he has the money only after being humiliated by the abbot and the 'high justice', who had conspired to defraud him. Having recovered his lands he goes home, and a year later returns to the forest to repay the loan. But by this time Robin has waylaid the cellarer of the abbey, who was journeying south and relieved him of more than twice the amount. So Robin waives his loan. But when later Robin escapes from the sheriff in Nottingham and is pursued by him, he is given refuge by the knight in his castle, and the two withstand the siege. Now both the knight and Robin are outlawed. The sheriff seizes the knight, but he cannot capture Robin. So the king comes down to restore order, but not even he can catch him until he disguises himself as a monk who is waylaid by Robin. The king reveals himself, recognises Robin's loyalty, pardons him and takes him into his service. But after a year or so in royal service Robin flees back to the forest, where he remains at large for a further twenty years before his final betrayal and death.

The dominant narrative is thus woven together, in such a way as to form a coherent story in which Robin assists the knight, they are both pursued by the sheriff and in the end pardoned by the king. Yet close examination reveals the stitching as it were: the unnamed knight in the early part becomes Sir Richard at the Lee in the later sections. It is divided into eight 'fyttes' roughly

representing the stories. Although the repetition of the call to the audience to pay attention is characteristic of these long recitations, sometimes they fail to disguise the joins. On the one hand the reminder to pay attention at the beginning of the sixth fytte,

*Lytbe and listen, gentlemen,
And berkyn to your [sic] songe,*⁵

is followed immediately by the narrative where it left off at the end of the previous fytte, with the sheriff pursuing Robin to the knight's castle. On the other hand the third fytte, beginning with a similar refrain, is the beginning of a new story. This is the tale of 'Little John and the Sheriff', which seems to be included for comic relief. The tone is completely different. Whereas the thread provided by the dominant narrative is lofty and serious minded, 'Little John and the Sheriff', concerning the mockery of the sheriff, is knockabout farce. Even the story of 'Robin Hood and the Sheriff', while it is linked to the main narrative, is different in spirit, for this is an all-action, swashbuckling yarn in which Robin proves his fighting prowess. Their positioning in the compilation as the third and fifth fyttes, however awkwardly handled, suggests a deliberate change of key by the compiler to introduce light relief. 'The Death of Robin Hood' is but a short condensation of a longer story appended as an epilogue. An independent, longer fragment of the same story survives.

Nevertheless, as the first attempt to create a unified narrative, the *Gest* is clearly recognisable as the basis of all later versions of the story of Robin Hood. Textual and linguistic analysis has suggested a possible date of composition of the elements as early as c.1400, and dates for the compositions to be committed to writing after 1450. The first surviving complete printed edition possible appeared in 1492. There are no earlier surviving manuscript copies.

Dating the *Gest* is complicated by the difficulty of distinguishing between what might have possibly been earlier, orally transmitted stories and the subsequent commitment of them to writing, of disentangling interpolations and adaptations at that stage, and of discerning manipulations of the text by compositors in setting the printed editions. Who was responsible for bringing this complex compilation together, when and why is not known. However, one can be reasonably certain that, while its constituent parts were in circulation earlier, it took the form we now have by the end of the fifteenth century.⁶

Of the other three, free-standing 'rymes', *Robin Hood and the Monk*, which survives in a manuscript version of the second half of the fifteenth century, and is probably the oldest surviving tale in writing, tells of how Robin is captured by the sheriff in Nottingham after he has been identified by a monk and how Little John rescues him. This has a sub-plot in which Little John rebels against Robin's authority, but is reconciled with his leader after he has rescued him. It ends with a speech by the king who had heard that Robin Hood had escaped the sheriff again, but concedes that Little John had in the end done his master good service.⁷ *Robin Hood and the Potter*, also surviving in manuscript form, which has recently been dated to the last third of the fifteenth century, is more in the spirit of 'Little John and the Sheriff' and tells how Robin, switching places with a potter, goes into Nottingham, sells the pots deliberately at a loss, becomes engaged in an archery contest with the sheriff and tricks him into returning to the forest with him where the sheriff is relieved of his horse and goods.⁸ *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*, although the earliest surviving copy is much later, can be dated by its language and content to the late fifteenth century. It is a straightforward tale of how the sheriff hires a bounty hunter to hunt down and kill Robin and of how Robin reverses the tables and kills both of them.⁹

This then is the corpus of early Robin Hood stories. Inevitably

the *Gest* has pride of place. As the first and influential attempt to construct one coherent story of Robin Hood, it quickly established the dominant narrative thread. It is also pre-eminent because it offered closure; it took the story to an end, Robin's return to the outlaw life, his betrayal and death, which give it an authority beyond the other tales of episodes in Robin's life. Later ballads, starting with the *Jolly Pinder of Wakefield*, *Robin Hood and the Butcher* and *Robin Hood and the Curtal Friar*, dating from the second half of the sixteenth century, may also be reworkings of pre-Reformation rymes. *Robin Hood and the Butcher* is so close to the story of the potter that it must be a variation on the same theme. *Robin Hood and the Friar* has many elements, which suggest an earlier, pre-Reformation origin. It is the tale that first introduces the story of Robin Hood and Friar Tuck, who appears as a character in the play text.¹⁰ While these three have been excluded from the texts upon which this study is founded, they give further substance to the notion that there were many more tales in circulation before the mid-sixteenth century than have survived and been compressed into what became *the* story of Robin Hood in later centuries.

The surviving texts of the early stories, in rhyme, seem to have been originally composed to have been chanted or recited. They are addressed to, and might have been designed to appeal to, different audiences. The *Gest* calls upon freeborn gentlemen to take note and listen, an address which is repeated in the middle of the text.¹¹ It is a moot point whether this is to be taken literally. The storyteller might well be flattering his audience. The constituent stories, however, seem to have been originally addressed to different listeners. Both 'Robin Hood and the King' and 'Robin Hood and the Knight' have strong associations with a gentle audience and feature issues that would appear to have been of concern to the privileged. 'Robin Hood and the Sheriff' and 'Little John and the Sheriff', on the other hand, although

amalgamated into the *Gest*, seem to be more appropriate for an audience of commoners. The mixed and wider audience seems then to be recognised in the envoi:

*Cryst have mercy on his soule,
That dyed on the rode!
For he was a good outlawe,
And dyde pore men much god.*¹²

This sits oddly with what has gone before, suggesting that it originally belonged to the separate story of the death of Robin Hood. It is also the only reference to Robin helping the poor.

Robin Hood and the Potter, on the other hand, in which the sheriff is again humiliated, is unequivocally addressed to good yeomen, ending with a blessing for all good yeomanry.¹³ The comic action, in which Robin changes places with the potter to sell his wares in Nottingham and to be entertained, incognito, by the sheriff and his wife perhaps had an appeal to an urban audience. In this, as well as in 'Robin Hood and the King', mockery is made of commerce. Robin sells the pots for next to nothing; he gets his profit by liberating the sheriff of his horse and other equipment. In the *Gest*, too, the king is fitted out in a new livery in which the cloth is cut with lavish abandon by Little John. The target here, which perhaps both gentle and yeoman audiences would relish, seems to be the extortionate merchant.¹⁴ Both *Robin Hood and the Monk* and *Guy of Gisborne*, in contrast, have no salutation or envoi at all. They stand as stories that do not seem to presuppose any particular audience.

Behind the written text lies the spoken word. One can be reasonably certain that Robin Hood stories were recited in halls, in taverns, in marketplaces and almost anywhere people gathered on special occasions. Late-medieval moralists disapproved of the ribaudiers, minstrels, jesters and histriones

who entertained gentle and lewd people alike with their profane stories, dissolute innuendo, disrespectful jokes and their insistent cries of 'for largess, for largess'. They were little better than vagabonds and beggars, leading good Christians, and law-abiding subjects, astray. That goody two shoes Piers Plowman would have nothing to do with 'Robin the Rybauder for his rusty word'.¹⁵ The Robin Hood stories were picked out early for special condemnation and there is a long string of complaint, from Langland in 1377 to the Reformation and beyond. Sloth, in *Piers Plowman*, is a personification of the indolent priest who did not know his pater noster well, but did 'rymes of Robyn hood'. In the first decade of the fifteenth century, the author of *Dives and Pauper* similarly disapproved of those who would sooner hear a tale or song of Robin Hood, or some other 'ribaudry' than go to mass or matins. It was the same a century later. Barclay complained in his early-sixteenth-century translation of *The Ship of Fools*:

*For goodlie scripture is not worth an hawe,
But tales are loved of ribaudry,
And many are so blinded with their foly,
That no scriptur think they so true nor gode,
As is a foolish jest of Robin Hode.*¹⁶

The refrain was enthusiastically taken up by Protestants. William Tyndale in 1528 excoriated stories of Robin Hood, along with fables of love and wantonness, as ribaldries 'as filthy as heart can think'. Hugh Latimer was incensed, so he preached before Edward VI in 1549, to have found recently that he was locked out of church because it was Robin Hood's day and the parish had gone abroad to gather for him. He had actually to give way to Robin Hood's men. It was no laughing matter: 'under pretence for gatherynge for Robin hoode, a traytoure, and a thefe, to put out

a preacher, to have his office lesse esteemed, to prefer Robyn hod before the ministracion of God's word'.¹⁷

Robin Hood became, literally, proverbial; the proverb 'many men speak of Robin Hood who never shot his bow' is first recorded at the beginning of the fifteenth century; the phrase 'Robin Hood in Barnsdale stood' had entered the language by 1429.¹⁸ The relationship between written text as it emerged and spoken word was complex. We should not assume that an oral tradition preceded the written text. As recent study of the early-modern period shows, the two intermingled.¹⁹ But it would be reasonable to suppose that the stories were far more frequently heard than they were read. Only after the development of print was it possible for those compiled as the *Gest* to be circulated in any number, and even then it would have been read aloud to a group more than privately alone. Whereas the author of *Dives and Pauper* castigated those who *heard* a tale or song of Robin Hood, Tyndale blasted those who allowed the laity to *read* (my italics) histories and fables, but forbade them to study scripture in the vernacular. The sentiment was the same, whether old catholic or new protestant, but for the protestant it was reading not hearing which was now central.²⁰

The stories were not only recited and read, but also performed. Latimer was incensed that he had had to give way for a 'gathering' of Robin Hood. From as early as 1426–7, when there is a reference to a performance at Exeter, there is evidence, quickening after 1475, of dramatic presentation. We now appreciate, especially as a result of the Records of Early English Drama project, that plays, revels, gatherings and archery contests involving the impersonation of Robin Hood were being performed in parochial May Games almost as early as we know rhymes were being recited. It may be, as is generally assumed, that the rhymes came first; but by 1500 play and rhyme were interchangeable. A play text of c.1475 called *Robin Hood and the Sheriff* is remarkably like the

near-contemporary *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*, which survives only in a later version.²¹ The language of the *Gest*, much of it in dialogue, is the language of performance as well as the language of storytelling; and the section which deals with the knight and the abbot of St Mary's, York, structured in three acts, is dramatic. We should not assume that Robin Hood performance was restricted to parochial fund-raising. The case has been convincingly made that the surviving play text was originally among the Paston Papers and that it is the script for the play to which Sir John Paston referred in a letter to his brother in 1473.²² And if a Norfolk gentry family enjoyed the play, why not other venues, such as the revels of the Inns of Court, where we know that plays were performed from the later fifteenth century. By the end of the century the stories had become popular in the modern sense of the word: all social groups, a few clerical kill-joys excepted, shared the fun.

By the second half of the fifteenth century the Robin Hood stories formed a body of popular literature that was declaimed, performed and ultimately read at most levels of society and in many different contexts. It is reasonable to suppose that performances drew upon the same body of stories as have survived as the rymes of Robin Hood and represented a wide dissemination of their themes. How many there were, we shall never know. But unlike the twentieth-century equivalent, such as Batman, the hero is something of a chameleon. Even in the surviving stories it is apparent that there were different Robin Hoods: sometimes the fount of restorative justice ('Knight'), sometimes a cold-blooded killer (*Guy*). Sometimes he is more courteous ('Knight'), sometimes more common; sometimes he is high-minded, sometimes he is a trickster (*Potter*). We are not dealing with one Robin Hood character: we are dealing with several. Little John, on the other hand, is more consistent. He is the loyal servant, albeit his loyalty is tested in *Robin Hood and the*

Monk. He is also more consistently the trickster. Whereas in this tale Robin goes to Nottingham boldly, 'withouten layn',²³ and is quickly recognised, Little John in rescuing him pretends to be what he is not to the monk, to the king and to the sheriff. As the king acknowledges at the end:

*'Little John hase begyled the schereff,
In faith so base be me.'*²⁴

And the plot of 'Little John and the Sheriff' depends on Little John's pretence as Reynolde Grenelefe to hoodwink the sheriff. He is the master of disguise.

The Robin Hood stories were themselves examples of a wider collection of outlaw tales in circulation, some of which such as *Adam Bell, Clim of the Clough and William of Cloudesly* and *Gamelyn* dealt with similar themes. The story told in *Adam Bell* is exceptionally close to the Robin Hood stories. It survives in an early-sixteenth-century text. It concerns three outlawed yeomen, outlawed for poaching venison, who flee to Inglewood forest in Cumberland. The action centres upon William going to Carlisle to visit his wife, where he is betrayed, and after a good fight is captured by the sheriff and 'the justice'. He is rescued from the gallows by his brother outlaws, Adam and Clim, after another mighty conflict. They flee to the forest, but then travel up to London to seek the king's pardon, which they receive, only after William has performed the feat of shooting an apple placed on his son's head. The story ends with William becoming his bowbearer and chief riding forester of all the north, and his wife the chief nurse of the king's children.²⁵

Gamelyn is more complex. This survives in a fourteenth-century text and is the story of how the youngest son of three is disinherited by his eldest brother after their father's death and forced to serve him. Eventually he rebels, assaults his brother and

flees to the forest, pursued by the sheriff. There he and his faithful servant join an outlaw band of yeomen. Not long afterwards the outlaw chief is pardoned, and so Gamelyn is elected outlaw 'king' to succeed him. Soon his evil eldest brother is made sheriff; Gamelyn agrees to surrender because he is promised a fair trial by his honest middle brother, who stands bail. But he is double-crossed by the sheriff, who arrests the middle brother and puts him on trial in Gamelyn's stead before a packed jury and a bought judge. But Gamelyn comes to the rescue with his outlaw band, seizes his evil brother, the sheriff and the justice, has them tried and hanged. The king pardons both surviving brothers, making Gamelyn chief justice of his forests.²⁶

Gamelyn links the Robin Hood tales and *Adam Bell* with an older tradition of exiled aristocratic outlaws exemplified in *Eustache the Monk* or *Fouke FitzWaryn*. As is apparent from these brief synopses, there are significant overlaps and borrowings between the stories. At the heart of all three is a story of a man outlawed, who flees to the forest where he lives by poaching before exacting revenge and receiving pardon from the king. Together they constitute the 'Matter of the Greenwood', a body of popular literature equivalent to the more refined Arthurian 'Matter of Britain'.²⁷ There are many details in common, but also some significant differences to which attention will be drawn later. But it is the stories of Robin Hood which are at the heart of it.

After the Reformation the Robin Hood stories changed. Protestantism significantly altered the context in which they circulated as popular literature. In brief the May Games were suppressed, but the tales resurfaced as ballads and broadsheets; print culture took over. The content also changed. Maid Marian entered the stories in the mid-sixteenth century: she was a migrant from other May Games, found associated with pre-Reformation Robin Hood games from the first decade of the century, but only after the Reformation did she replace the Virgin Mary in Robin's

heart. Robin himself was promoted to the peerage as the dispossessed earl of Huntingdon in the last decade of the sixteenth century by Anthony Munday in his two plays, *The Downfall* and *The Death of Robert, Earl of Huntingdon*. Munday was responsible also for turning Marian into Matilda, daughter of Lord FitzWater, and transposing the plot to the reign of Richard I while he is absent on crusade, leaving his realm in the care of his wicked brother, Prince John.²⁸ Later, in the early nineteenth century, Robin became an Anglo-Saxon freedom fighter, throwing off the Norman Yoke. The publication in 1888 of Francis Child's edition of the *Gest* re-established it as the central early text and as a result, with the accretions and glosses of the intervening years, since the late nineteenth century it lies at the heart of the fixed story of Robin Hood familiar to the early twenty-first century.²⁹

Robin Hood is essentially a fictional creation. A number of ingenious attempts have been made to discover the 'real' or 'historic' Robin Hood, even to identify some of the supporting cast as derived from people who once lived. The trail has led back to the third decade of the thirteenth century, to a record of 1230 in which the Sheriff of Yorkshire accounted for the goods he had seized from a fugitive called Robert Hood, and five years earlier to Robert of Wetherby, possibly the same man, an outlaw and evil-doer, whom the sheriff hunted down and hanged in 1225.³⁰ But another Robert Hood lived in County Durham in the early thirteenth century. He, Robert 'Hod' of Burntoft, gave surety to his neighbour, William Claxton, in 1244. Could he have later fallen foul of the law? His property, subsequently acquired by the Claxtons, was leased by them as 'Hodesplace' in the mid-fifteenth century. The matter is made more complex by the fact that from 1262, at the latest, the aliases 'Robehod' and Little John begin to appear in legal records, indicating the development of a convention whereby certain criminals adopted what had become known names. The existence of these aliases in the late

thirteenth century suggest that stories about fictitious figures were already in circulation. But whose was a given name and whose an alias?³¹ It is unlikely that it will ever be known for certain whether a 'real' Robin Hood ever existed on the same basis as we know, for instance, that Jesse James or Ned Kelly were 'real' outlaws in the nineteenth century.

The convention in the stories is indeed that 'he once walked on ground', but the earliest claims that Robin Hood was a real historical figure occur in fifteenth-century Scottish histories of English affairs. Andrew of Wyntoun wrote early in the century that Little John and Robin Hood were active in Inglewood and Barnsdale between 1283 and 1285; in the 1440s, Walter Bower placed them under the year 1266, linked to the defeated followers of Simon de Montfort. No fifteenth-century English chronicler made an attempt to place the outlaws in 'real time'. For these fifteenth-century commentators, Robin and Little John were nothing more than the central characters of vulgar tales, or lewd ribaldries.³² It is the lewd ribaldries with which we are concerned. There is no doubt that some were in circulation well before 1400. What the content of these stories would then have been we do not know, but it is reasonable to assume that they were changing, and continued to change, just as they changed again in the century following 1550. Our texts are those captured at a particular moment, even though we do not know exactly when that moment was. But they are of the pre-Reformation century and they talk to us of that century. In so far as they seem to be set in an earlier age, they contain memories of that earlier era, which are refracted through and speak to the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The challenge, addressed directly in the final chapter of this book, is to identify that which was historic for the pre-Reformation century, and to establish the significance of it for contemporaries – what their past meant for their present.

What of that fifteenth-century present? Any attempt to

configure it in the twenty-first century is subject to the same catch as configuring the late thirteenth century in the early sixteenth. The past is seen from the present. This is perhaps nowhere more dramatically revealed in English historiography than in the history of the fifteenth century itself. As a result of successive layers of dynastic propaganda overlain by Shakespeare's dramatic influence, the century before Henry Tudor's victory on Bosworth Field was for long characterised as anarchic. The characterisation began in 1461 when Edward IV blamed Henry IV's usurpation of the throne for the subsequent 'unrest, inward war and trouble, unrighteousness, shedding and effusion of innocent blood, abuse of the laws, partiality, riot, extortion, murder, rape and vicious living', never experienced elsewhere in the world before. Successive usurpers, Richard III and Henry VII, recycled the same horrific vision to justify their acts. Fortuitously Henry VII was the last of three. His dynasty successfully established itself and so he, rather than either of his predecessors, became the great saviour from the chaos that had preceded him. What began as propaganda became accepted as historical truth by the end of the sixteenth century. Shakespeare used the history to hold up a mirror to his own age in his cycle of eight plays covering the end of Richard II's reign to the beginning of Henry VII's. Over the centuries, reinforced by Renaissance enlightenment, Protestant ideology and Whig political thinking, the fifteenth century as a whole came to be seen as uncivilised, blind and debased as well as anarchic. It was, and remains, a powerful characterisation of the last medieval century. During the twentieth century it was almost completely demolished by historians unbound by Victorian certainties and open to the evidence of contemporary sources. Nevertheless to this day one still finds, even in the works of influential British historians, repetition of the earliest caricature of the Wars of the Roses. Simon Schama commented in 1995 that it can hardly be an accident that the first printed editions of the *Gest*

appeared 'at a disastrous moment in English history: the Wars of the Roses', while in 1999 Norman Davies wrote in a popular history of Britain, that 'From 1455 to 1485, the Wars of the Roses, between the rival proponents of Lancaster and York reduced England to chaos'.³³

On the contrary the whole weight of twentieth-century historical scholarship was to stress that the later fifteenth century was neither chaotic nor a disastrous period. This is not to deny that there were in these decades periodic outbreaks of civil war. But the length, scale and impact of the conflict have been much exaggerated. There were rebellions and fighting in 1455, in 1459–64, in 1469–71, in 1483, in 1485, in 1486 and 1487. Some rebellions were short lived and easily put down, others succeeded with little opposition. Intense fighting between rival armies and sustained campaigning in the field in central, mainland England was restricted to 1459–61 and the spring of 1471. But none of the campaigns lasted more than a few weeks, battles were decisive, casualties, with the exception perhaps of Towton, were relatively light, the disruption and damage slight, and the impact largely restricted to the highest ranks of society and the rival royal families in particular. Civil war was intermittent. The disruption to normal civilian life, apart from the sustained upheavals of 1459–61 and 1469–71, was minimal; even then most people in most places were able to go about their daily lives without hindrance. For twelve years, between 1471 and 1483, peace and stability were fully restored. The crown changed hands several times as a result of battle, but most English men and women most of the time were unaffected by these events.³⁴ Far greater social and economic disruption was caused by the Great Civil War in the middle of the seventeenth century, and it is arguable that the conflicts of the reigns of Edward II and Richard II, as well as the struggle by Henry IV to establish himself on his throne after 1399, were as disruptive as the Wars of the Roses.

Beyond the realm of high politics and dynastic dispute, not finally put to rest until the peaceful succession of Henry VIII in 1509, England during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries was growing in prosperity. The kingdom had passed through a period of trauma and crisis following the devastation of plague, which first arrived in the late summer of 1348. Successive outbreaks, not just the Black Death itself, had reduced the population by up to 40 per cent over four decades. In the wake of this almost unimaginable disaster, for which there seemed no remedy, as well as defeat and failure in war in France after 1369, which before 1360 had been so gloriously triumphant, the last decades of the fourteenth century were crisis ridden, politically, in religion and socially. Political crises in the reign of Richard II, who came to the throne in 1377, culminated in his deposition in 1399. Religious crisis came to a head in the heresy associated with John Wycliff, known as Lollardy, which was troubling the authorities by the 1380s. Heavy taxation to pay for a failing war, attempts by landlords to impose minimum wages and feudal obligations on tenants led to resentment which exploded in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and rumbled on in lesser protests thereafter. English society from top to bottom was jolted, confidence was shaken, and the very fabric of the social order seemed threatened. To shore up the established order a whole series of statutes were passed through parliament to control wages and employment, to fix the social hierarchy by prescribing the clothing people should wear according to their station (sumptuary legislation), to control leisure activity and social behaviour (football was banned, hunting in open land, tennis and bowls restricted to the better sort), to curtail educational opportunity, and carefully to delimit political enfranchisement to exclude the non-gentle. As the old 'feudal order' (for want of a better phrase) in their eyes faced collapse, parliament and the crown stepped in to construct a national code of social control, more explicitly class based, to buttress it.³⁵

But during the fifteenth century matters stabilised. Continuing high death rates and low birth rates ensured that the population did not recover to its previous level. Indeed it was probably not until the mid-sixteenth century that it rose again to its early-fourteenth-century level. The Lancastrian dynasty, for a while, especially under Henry V, restored political confidence and brought even greater victories in the long-running war in France. The Lollard challenge was faced down, and the remnant of its followers driven underground. But most important of all the economic structure was transformed and stabilised on a new basis. The loss of population led in the long term to a contraction of output, especially agricultural output, a significant reduction of land under cultivation, the shrinkage and desertion of villages, the abandonment of direct farming of their own demesnes (or home farms) by landlords exploiting labour service, the withering and virtual disappearance of serfdom (the legal basis on which the obligation to render labour service stood) and a general rise in wages and fall in rents. In this new equilibrium, in which tenants and labour were in short supply, the advantage switched marginally away from the landed elite towards tenants and labourers. Market forces did not operate entirely smoothly, and in many places social conflict and tension continued, but all in all the landed elite accepted the new relationship.

Alongside the changes in the countryside, towns suffered mixed fortunes. There was a general contraction, especially of those dependent on local agriculture. Many small towns, with only limited markets, virtually reverted to villages. Fierce competition locally led to survival of some at the expense of their neighbours. A shift in international trade patterns also affected the great seaports. The rise of the Hanseatic League led to the effective exclusion of English shippers from the North Sea/Baltic trade routes. The once great port of King's Lynn was a major victim here. At the same time a major shift took place in the

nature of English exports from raw wool to half-finished cloth. By the end of the century certain districts, especially East Anglia, the Cotswolds, Somerset and Devon, were flourishing on the basis of this new industry. On the back of it London grew at the expense of its provincial rivals, especially York. While Southampton and Exeter briefly flourished, a growing proportion of international trade focused on London and the sea route across the Straits of Dover to the ports of Flanders and Brabant. During the fifteenth century London entrenched itself as the unchallenged metropolis of the kingdom.

In all this the social order survived. The late-fourteenth-century social legislation may well have helped, but in essence it became apparent that social revolution was a long way off. The gulf between the resources of the very rich, the peers of the realm, the wealthiest gentry and the great religious houses and institutions and the income of those who worked for their living remained huge. While much of the legislation designed to check social mobility and fix social relationships in an old mould proved futile, fearful contemporaries discovered that the social order could absorb change. There was a general rise in the living standards of those who were skilled labourers in regular employment, tenant farmers, artisans and craft workers. Paradoxically the per capita wealth of English people increased while national income declined. As the century progressed, right through the ultimate defeat in France in mid-century and the 'chaos' of the Wars of the Roses that followed, the disposable income of ordinary men and women grew. This is shown in improved housing, a growth in horse ownership, an increase in the consumption of meat, dairy products and ale, the acquisition of decencies such as brass and pewter vessels, and more time spent simply in leisure. There was widespread amelioration as the benefits of a redistribution of income spread down the social order. New definitions were adopted for that social order, and given legal form by the Statute

of Additions of 1413. Men below the level of gentleman were to identify themselves in any legal transaction as yeoman, or husbandman, or labourer or by their craft. The stratification was not in itself new, but it is clear from the end of the fourteenth century that a recognisably modern occupational structure existed in the countryside. The greatest beneficiaries were what came to be called the middling sort – yeomen, substantial husbandmen, self-employed craftsmen, small-scale traders, brokers and factors (many were employed in the cloth industry, which flourished in the countryside where costs were lower).

The question thus arises as to whether this was in any meaningful sense a peasant society. A peasant is usually identified as a self-sufficient smallholder, with a strong attachment to the land over several generations, who lives on the resources of his own family and whose way of life is rooted to the soil. This is a husbandman in the social terminology of the fifteenth century, who worked his own smallholding (some thirty acres or so) with his family and generated from it an income upon which in normal years they could live. To call him a peasant (or 'rusticus' as it was rendered in some accusations presented before the local courts), however, was a much resented slander.³⁶ A forthright case has been made, drawing a contrast with the model of more recent eastern European peasantries, that England from the moment from which written records survive, never had a peasantry.³⁷ This is a view that would seem to have been shared by Sir John Fortescue. England, he told the young Lancastrian prince of Wales in exile in France in the late 1460s, was a place that unlike France was virtually productive without the need of labour. Hence, the English

are not very much burdened with the sweat of labour, so that they live more spiritually . . . For this reason the men of that land are made more apt and disposed to

investigate causes, which require searching examination than men who, immersed in agricultural work, have contracted a rusticity of mind from familiarity with the soil.³⁸

Sir John viewed his native country nostalgically, especially in his imagined rural Arcadia, but it is revealing nevertheless that he saw a connection between independence of mind and liberation from toil. The English countryman did not have a peasant outlook, because, in Fortescue's eyes, he was not a peasant.

Nevertheless historians of the medieval economy continue to use the word to describe a particular category of smallholder. Jane Whittle has maintained that there were through to the sixteenth century 'small-scale agricultural producers . . . in possession of land which is farmed primarily with family labour and with the main aim of providing the family directly with a means of subsistence', who can be called peasants. And Phillipp Schofield, in an incisive discussion of the topic, while acknowledging the difficulty of accommodating traditional and narrow definitions of peasantry and emphasising the multiplicity of the experience of country people across time and between regions, judges that the term 'peasant' still seems entirely appropriate.³⁹ But was late-medieval England a peasant *society*?

The test applied here is the degree of market penetration. All agree that the rural economy was commercialised. Countrymen, Christopher Dyer argues for example, had moved away from simple self-sufficiency by 1200 and by the end of the thirteenth century were producing for sale on a considerable scale. They responded to market demand by changing farming practices. The market promoted a greater degree of specialisation. A vibrant land market flourished. However, although influenced by the market, countrymen had not fully developed a commercial mentality and were only partly integrated into it. Or, as Whittle puts it, they are

not market dependent. This seems to be the test: rural society ceased to be a peasant society only when market production dominated over subsistence production.⁴⁰

It all depends on the degree of commercialisation. By 1300 England had undoubtedly reached a high degree of commercial development. It was already a highly urbanised society, if by town one accepts the broad definition of a settlement whose inhabitants lived by other means than agriculture. While it has been estimated that 20 per cent of the population was urban, a far larger proportion lived within a day's walking distance to and from the nearest market town. Much manufacturing production was already rural, including stages of the cloth-manufacturing process, clothes making, metal working, pottery, brewing and of course milling. The English economy was to a significant degree commercially driven and market oriented. And so it remained through the great economic crises of the fourteenth century.⁴¹

Might it not, therefore, be more appropriate to describe England as already a capitalist economy? Characterised by the operation of market forces, the dominance of consumer demand, new investment, specialisation and concentration of industry (in the country as well as in the town), the English economy in the fifteenth century showed many of the features of incipient capitalism. It may not have been a fully fledged capitalist economy, but the transition was well under way. Some individuals emerged in the late-fifteenth-century countryside, such as the grazier Roger Heritage of Burton Dassett in Warwickshire, who produced on a large scale for the market, employed a considerable labour force, invested in buildings and equipment, and made a significant profit. Northern Norfolk, the most advanced economic region of England, was already by the early sixteenth century in effect a capitalist economy. In lowland southern and eastern England generally, town and country, market and hinterland, were so integrated and interdependent, structured in

an interlocking network of regional urban hierarchies, all dominated by the great city of London, that the distinction between urban and rural society was already blurred. As Dyer has concluded, it was not yet a capitalist economy, but capitalists and potential capitalists thrived in fifteenth-century England.⁴²

These issues are important because we need to have as clear an idea as possible of the social characteristics and outlooks of the popular audiences to which the Robin Hood stories appealed. They were neither 'peasants' in the generalised use of the word, nor 'capitalists' in any modern sense of that word. No doubt husbandmen enjoyed them, and so perhaps did graziers, but so too did gentlemen, yeomen, artisans and labourers, as did men and women of all ranks. From whatever precise social category readers, listeners and performers were drawn, they shared one thing in common; the benefits of an improved standard of living. One must be careful not to paint a picture of a pre-Reformation golden age. Disease and death rates remained high, harvests failed (spectacularly in the late 1430s and early 1480s), trade stoppages were common. The middle decades of the fifteenth century were a time of deep recession, brought on first by agrarian crisis, and then by a gathering slump in international trade, from which recovery did not really begin until after 1470.⁴³ But thereafter, in an international climate in which English rulers generally sought to avoid war, and to maintain peaceful relationships with England's principal markets in the Netherlands, despite periodic interruptions, prosperity continued to increase. Although sporadic in their movement, some indicators of economic growth have been found which have suggested an overall annual increase of just under 1 per cent per annum between 1471 and 1529. By twenty-first-century standards this is a modest growth rate. But by comparison with what had gone before, and what could be expected of a pre-industrialised economy, sustained growth of any level might be considered impressive. The signs of increasing

national wealth, if only patchily distributed, are to be seen today most vividly in building works, especially in the improvements to parish churches, whether by new furnishings of pews and rood screens, the addition of new porches (Tiverton, Cirencester), the building of new chapels, the erection of bell towers (most notably in Somerset and East Anglia) or even complete rebuilding (Lavenham). Prosperity had its limits. Political circumstances (at home and abroad) and economic conditions were still volatile and uncertain.⁴⁴ The world was often unsettled. But there is some foundation to the notion, which arose after the upheavals of the mid-sixteenth century, the break with Rome, the imposition of Protestantism, the beginning of inflation and an apparent increase in poverty, that this had been a happy and prosperous time: that this had been Merry England.

Robin Hood was reckoned to be the best archer that was in Merry England.⁴⁵ This book cannot seek to encompass all that can be said of him. The expressly literary dimensions, the exploration of the stories as a manifestation of a particular genre of writing and the provenance of the texts are expertly handled elsewhere.⁴⁶ Certain elements of the stories are played down. Little is said of archery contests, or wrestling, or pluck buffet and other competitive games in which the outlaws revelled. There perhaps should be another chapter here on popular sports in the era before the Reformation. Nor does the book address adequately the absence of women. Apart from the Virgin Mary and the repeated convention that Robin honoured all those of her sex, and the wives and widows who crowd around to buy the potter's cut-price pots in Nottingham market, only three individual women appear in the stories. One is the sheriff's wife, with whom he flirts, and who is a bit of a sport. When the sheriff returns to Nottingham at the end of *Robin Hood and the Potter*, having been relieved of his horse and all his gear, he brings with him a gift of an ambling palfrey for her. When her husband bemoans the way

he has been tricked and humiliated, she bursts into laughter and remarks that they have now paid for all the pots Robin gave to her. She seems to be drawn from the same tradition as Noah's wife and the wife of Bath.⁴⁷ The knight's wife, fair and free, appears twice as a dutiful and supportive lady, welcoming her lord home at the gate when he returns having recovered his property, and coming to the greenwood to beg Robin to free her lord, who had been captured by the sheriff.⁴⁸ Lastly there is the prioress of Kirklees, a mysterious kinswoman who is also described as a widow, but who betrays Robin. She is the very antithesis of the Virgin Mary.⁴⁹ Women in the stories are highly conventional. These are boys' stories for boys of all ages.

The scene for almost all that follows is set in the opening stanzas of the *Gest*.⁵⁰ It begins with a call to the audience to pay attention, in which the narrator informs his listeners that Robin, when he lived, was a yeoman and an outlaw; in fact, a good yeoman and a proud outlaw. Robin is found leaning against a tree, probably his *trystel tree*, in Barnsdale (it later becomes apparent that Barnsdale in southern Yorkshire merges into Sherwood Forest). With him are his principal confederates: Little John, Will Scarlock and Much the Miller's son, also good yeomen all three. Robin declares that he will not dine until they have waylaid a traveller through the forest and invited him to share his table, for which, of course, he is expected to pay handsomely. Nor will he eat, as is his custom, until he has heard three masses. Who, Little John asks (as if he did not know), should they rob and assault ('beat and bind')? Why, Robin replies, earls, barons, knights and esquires, bishops, archbishops and abbots, and especially the hie sherif of Notyngam'. However, they are not to molest women, husbandmen, good yeomen and any knight or esquire 'that wol be a gode felawe'. And so they walk to Sayles on Watling Street to find a guest for dinner. We do not hear of Robin's professed loyalty to his king or of his poaching the king's deer. And we are

not told yet that it is the merry month of May when the leaves be green and the birds do sing. These appear later. We have, however, entered Robin Hood's world. And so in we 'trillingly plunge'.

2

Yeomanry

*Herkens, god yemen,
Comley, cortesey, and god,
On of the best that yever bare bou',*

*His name was Roben Hode
Roben Hood was the yeman's name,
That was both corteys and ffre*

So runs the second and repetitive beginning of the third stanzas of *Robin Hood and the Potter*, a story which most clearly and unambiguously identifies Robin as a yeoman and his audience as composed of those who were, or would like to be thought of as, yeomen, and whose self-esteem and aspirations are flattered by the minstrel in his greeting to them as comely and courteous. The emphasis is repeated at the very end:

*God haffe mersey on Roben Hodys sole,
And safe all god yemanrey¹*

'From the moment he first steps on the historical stage', wrote Dobson and Taylor in 1976, 'Robin Hood is presented as a

yeoman hero for a yeoman audience'.² But what precisely constituted a yeoman and yeomanry in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, and especially what precisely is meant in the description of Robin Hood himself as the personification of good yeomanry has been and remains hard to pin down. Essentially there are two distinct usages of the term. The first and oldest is that of a household rank; the second and more recent was the extension of the term to describe a social status. In the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries both were in common use

It is perhaps not surprising therefore that the meaning of the terms yeoman and yeomanry in the rymes of Robin Hood has been the subject of sustained discussion since the late 1950s. Debate began with the publication in *Past and Present* of Rodney Hilton's ground-breaking article on 'The Origins of Robin Hood' in 1958. Hilton, who received initial support from Maurice Keen, conceived of the ballad hero in terms of medieval class conflict. Robin the yeoman was identified as a free peasant representing peasant ideology for a peasant audience.³ Hilton's initial hypothesis was roundly challenged by Sir James Holt, first in his rejoinder to Hilton, and subsequently in his *Robin Hood*. Holt argued that the term was used in the sense of a household officer and that the stories were nurtured in the halls of castle and manor, and were not for peasant ears.⁴ Since then the argument has moved on. The specific identification of the term yeoman within a peasant context has been significantly modified in the light of the understanding that fifteenth- and early-sixteenth-century rural society was considerably more complex than a simple peasant economy and that there was a growing and influential body of *mediocres*, or middling sorts, for whom the word peasant is not applicable, and with which the yeomanry as a social group can be equated.

More recent writings on the ballads have accordingly stressed

this social context. Peter Coss has expressed himself broadly in agreement that the term employed in the *Gest* describes a social gradation between the armigerous and the tillers of the soil. He has concluded that the *Gest* was composed for an audience that was not knightly and detected in the work elements of parody of knightly rituals.⁵ Colin Richmond has associated Robin Hood with an intermediary and transitional status of 'yeomanliness'. Not 'gentle', he embodies the dreams and aspirations not only of the emergent rural elite of prosperous farmers of medium-sized holdings, but also of the downwardly mobile younger sons of gentry who joined their ranks.⁶ In their most recent thoughts on the subject, Dobson and Taylor have reiterated the centrality of Robin Hood's status as a yeoman. By the mid-fifteenth century he had emerged:

not only as a new sort of hero but as a hero for a new and large social group, the yeomanry of England. Above all it seems to have been the outlaw's association with that large if ill-defined section of late-medieval society which provided him with what were to prove his most distinctive and enduring characteristics.⁷

The early-twenty-first century consensus is that Robin Hood was the personification of non-gentry aspirations and of the hopes of 'people of handicraft',⁸ artisan as well as husbandman, urban as well as rural, of fifteenth-century England.

Even so, Holt, while acknowledging that from the late fourteenth century the term had been extended to incorporate a social status between gentleman and husbandman, was dismissive of any attempt to identify yeomanry with a new social group emerging in the later middle ages. He has continued to insist that the ballads did not express the outlook of any new social group;

indeed he doubted that society in the fifteenth century was any more diversified than in the thirteenth, suggesting that the word yeoman was but a new label for a long-established social status. Only later, at the end of the fifteenth century, were the stories adulterated and contaminated for a more popular 'yeoman' audience.⁹

First, the point at issue has been whether the term yeoman was initially used in the stories and continued to be used primarily as a description of a household rank on to which the meaning of a social status was grafted, or whether the term was from the beginning primarily used to identify a social status. On this hangs a wider debate as to whether the Robin Hood stories are to be perceived as deriving from gentle circles or as having popular roots, and thus as to whether they subsequently became popularised, or in the course of time became gentrified. In the debate as it has been conducted so far, these have largely been seen as alternatives, and the two mutually exclusive. In the process there has also been a tendency to make no distinction between the yeomanry of Robin Hood, and of his merry men and some of his associates, and the yeomanry of the audience to which the stories were supposedly delivered, and in at least one surviving text explicitly addressed. But the two need not have been the same. Robin Hood could have been one sort of yeoman, the audience as a whole composed of others, and not just yeomen. Second, there has also tended to be an assumption that all the different stories drew upon one meaning of yeoman and yeomanry, whichever it was. But this too is not to be taken for granted. As we have already seen, there were different sorts of stories in circulation in the later middle ages, about Robin Hoods with different characteristics. It is thus possible that the stories in their first recorded versions incorporated and encompassed both the yeoman of the household rank and the yeoman of intermediate social status either in the personification of the hero or the membership of the audience. A

discussion of the 'yeomanliness' of Robin Hood and the social world in which he is set needs to keep all these considerations in mind.

Part of the problem is linguistic. The English word 'yeoman' is derived from the Old English 'yonger man'. The phrase 'yonge men' in fact appears twice in place of 'yeomen' in the printed version of the *Gest* at the beginning of the story of 'Robin Hood and the Sheriff'; here his followers are his 'mery yonge men' and 'seven score of wyght yonge men'.¹⁰ A similar usage is found in *Gamelyn*; the outlaws in the forest whom he joins are 'seven score yonge men', sometimes merry men, but always young men not yeomen. In *Gamelyn* an emphasis is placed on their age. They are indeed young, as is the hero.¹¹ They are also in the service of their master, the king of the outlaws, whose service *Gamelyn* also joins. There is implicitly a dynamic element in the use of the phrase in the sense of indicating a stage in a career, the stage through which a young man in service passes on the way to becoming a squire or master, as does *Gamelyn*, who soon becomes the king of the outlaws himself.¹² The usage of 'yonge man' in this way was extended to great London companies of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries such as the tailors. The word was adopted to identify those who had completed their apprenticeships, but were not yet masters, probably unmarried and working as wage-earners, or journeymen. In the late fourteenth century they formed their own fraternities, which, at first distrusted by the livery, were in time absorbed into the structure of the company. The membership also widened to incorporate small-scale masters who were on their way to becoming livery men, or, in many cases, were never going to make it. Thus in this urban context too the meaning of the word shifted from being a life stage to a social and economic status.¹³

In the fourteenth century the word 'yeoman' also began to be used as a translation of the French *valet*, or Latin *valettus*, as a rank.

As such it lay between esquire and groom in a noble household. Valets or yeomen, as household ordinances and lists reveal, occupied a distinct position in the hierarchy. Ralph Neville, earl of Westmorland, provided in his will drawn up in 1424 for legacies of 10 marks for each of his squires, £2 for each of his valets and £1 for each of his grooms.¹⁴ In this context, too, the word probably began as an indication of a life stage, but by the end of the fourteenth century, while it probably implied an unmarried man, it did not necessarily mean a stage in career development (although in the case of Geoffrey Chaucer it did). There were probably some aged valets in Earl Ralph's household, just as there were ageing yeomen in the ranks of the Merchant Tailors in London. Such an aged yeoman is to be found in the household of Richard Clervaux of Croft, a Yorkshire squire who in 1449 granted to William Cabery on his retirement free board, lodging and livery after a lifetime of service to Richard and his father.¹⁵

In the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, an age of rapid social mobility and growing differentiation of wealth, in which the governing classes were anxious to preserve the status quo, the use of the term yeoman was extended to an intermediary social category between husbandman and gentleman in the country. Some sense of the transition of meaning is to be found in the provision in 1386 by William Claxton of Claxton, County Durham, of the same livery for his new tenants of his manor of Hulam as he was accustomed to provide for the yeomen of his household.¹⁶ The defining moment was the Statute of Additions of 1413, which laid down that social status or occupation had to be specified in all legal transactions. Craftsmen were to be known by their trades; but countrymen appearing before the courts who were of greater wealth and higher standing than mere husbandmen gave to themselves, or had ascribed to them, the loose designation of yeoman.¹⁷ As a social category 'yeoman' was primarily applied to men who in the modern sense of the word

were substantial and prosperous farmers. It was a status akin to that enjoyed by certain rural artisans and tradesmen. Many occupations such as clothier, or fuller, or butcher, or smith, or even potter, in town and country generated as much income, or more, and endowed a similar social status. Moreover in late-medieval villages and small towns, where the same men were often occupied in both husbandry and a craft or trade, the distinction was blurred: they all were handicraftmen, men who practised a craft with their hands. Additionally, the manner in which the act was applied led to multiple ascriptions, or aliases, whereby the same person could be identified in separate legal actions by different designations, both by social status and by occupation. There was therefore considerable confusion of nomenclature.

In the late fourteenth century yeomanry also implied freeborn blood and free tenure. Robin, the storyteller reminded his audience, was both courteous and free. But it is evident that a century later substantial customary tenants, some even of questionable birth, styled themselves yeomen and were accepted by their neighbours as such. William Hawler, who leased and worked the small Durham manor of Pontop from Robert Claxton in 1435, was identified as a yeoman in his lease. In 1470 a tenant of a holding of sixty acres in the Tees valley could describe himself uncontroversially as a yeoman. Bishop Latimer preaching before Edward VI reminisced about his father being one such yeoman with his own farm, one or two labourers and a comfortable standard of living.¹⁸ A yeoman was in the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries a respectable local worthy, a man whose income, if it exceeded 40 shillings a year, might even, and if the returning officer did not inquire too closely into his tenure, entitle him to vote in parliamentary elections. He was one who might serve as churchwarden, as a juror on his local manorial court, or even find himself empanelled by the king's sheriff or escheator onto one of the many local juries of inquiry. When Sir John

Fortescue, in exile, praised the virtue of his kingdom, he only exaggerated when he claimed that there were in England many yeomen sufficient in patrimony to serve on a jury who could spend more than 600 'scutes' (£100) a year. Yeomen belonged to the social group which a century later came to be known as the 'middling sort'.¹⁹

Not a gentleman, still a working farmer, artisan or tradesman who worked with his hands, he was nevertheless a man of local substance and importance, employing one or two of his own servants. The privileged were anxious to draw a clear distinction between a gentleman and a yeoman, even though in practice, at the margins, it was sometimes difficult to discern. No gentleman, it was asserted, worked with his hands. The distinction was even extended to objects; there were yeomen sheets, which were rougher than gentlemen's sheets, there were horses suitable for yeomen to ride, but not gentlemen.²⁰ A yeoman might aspire to gentility, and indeed on occasion seek to pass himself off as better than he ought; if so he was usually found out. His son, however, might be put to school and so prosper in the law, or at court, or in noble service, or on the field of battle that he became a gentleman. Yet the distinction was clear. One knew a gentleman from a yeoman. Richard Calle, the son of a Framlingham grocer, loyal bailiff and servant to the Pastons, discovered in 1469 to his cost that a yeoman presumed too much above his station if he eloped with his employer's daughter.²¹ Yet yeomen liked to think of themselves as being sufficiently courteous and free to be a cut above the common sort. Some may have had pretensions to gentility, but they were all proud to be respectable.

The numbers of yeomen, at least proportionally to a reduced population, grew during the fifteenth century in line with the rise of the standards of living of those in the intermediate ranks of society, and they were swollen by downward as well as upward mobility. In a world of primogeniture, the younger sons of

gentlemen, and even more so their grandsons, came to rest in the same social group. They were to be found throughout England, in Weardale as well as in the Thames valley. It is arguable, too, that those who styled themselves yeomen were becoming more self-conscious and articulate. Some may even be described as proto-capitalists; they were certainly not averse to investing in trade and industrial production.²²

Yet the word yeoman was still current at the end of the fifteenth century in its older and original meaning. It still continued to be employed in noble and royal households. In the great noble households there remained three grades of servant — now gentlemen, yeomen and grooms (sometimes knaves). A list has survived of those present in John, Lord Howard's household on a visit to London on 22 January 1467. There were sixteen 'gentlemen' (three of whom were knights), forty-eight yeomen and twenty-seven grooms. The number of yeomen seems excessive, for sixteen years later, when he had risen to be duke of Norfolk, he was accompanied on a journey to London on 2 September 1483 with fifty-four men, no more than nineteen being yeomen. Greater detail of the household staff and their functions is given of the similar riding, or travelling household, of Henry Percy, earl of Northumberland, in 1511. It was laid down in his household statutes that when he set out on a journey a group of five servants would go ahead to set up the lodgings, three would accompany the baggage (also in advance) and another much larger party would follow to prepare the hall and chamber for his arrival. The rest would travel with him. Three yeomen, a yeoman usher of the chamber, a yeoman usher of the hall and a yeoman cook would be in the first party. Accompanying the baggage would be a yeoman porter for keeping the gate. A yeoman cellarer travelled with the third party. In the retinue of the earl himself rode a yeoman of the robes, a yeoman of the horse, a yeoman of the chamber, a yeoman of the pantry, a yeoman of the buttery, an unspecified number of

yeoman waiters and finally 'all other yeomen to ride behind the lord', presumably as the party's escort.²³

The official ordinances of the household of Edward IV, issued in 1478, give full details of the duties, perks and rewards of such yeomen. The yeomen of the chamber, of whom there were four in the king's household, were to make beds, to hold torches, to set boards (tables), to apparel all chambers and to carry out all other such tasks as ordered by the chamberlain or ushers of the chamber, taking the accustomed wages and receiving the usual livery (clothing allowance). Other royal yeomen, some duplicated in noble households, were the yeoman of the stool (the chamber pot), the yeoman of the armoury, the yeoman of the bows and a yeoman of the king's hounds. The royal household was the model for all others. The ordinances in fact laid down the nominal sizes of noble households, specifying, for instance, that a duke should have eighty men. It is clear too from Edward IV's ordinances, explicitly drawing upon similar ordinances laid down by Edward III, more than a century earlier, that the yeomen had a specifically military function. The twenty-four yeomen of the crown, who carried out all these various functions, had also to be the 'most semely persones, clenly and strongest archers, honest of condicions and of behavoure, boldmen, *chosen and tried out of every lordes house in Yngland for theyre cunynge and vertew*' (my italics). They were chosen men of 'manhoode [and] shootyng'. In the noble Edward's statutes, the ordinances further noted, they were called the 'xxiiij archers a pe currauntz enchierment deuaunt le roy pur payis pur gard corps du roy', called also 'the kinges watchement'. Thus it was laid down that 'whan they make wache nyghgtly they should be gurde with theyr swerdes or with other wepyns redy and harneys about them'.²⁴ This was an elite corps, the yeoman of the guard as they were to be later styled, whose responsibilities combined waiting on the king in various functions with maintaining the security of the palace. One assumes that the yeomen of the noble households, from which they were

recruited, carried out similar duties. Thus one might envisage that the yeomen who followed on the earl of Northumberland in 1511 were his armed guards, employed to protect him.

It is not hard to find examples of the term being used in the stories to denote service rank. In *Robin Hood and the Potter*, when Robin, in disguise, is in Nottingham, has sold the pots, and dined well with the sheriff and his wife, takes part in an archery contest. Since Robin had no bow with him,

*The screfe commandyd a yemen that stod hem bey
After bowbes to weynde,
The best bow that the yeman browthe
Roben set on a stryng.*²⁵

Was this the sheriff's yeoman of the bows? In the story of 'Little John and the Sheriff', Little John disguises himself as Reynolde Grenelefe to join the household service of the sheriff. Though the role he assumes is not specified, a post such as yeoman of the hall or chamber is envisaged, otherwise the comic action in which he assaults the steward and butler would make no sense. The cook, with whom he fights and finally absconds, is an equal, and proves himself an equal in combat. He is subsequently praised by Robin Hood as a 'fayre' yeoman.²⁶ At another point in the story of 'Robin Hood and the Knight', also incorporated into the *Gest*, Little John plays the role of a household yeoman in service to the knight as he sets off to repay his mortgage. Having been elaborately equipped by the outlaws, the knight finally departs with Little John standing in for his entire entourage:

*'It were greate shame', sayde Robyn,
'A knight alone to ryde,
Withoute squire, yoman, or page,
To walk by his syde*

'I shall the lende Littell Jobn, my man,
For he shal be thy knave,
In a yeman's stede he may the stande,
If thou greate nede have.'²⁷

The knight should have an honourable escort, worthy of his dignity. It might be smaller than that with which the duke of Norfolk or earl of Northumberland moved about the country, but the yeoman fulfils the same function. A similar sense of propriety is at play in an incident later in the story when, having lost an archery contest to the king in the disguise of an abbot, Robin prepares to take the customary forest penalty of a blow to the head. But the king refuses:

'It falleth not for mine order', seyde our kyng,
'Robyn, by thy leve,
For to smite no good yeman,
For doute I sholde hym greve.'²⁸

Neither a king nor an abbot should strike an honest servant. The distinction between the two types of yeomen is apparent in the texts. The same is found in *Adam Bell*, even more explicitly. At the end the three outlaws are received into the king's household. The king declares:

William, I make the a gentleman
Of clothing, and of fe:
And thi two brethren, yemen of my chamber,
For they are so seemly to me.'²⁹

Some yeomen in the stories of Robin Hood do, as Holt argued, hold household office.

Finally we can find the term being used simultaneously to

describe both a yeoman by office and a yeoman by status. In 1386 Isabella Claxton of Horden, the widow of Sir William Claxton, agreed a complex twelve-year lease of her manor of Hulam and its appurtenances in County Durham with three Betonson brothers who were to work the land. Among the clauses she undertook to provide clothing such as she gave her yeomen (*valetti*), and of the same livery, and if she failed to do so would make an allowance as a deduction of the rent to the value of clothing received by her own yeomen, or other yeomen in the neighbourhood. Thirty-four years later she entered into a similar agreement over the site of the manor of Claxton, in which again the tenant farmers were to receive annual robes of livery. In 1465 Henry, Lord FitzHugh retained Abraham Metcalf, yeoman, at Ravensworth in north Yorkshire, who was to have the lease of the demesne at Askrigg and other tenements in exchange for his sworn service at all times and to be 'good tenant and agreeable and of good reuill and demenyng to all the seid lord tenants'.³⁰ In an era of social flux, therefore, when contemporaries frequently complained that no one knew their place any more, the term yeoman encompassed several overlapping shades of meaning and incorporated diverse social groups. As Coss has stressed, the use of the term 'yeoman' in the stories is often hard to disentangle from the contemporary confusion of status and status terminology.³¹

There is, however, a specific further use of the term yeoman, 'yeoman of the forest', which brings official rank and social status even closer together and has particular relevance for the social world of the stories. Holt drew attention to a particular association between yeomen and the forest as early as his original article on the subject. As he pointed out, one of the earliest references to 'yonger men' is to be found in the twelfth-century *Pseudo-Cnut de Foresta*, in which they are under-foresters drawn from the middling ranks of freemen. But neither in his initial article nor in his later book did Holt develop the significance of the explicit

description of Robin and his men as foresters, or examine the terminology of forest and hunting which recurs in the ballads. In his first article, he stressed the manner in which Robin poached the king's deer, thus to be seen in the thirteenth-century context of conflict over forest rights between king and lords. But while he noted the probability that Robin's earliest audiences thought of him as an outlawed forester, he did not there, or subsequently, develop the idea further.³² He was more concerned to establish what he perceived as the broader aristocratic milieu of the ballads and Robin's rank as a household officer than to explore his particular identification as a specific kind of yeoman.

Coss noted too that Robin and his men are sometimes described as 'yeomen of the forest', but concluded, nevertheless, that the phrase applies to the outlaws' situation rather than their status. The term forester, he added, was used by way of contrast to a man specifically in royal service. By implication, were they foresters by occupation, the legendary outlaws would be described as such. Robin and his men are thus not yeomen of the forest, but outlawed yeomen of an intermediary social status who have sought refuge in the forest. We are thus to picture Robin and his fellows as prosperous countrymen in flight from justice who have banded together in the woods.³³ Yet the key to Robin Hood's own yeomanry, and his being equally at home in rural society and in household service, lies in his identification by the audience as a yeoman of the forest.

In the *Gest*, Little John holds up the cellarer of St Mary's Abbey, York:

*'Who is your mayster?' sayd the monke
Lytell Johan sayd, 'Robin Hode',
'He is a stronge thefe', said the monke
'Of hym herd I never good'.*

*'Thou liest', than sayd Lytell Johan,
'And that shall rew the,
He is a yeman of the forest,
To dyne he bath bode the'.³⁴*

A yeoman of the forest is the antithesis of a strong thief. This angry exchange can make sense only if one appreciates that it was the yeoman of the forest's role to apprehend common criminals; in Little John's eyes his master did not break the law, he upheld it. He is, in short, a forester. The specific meaning of a forester is reinforced when, later in the *Gest*, Robin himself with his men behind him holds up the king, who is disguised as a monk. He declares

*We be yemen of this forest,
Under the grenewode tre,
We lyve by oure kynges dere,
Other shyft have not we.³⁵*

He too identifies himself and his men as honest foresters, whose sole duty is to protect the king's deer. Furthermore, he and his men now claim to be explicitly yeomen of *this* forest; they are, the king/abbot is to believe, his serving foresters of Barnsdale/Sherwood.³⁶

Late-medieval foresters, the yeomen of the forest, were part of the extended household of the king and great lords; the household out of doors as it were. They exercised a wide range of duties. The responsibility for preserving the vert (the vegetation) and venison (the game) in all forests, seigneurial as well as royal, lay with them. Each belonged to an elaborate establishment. At its head, the keepership, was usually an office occupied as a sinecure by a courtier or retainer. The principal man on the spot was the chief forester, who was himself assisted by a team of riding or

mounted foresters, whose responsibility extended over the whole forest, and by dismounted or walking foresters, each of whom kept a division of the forest known also as a walk, ward or bailiwick. The first duty of the yeoman forester was the protection of the deer in his 'division'. He needed to know that division like the back of his hand. He had to be alert for poachers, to provide winter feed for the deer, and to take care of the hinds and newly dropped calves during the 'fence month' (the equivalent to the close season) around Midsummer Day. But he had also to preserve the vert, which included the prevention of unlicensed grazing, the detection of illegal logging and the management of woodland in all its aspects. He walked or, if he were mounted, rode round his section of the forest protecting the game and the vegetation.³⁷

There were nine working foresters employed in the New Forest at the end of the fifteenth century, nine in the forest of Clarendon, six employed by the earls of Westmorland in their Durham forests and sixteen, including parkers and woodwards, in the seigneurial forest of Wensleydale. The New Forest establishment, for instance, was headed by the Keeper, a sinecure held by the earl of Arundel in the 1480s. He employed a lieutenant and a deputy lieutenant. Beneath them came a chief forester, the riding forester, two rangers and the bowbearer. Then there were the nine foresters each responsible for a separate bailiwick. The office of forester was of local importance, sometimes held by members of minor gentry families, but more characteristically in the fifteenth century by those of lesser families, yeomen by status as well as occupation, bearing names in Wensleydale such as Forster, Hunt and Hunter. The post carried with it rights of pasture and pannage, the concession of cutting a number of standing trees and the privilege of taking one or two deer a year. Some, reckoned always to be on duty, were paid a salary of two pence a day. Other forest officials, such as verderers, woodwards, rangers and agisters, were also of yeoman status, as were the parkers of the enclosed parks both

within and separate from the forests themselves. Taking all the forests and chases throughout England, there were literally hundreds of them in the kingdom at large.³⁸

Sir John Fortescue in his idealised descriptions of England had a special word to say for these men. Discussing the king's officers he comments,

the least of them, although he be only a parker, taking but two pence a day, yet he has yearly £3 and 10 pence, besides his dwelling in his lodge, his cow for his milk, and such other things about him, and the fees of his office, so that the office is to him as would be 100 shillings of fee or rent, which is a fair living for a yeoman.

Thus, *mutis mutandis*, for a forester who received the same fee, and enjoyed similar benefits. And so also for those employed not by the king, but by great lords such as the third earl of Westmorland, whose parkers and foresters on his Durham estates enjoyed the same rate of pay. Fortescue valued them, he wrote, because in them, after the might of the great lords, lay the might of the land. 'Some forester of the king's', he asserted, 'who has no other livelihood, may bring more men to the field well arrayed, especially for shooting, than may some knight or squire of very great livelihood, dwelling by him but having no office'. This applied, too, as Fortescue knew, to his 'overmighty subjects', the great lords of the realm. As archers, and the leaders of archers, foresters provided a significant part of the kingdom's military reserve.³⁹

These are the same yeomen, foresters, whom Little John and his fellows are not to molest. They can prey on churchmen and the Sheriff of Nottingham,

*But loke ye do no husbonde barme,
That tylleth with his ploughe.*

No more ye shall gode yeman
That walketh by grene wode shaw.⁴⁰

These yeomen are not substantial farmers of an intermediary status between husbandmen and gentry, as has usually been supposed. An unambiguous distinction is drawn, in the conventional terminology of estates, between those who work the land and those who patrol the forest. Confirmation that walking 'by grene wode shaw' is a job description is to be found in the surviving records of Sherwood Forest itself. A late-fifteenth-century transcription of the oath made by foresters includes the undertaking to 'kepe and walke the office of forestership and trewe watche make bothe erly and late both for vert and venyson'.⁴¹ An eighteenth-century copy of the charge of the court of swanimote likewise refers to the foresters and walkers within the forest.⁴² The occupational description is made even more explicit in the opening two stanzas of *Adam Bell*:

Mery it was in grene forest
Among the leves grene,
When that men walke both east and west
Wyth bowes and arrowwes ken:

To ryse the dere out of theyr denne,
Such sightes as bath ofte bene sene,
As þy yemen of the north countrey,
By them it is as I meane.⁴³

And then Adam Bell, Clim of the Clough and William of Cloudesly are named. They come from the same background as Robin Hood and Little John.

Robin is not just a forester: he is himself the self-proclaimed 'chief governoure' of the forest, the master in outlawry of a fabulous 140 'wight' yeomen, as if all the foresters of the north had flocked

to his side. When, at the end of the *Gest*, he deserts the court and returns to the life of a forest outlaw, he blows his horn, and all the old gang reassemble, duff their hoods, kneel and welcome their master back. He is the forest king. So knowledgeable of his kingdom is he that he is able to lead not only the sheriff but also the crowned king a merry dance from forest to forest. Only another 'proud' forester in the royal service knows how to track him down, and that is by the ruse of the king disguising himself as a monk, a guest Robin can never resist inviting to dinner.⁴⁴

As befits the self-proclaimed chief governor of the forest, Robin needed a bowbearer, for in all forest administration a bowbearer was appointed to carry the keeper of the forest's bow when he came to hunt, or to accompany the king when hunting, and possibly also to act as his personal bodyguard. He was also his deputy, charged with overseeing the administration of the forest law in his absence.⁴⁵ This is a role, however, which Little John rejects at the beginning of the story of *Robin Hood and the Monk*. Robin, planning to go into Nottingham to participate in an archery contest, is advised to take an escort of twelve men. But no,

'Of all my merry men', seid Robyn,
'Be my feith I will none have,
But Litul John shall beyre my bow,
Till that me list to drawe'.

To which Little John, asserting bluntly that there is no room in the greenwood fellowship for such aristocratic hierarchy, replies,

'Thou shall beyre thin own, Maister,
and I will beyre mine'.⁴⁶

William of Cloudesly, on the other hand, is happy after he is pardoned to accept the role of king's bowbearer, with a fee of 18

pence a day and the additional office of Riding Forester of the North.⁴⁷

Finally, Robin and his men, as no one needs reminding, dressed in green. They don the uniform when they go into action. Thus in the fourth fyfte of the *Gest*, part of the story of 'Robin Hood and the Knight', when the outlaws go up to Sayles to lie in wait for an unsuspecting guest, they go with bow in hand, and Little John, as Robin's lieutenant,

*Gyred hym with a full god sworde,
Under a mantel grene*⁴⁸

At the climax of 'Robin Hood and the King', the king and his men cast away their robes in which they had come to the forest disguised as monks and clothe themselves in Lincoln green, dressed as foresters they descend with the outlaws on Nottingham.⁴⁹

Robin was, as Chaucer put it in his description of the Knight's yeoman, 'a forster . . . soothly' (modernised by Coghill as a proper forester). 'Of wodecraft wel coude he al the usage'. That is to say he was a master of the handicraft of forestry. Chaucer described a riding forester, mounted on horseback. He is dressed accordingly 'in cote and hood of grene' and carries the forester's tackle of bow, arrows, shield, sword and dirk, complete with a horn, even 'the bawdric' (baldric), the belt on which his horn was carried, 'was of grene'.⁵⁰ This yeoman forester, now on foot, reappears in the 'Friar's Tale', all in green again, carrying a bow and standing under a 'leafy shaw'. The reader may mistake him for Robin Hood himself, for he passes himself off to the summoner, whom he hopes to entertain one day, as a man like himself, a grasping bailiff from far away in the north. But the joke is on the reader as well as his new companion, for the mysterious forester soon reveals himself to be a fiend come to take the summoner down to hell.⁵¹



1 The yeoman as household officer: in this detail from January in the calendar in *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, a household yeoman, or valet, an usher of the chamber in his English equivalent, can be seen bringing a visitor to the household (top left wearing a red hat) into the duke's presence (far right). (See p. 37.)
Musée Condée, Chantilly, France.



14 'Oure comly kynge': Edward III, the flower of kings past and the glory of kings to come, here portrayed as the venerable founder of the Order of the Garter. He was the most likely of the first four Edwards to have been the model for the king in the early stories. Yet memory of the ultimate failure of even this paragon, embedded in the narrative of the *Gest*, reminded audiences to put their trust in Robin Hood rather than princes. (See pp. 200–1.)

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Fifteenth-century men and women of all ranks, not just the poet, who was himself briefly absentee Forester of North Petherton in Somerset (Quantock Forest) in the 1390s,⁵² are likely to have been familiar with the forest world to which Robin Hood belonged. Forests, seigneurial as well as royal, existed in almost every county of England. Some were extensive. Foresters were still significant local officials. They were, as servants of their lord or of the king, members of their extended households, receiving fees from them. At the same time they were also of their local communities, frequently landholders themselves. In some districts, service when the king hunted was one of the conditions of tenure.⁵³ There were thus few parts of rural England where husbandmen and labourers did not know and deal with foresters and hunters, seigneurial or royal. Sometimes relationships were amicable and peaceful; sometimes they were not. But the yeoman forester was a familiar figure, a member of both the society of countrymen and the world of aristocratic service. While he occupied a higher social status than his occupational descendant the gamekeeper, like him his role gave him a foot in both camps.

The extent to which a forester belonged to the world of the gentle as well as the commoner is demonstrated by the need for him to be familiar with the code of aristocratic hunting. Paralleling the local forest administrations of the crown and great lords were local hunt establishments. In 1408, Edward, duke of York, the author of the early-fifteenth-century translation of the *Livre de Chasse* as the *Master of Game*, entered into a contract with Henry IV as his master of hart hounds in Somerset and Dorset. He agreed to retain two yeomen berners at horse (*valets de chiens* or *kennelmen*) at four pence daily, four yeomen berners at foot at two pence daily, two yeomen fewterers (who held the greyhounds ready to let slip the leash at the appropriate moment in the hunt) also paid two pence a day, and four groom fewterers. In Chapter XXXVI of

the *Master of Game*, entitled 'Of the ordinance and the manner of hunting when the king will hunt in forests or parks for the hart with bows and stable', the duke states that the master of the game, the organiser of the royal hunts, is required to arrange with the master forester where the king will hunt. The master forester is to advise the master of the game where the deer are to be found, and to direct his foresters to set up the hunting positions, and to meet the huntsmen and escort them to their posts so as to avoid disturbing the game.⁵⁵ The foresters who worked alongside the huntsmen needed themselves to know how to conduct a hunt and how to deal with the quarry when it was killed. They were required, as part of their craft, to know the specialised terminology of hunting and to be able to participate in the formalised rituals involved in virtually every aspect of this aristocratic pastime.

As expected of foresters, Robin Hood and his men are fully conversant with the art of venery. They understand the hunting terminology and practices employed, such as the correct description of a 'great hart' or a 'dun deer', the way to 'undo' the carcass, and are familiar with the dining customs, especially the eating of the numbles or offal.⁵⁵ And they practise the different types of hunting. On one occasion Robin stalks his prey like a poacher, common or gentle. This is on his return to the forest after his flight from court at the end of the *Gest*, when he goes out alone to shoot 'a full grete hart'. In this respect he is like Bell, Clim and Cloudesly, who, after they have fought their way out of Carlisle, celebrate their return to the forest by each slaying a 'hart of graece' the best there were.⁵⁶ Once, too, hunting 'par force', the chasing of a hart by mounted huntsmen with hounds, occurs. But this is a lampoon in which the sheriff is gulled by Little John, alias his servant Reynolde Grenelefe, who offers to lead him as a forester should to a 'ryghte fayre hart', his colour all of green, with a herd of seven score deer, each with sixty sharp tyndes (tines, the points

of the antlers). Of course the hart is Robin with his merry men armed with bows and arrows. In this mockery of aristocratic hunting, the stupid sheriff is led into an ambush by 'the mayster herte' at his tryst.⁵⁷

The use here of the word 'tryst' is a reference to the other, and increasingly favoured, form of aristocratic hunting, 'bow and stable', in which herds of deer, red and fallow, hinds and does as well as younger males were driven towards standing huntsmen. The principal huntsman took up his stand, accompanied by his yeoman of the bows (or bowbearer) and the fewterers with their hounds ready to be let slip. In a large (especially royal) hunt, courtiers and gentle companions were directed to their own stands nearby, each with their own bowbearers and fewterers. Other hunters, including the professional hunt staff and foresters were stationed around the boundaries of the section to drive any 'great deer' (harts) back towards the hunting party and to take lesser game for themselves. The place, or station, where the gentle huntsman stood with his bowbearer and fewterer to receive the deer was also called the tryst. It was frequently placed beside or in front of a prominent tree. Thus occasionally the word 'tree' is used for 'standing' or 'tryst'. In a great hunt, especially when the queen or ladies were accompanying the king or noble hunter, a lodge, or hide, of green boughs was constructed by the fewterers at the tryst for shelter and camouflage.⁵⁸

Knowledge and practice of bow and stable hunting by the outlaws is clearly implied. In the *Gest*, after he has intercepted and invited the king, disguised as an abbot, to dine, and having discovered that he carries the king's seal, Robin lays on a hunt.

*'Syr Abbot, for thy tydynges,
To day thou shalt dyne with me,
For the love of my kyng,
Under my trystell tree.'*

Forth be lad our comly kinge,
Full sayre by the bonde,
Many a dere there was slayne,
And full fast dyghtande.⁵⁹

The abbot/king does more than dine at the trystel tree. Robin leads him there courteously by the hand, just as the yeoman of the bow is instructed in the *Master of Game*. And there many deer are slain before being 'undone' (dyghtande) for eating. In other words Robin organises a hunt by bow and stable and then breaks up the carcasses in the proper manner, before providing the feast. The outlaws are also accustomed to organising a bow and stable hunt for their own entertainment, or larder. In a passage in *Robin Hood and the Monk*, Little John and Much set out to ambush the monk. But before they leave, it seems, John instructs the other outlaws to have some sport:

'Loke that ye kepe wel our tristil tre,
Under the leves smale,
And spare non of this venyson,
That gose in this vale'.⁶⁰

Poaching is done in style.

This trystel tree has more uses than as a hunting spot where deer are killed. Little John proposes that Robin waits under a trystel tree while he goes forward to challenge Guy of Gisborne. Robin himself, disguised as the potter, boasts to the sheriff that he has had a hundred bouts with the great outlaw under his trysting tree. The lodge fulfils a similar role. Robin welcomes the knight and the cellarer of St Mary's at the lodge door. Before the knight leaves he undertakes to repay Robin for his loan a year later, 'under this greenwood tree'. On his return, he is welcomed again by Robin 'under my trystell tre'. It would seem that in this tale the

greenwood tree, the trystel tree and the lodge are one and the same place. The trystel tree and associated lodge are the symbolic places where Robin exercises his authority as the 'king' of the forest. Thus it would appear that the game played by the young Henry VIII on Shooters Hill on 1 May 1515, when he, dressed all in green, and the queen were welcomed by Robin Hood at his 'arbour of boughs' was a more meaningful playing out of a scene from the tale of 'Robin Hood and the King' than has usually been supposed.⁶¹

The symbolism of the trystel tree depends on Robin being clearly identified by the audience, gentle and common, as an outlawed forester. The stories are nevertheless ambivalent in their attitude to hunting. They present Robin Hood as a dutiful and diligent forester, organising a hunt for the abbot/king; they casually refer to his fellow outlaws hunting themselves by bow and stable. They portray Robin stalking, the manner of poaching practised by nobleman and commoner alike. On the other hand they mock the aristocratic method of hunting par force in the gulling of the sheriff. The outlaws sometime dine as gentlemen, sometimes as foresters. They adopt the same hierarchy as legitimate foresters. Little John might at first refuse to be Robin's bowbearer, but in the end he accepts his position as a subordinate. These ambiguities, all apparent in the stories which make up the *Gest*, nevertheless all derive from the status of Robin Hood and his men as outlawed yeomen of the forest.

The ambivalence in the texts is matched by the contradiction between knowledge of hunting assumed by them and the social exclusiveness claimed for hunting in romance and treatise. Books VIII–X of Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* concern Sir Tristram de Lyonesse's exile in the forest. Corinne Saunders suggests that Malory depicts him as the epitome of a huntsman, 'the chief chacer of the worlde and noblyst blower of a horne'. As such he is the pattern of gentility.⁶² Indeed, the author adds a much

quoted digression to his tale when he reminds his readers that Sir Tristram devised the terminology of hunting and for that reason the book of venery was called the book of Sir Tristram. Thus

all jantylmen that beryth old armys ought of right to honour sir Trystrams for the goodly tearmys that jantylmen have and use and shall do unto the day of Dome, that thereby in a maner all men of worship may discever a jantylman from a yoman and a yoman from a vylane.⁶³

Leaving aside the question of what kind of yeoman Malory had in mind, Robin Hood, as a yeoman of the forest, evidently broke this rule. He also knows all the terms of hunting. The *Master of Game*, a stickler for correct terminology, also makes it clear that one can tell a gentleman from others because he refers to a 'great hart', not to a 'big' or 'large' hart, and can distinguish correctly the three different coat colours of brown, yellow and dun.⁶⁴ It is reasonable to suppose that, notwithstanding Malory's snobbish assertion that only a gentleman should know the finer points of distinction of venery, those from lower social groups, to whom the tales were often addressed, were also familiar with them. The Oxfordshire gentleman, Peter Idley, moaned that nowadays, 'a man shall not know a knave from a knight, for all be alike in clothing and array'; he could probably have added that they could tell a brown hart from a dun too.⁶⁵

Around the figure of yeoman forester could be created different, even contradictory situations, for different audiences. In 'Robin Hood and the King', for instance, hunting is treated with respect; the forester plays his proper role in laying on a hunt for his master. In 'Little John and the Sheriff', another story incorporated into the *Gest*, aristocratic hunting is parodied. In both 'Robin Hood and the Knight' and 'Robin Hood and the King', the

social order is treated with solemnity: rank is recognised and loyal service is rewarded. But in 'Little John and the Sheriff', the conventions of courtesy, good service and household order are lampooned. In the first the figure is constructed to conform with social norms and hierarchy, and thus perhaps to appeal, not only to those of gentle blood themselves, but also to those worthy and respectable yeomen who may have had aspirations to gentility. In others he is made to be more subversive, and thus perhaps appeal to those who had no time for such pretensions, or even for the gentry themselves. The wider appeal to all yeomen is most clearly reflected in *Robin Hood and the Potter*. The potter himself, an artisan, is recognised as a good yeoman and becomes, as it were, an honorary outlaw. *Guy of Gisborne* is the most directly focused on the forest world itself, having as its theme the conflict between good and bad foresters. Guy, another 'wight yeoman', is a bounty hunter, hired by the sheriff to kill Robin, who had been 'many a mans bane', and has 'done many a curst turn'.⁶⁶ He meets his richly deserved and grisly end, his head treated as a hunting trophy. The sheriff is shot in flight as if he were the hunted beast. Is this a ballad which yeomen of the forest themselves would have appreciated most?

The yeomanry of Robin Hood is thus a complex, if not to say confusing, matter. The identification of the outlaws as yeomen lies at the cusp of a significant change in the usage and meaning of the term from a descriptor of household rank to a descriptor of social status. In fifteenth- and early-sixteenth-century society it meant both things and was on occasion used at the same time in both senses. And so too in the stories, where the uses of the word to describe Robin Hood himself and as an invocation to the audience are not necessarily calling upon the same meaning. But the particular and unambiguous identification of Robin Hood as a very specific kind of yeoman, a yeoman of the forest, or forester, provides a fixed point of reference in this fluidity. His status as a

forester, a figure familiar to both gentle and common audiences, who practises a skill, shooting, which is admired by both and sustains himself by an activity, hunting, which is exercised by both, brings the heterogeneous elements of audience and narrative together. He is both of intermediary rank and of intermediary status. The liminal character of this situation means that Robin Hood is a hero cut for all. As a fifteenth-century literary figure, therefore, Robin need neither be seen exclusively as belonging to the milieu of the aristocratic household, nor solely as a representative of a new middling sort. He reaches out beyond precise social categories. When we first come across him in the fifteenth-century versions of the stories, he is already all things to all men, and the idealised greenwood in which he operates is an appropriate milieu in which all men can imagine him.

NOTES

1 Texts and Context

- 1 Julian Barnes, *England, England* (London: Picador, 1999), p. 148.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 83, 146–51, 221–5, 227–32.
- 3 Maurice Keen, *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1977), p. 177. The same passage is translated by Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren, eds, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University Press, 1997), p. 26, as 'whom the foolish populace are so inordinately fond of celebrating both in tragedies and comedies, and about whom they are delighted to hear the jesters and minstrels sing above all other ballads.' See also p. 112.
- 4 Chaucer, *Complete Works*, vol. 4, pp. 645–67 (*Gamelyn*) and Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*, pp. 258–73 (*Adam Bell*). While the hero of the story is William of Cloudesly, it has always been known as *Adam Bell*, *Clim of the Clough* and *William of Cloudesly*. All references to the text are therefore to *Adam Bell*.
- 5 *Gest*, stanza 315.
- 6 For a recent discussion of the problem of dating see R. B. Dobson, 'Robin Hood: The Genesis of a Popular Hero', in Thomas Hahn, ed., *Robin Hood in Popular Culture* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 64–70. Linguistic analysis by Douglas Gray, 'The Robin Hood Poems', *Poetica*, 18 (1984), 1–18, indicates c.1400 and possibly earlier as the date of composition of parts of the text of the *Gest*. Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994), pp. 47–9, has proposed a date of recording as late as c.1450, but this does not preclude earlier oral composition. Thomas Ohlgren has suggested in a private communication that the text was brought together from lost manuscripts by its first printer in the 1490s. In their surviving versions, the other 'early' ballads (*Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*, *Robin Hood and the Monk* and *Robin Hood and the Potter*) seem to date from before or shortly after 1500.
- 7 Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*, pp. 113–22; Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood*, pp. 31–4.
- 8 Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*, pp. 123–32; Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood*, pp. 57–9; Thomas Ohlgren, 'Richard Call, the Pastons and the Manuscript

- Context of Robin Hood and the Potter (Cambridge, University Library Ee.4.35.1)', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 45 (2001), 210–33.
- 9 Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*, pp. 140–5; Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood*, pp. 169–71; John Marshall, 'Playing the Game: Reconstructing Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham', in Hahn, ed., *Robin Hood in Popular Culture*, pp. 161–74.
 - 10 Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*, pp. 146–64. Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 14–33 suggests that the *Gest*, more self-consciously heroic in tone than the three free-standing stories, transforms what had been similarly more down-to-earth tales into a format for a more socially elevated audience, and thus represents a stage in the growth of the respectability of the hero.
 - 11 *Gest*, stanzas 1, 144 and 317. The second occasion, addressed to 'All that nowe be here', is at the beginning of the third fytte introducing the story of 'Little John and the Sheriff' and promises them 'Goode myrth'.
 - 12 *Gest*, stanza 456.
 - 13 *Potter*, stanzas 2 and 83. The yeomen audience is addressed as 'Comley, cortessey and god'.
 - 14 *Ibid.*, stanza 83; *Gest*, stanzas 71–4. Little John is described as the 'devil's draper'. The mercantile theme has attracted recent attention. Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood*, pp. 58–9, while noting the wide appeal of the tale, stress the mocking of 'mercantile' values in *Potter*. On the other hand, Ohlgren, 'The "Marchaunt" of Sherwood: Mercantile Ideology in A *Gest of Robyn Hode*', in Hahn, ed., *Robin Hood in Popular Culture*, pp. 175–90, suggests that the narrative reflects them.
 - 15 G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Late Medieval England*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961), pp. 10–11. For minstrels and their role in the dissemination of the Robin Hood stores, see Holt, *Robin Hood*, pp. 110–13; 128–41.
 - 16 T. H. Jamieson, ed., *The Shyp of Folyes of the Worlde*, (London, 1874), vol. 2, p. 155. Was Barclay making a specific reference to the *Gest* by consciously playing on the meaning of the word, for a jest, after all, is both a story and a joke, and a jester is both a storyteller and a joker?
 - 17 G. E. Duffield, ed., *The Work of William Tyndale* (Appleford, Berks.: Marcham Manor Press, 1964), p. 164; E. Arber, ed., *Hugh Latimer, Seven Sermons before Edward VI* (London: Murray, 1869), pp. 173–4.
 - 18 Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*, pp. 1–4.
 - 19 Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500–1700* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), *passim*.
 - 20 Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*, p. 3.
 - 21 *Ibid.*, 38–42; David Wiles, *The Early Plays of Robin Hood* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1981), *passim*; Knight, *Complete Study*, pp. 98–108; Jeffrey L. Singman, *Robin Hood: The Shaping of a Legend* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998), pp. 62–103. See also note 9 and pp. 168–71.
 - 22 John Marshall, "'goon in-to Bernysdale": The Trail of the Paston Robin Hood Play', *Leeds Studies in English*, 29 (1998), 185–217.
 - 23 *Monk*, stanza 17.
 - 24 *Monk*, stanza 84.
 - 25 Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*, pp. 260–77.
 - 26 Chaucer, *Complete Works*, vol. 4, pp. 645–67; Keen, *Outlaws*, pp. 78–94; Richard W. Kaeuper, 'An Historian's Reading of the Tale of Gamelyn', *Medium Aevium*, 52 (1983), 51–62. For a version in modern English see Stephen Knight, 'The Tale of Gamelyn', in Thomas H. Ohlgren, ed., *Medieval Outlaws: Ten Tales in Modern English* (Stroud: Sutton, 1998), pp. 168–86.
 - 27 Keen, *Outlaws*, pp. 1–8.
 - 28 Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*, pp. 41–6; Singman, *Robin Hood*, pp. 84–5; Knight, *Complete Study*, pp. 115–34; Knight, *Mythic Biography*, pp. 49–65. It is possible that the introduction of Maid Marian into the story drew upon 'The Nut Brown Maid', another late medieval story concerning a maiden who proved her love by enduring the privation of the forest.
 - 28 Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*, pp. 53–8; Knight, *Complete Study*, pp. 153–217.
 - 30 D. Crook, 'Some Further Evidence Concerning the Dating of the Origins of the Legend of Robin Hood', *EHR*, 99 (1984), 530–4; D. Crook, 'The Sheriff of Nottingham and the Robin Hood Stories: The Genesis of the Legend', in P. R. Coss and S. D. Lloyd, eds, *Thirteenth Century England*, vol. 2 (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1988); J. C. Holt, 'The Origins of the Legend', in K. Carpenter, ed., *Robin Hood: The Many Faces of that Celebrated English Outlaw* (Oldenberg: BIS, 1995), pp. 27–34; R. B. Dobson and J. Taylor, 'Robin Hood of Barnsdale: A Fellow Thou has Long Sought', *Northern History*, 19 (1983), 210–20; Dobson, 'Genesis', pp. 70–7.
 - 31 Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*, pp. xxi–xxii, xxx–xxxii, 10–17.
 - 32 For the texts of Wyntoun and Bower in translation, see Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood*, pp. 24–6.
 - 33 S. Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 149; N. Davies, *The Isles: A History of Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 437–8; A. J. Pollard, *Late Medieval England, 1399–1509* (London: Longman, 2000), pp. 1–11.
 - 34 A. J. Pollard, *The Wars of the Roses*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 19–40, 65–80.
 - 35 For this and the following paragraphs see R. H. Britnell, *The Commercialisation of English Society, 1000–1500*, 2nd edn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 155–237; Christopher Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages: The People of Britain, 850–1520* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 265–365; Mark Ormrod and Philip Lindley, eds, *The Black Death in England* (Stamford, Lincs.: Paul Watkins, 1996); Pollard, *Late Medieval England*, pp. 169–203.
 - 36 Durham, Dean and Chapter Records, Halmote Rolls, Billingham, Summer 1477.
 - 37 A. McFarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976), *passim*.

- 38 J. Fortescue, *On the Laws and Governance of England*, ed. S. J. Lockwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 42–3.
- 39 J. Whittle, *The Development of Agrarian Capitalism: Land and Labour in Norfolk, 1440–1580* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p. 11; P. R. Schofield, *Peasant and Community in Medieval England, 1200–1500* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), pp. 1–10.
- 40 Dyer, *Making a Living*, pp. 163–8; Whittle, *Agrarian Capitalism*, pp. 5–16.
- 41 See in particular the argument of Britnell, *Commercialisation of English Society*, esp. pp. 228–237.
- 42 C. C. Dyer, 'Were There any Capitalists in Fifteenth-Century England?', in Jennifer Kermode, ed., *Enterprise and Individuals in Fifteenth-Century England* (Stroud: Sutton, 1991), pp. 10–16, 19, 21. For Keith Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain, 1470–1750* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), p. 29, the key point, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, is that there was no 'concept of a market order as a self-regulating system of economic relationships' (p. 29); see also Britnell, *Commercialisation of English Society*, pp. 233–7, and the comments of L. R. Poos, *A Rural Society after the Black Death: Essex, 1350–1525* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 291–3, concerning the economic and cultural differentiation of northern and central Essex where a 'proto-yeomanry' dominated the countryside, which had a predominance of wage-earners and a distinctive industrial sector. Others might have said 'proto-capitalist'.
- 43 John Hatcher, 'The Great Slump of the Mid-Fifteenth Century', in R. H. Britnell and J. Hatcher, eds, *Progress and Problems in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 237–72.
- 44 R. H. Britnell, *The Closing of the Middle Ages? England 1471–1529* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 208–47, esp. pp. 241.
- 45 *Gest*, stanza 437.
- 46 See especially Gray, 'The Robin Hood Poems', *passim*; Knight, *Complete Study*, pp. 44–81; Knight, *Mythic Biography*, pp. 1–32; Ohlgren, 'Richard Call', *passim*, and Marshall, 'Playing the Game'. Knight, *Mythic Biography*, pp. 193–202, offers a selective discussion of the writings of twentieth-century historians, in which he remarks that some 'have produced some of the most limited and intellectually self-centred of the accounts of the hero's biography' (p. 201). While one is not sure what he is driving at, one hopes, since it is not a 'biography', that this work will escape such censure.
- 47 *Potter*, stanzas 76–9.
- 48 *Gest*, stanzas 126–7, 334–9.
- 49 *Gest*, stanzas 451–5. In *Death*, a fuller though not complete version of the story which was perhaps the source, she is first the prioress and then a widow (Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*, pp. 134–7).
- 50 *Gest*, stanzas 1–18.

2 *Yeomanry*

- 1 *Potter*, stanza 83.
- 2 Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*, p. 34. Elements of this chapter have previously appeared in Richard Almond and A. J. Pollard, 'The Yeomanry of Robin Hood and Social Terminology in Fifteenth-century England', *Past and Present*, 170 (2001), pp. 52–77.
- 3 R. H. Hilton, 'The Origins of Robin Hood', *Past and Present*, 14 (1958), 30–44, reprinted in Hilton, ed., *Peasants, Knights and Heretics: Studies in Medieval English Social History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Maurice Keen, 'Robin Hood — Peasant or Gentleman?', *Past and Present*, 19 (1961), 7–15, reprinted in Hilton, *Peasants, Knights and Heretics*, pp. 258–64.
- 4 J. C. Holt, 'The Origins and Audience of the Ballads of Robin Hood', *Past and Present*, 18 (1960), 89–110, reprinted in R. H. Hilton, ed., *Peasants, Knights and Heretics*, pp. 236–57; J. C. Holt, *Robin Hood* (London, Thames & Hudson, 1982), pp. 118–24, 128–43, and reinforced in his 1989 postscript (p. 197), 'the earliest tales were primarily addressed to yeomen of the household. They reflect the skills, ambitions and social assumptions of these men and the conventions of service and reward of the world in which they moved. The earliest tales fit no other context'.
- 5 Peter Coss, 'Aspects of Cultural Diffusion in Medieval England: The Early Romances, Local Society and Robin Hood', *Past and Present*, 108 (1985), 66–79, esp. pp. 73–4.
- 6 Colin Richmond, 'An Outlaw and Some Peasants: The Possible Significance of Robin Hood', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 37 (1993), 90–101.
- 7 Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*, p. xxxvi.
- 8 *Statutes of the Realm*, vol. 1, 380. These views are broadly in accord with those of Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Ohlgren, eds, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University Press, 1997), pp. 34, 59, who identify a 'dream of yeomanly community' in *Monk* and an exploration of yeomanly values appropriate to a new social stratum in *Potter*.
- 9 Holt, *Robin Hood*, pp. 124, 127.
- 10 *Gest*, stanzas 287–8.
- 11 Chaucer, *Complete Works*, pp. 658, 660–1; *Gamelyn*, ll. 551–3, 613–58.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 662.
- 13 M. P. Davies, 'The Tailors of London and their Guild, c.1300–1500', unpublished D Phil thesis, University of Oxford, 1994, pp. 147–56; Davies, 'The Tailors of London: Corporate Charity in the Late-Medieval Town', in R. E. Archer, ed., *Crown, Government and People in the Fifteenth Century* (Stroud: Sutton, 1995), pp. 175–6. The term was also interchangeable with the word bachelor.
- 14 J. W. Clay, ed., *North Country Wills* (Woodbridge: Surtees Society, 117, 1908), p. 72.
- 15 North Yorkshire County Record Office, Clervaux Cartulary, fo 55; A. J. Pollard, 'Richard Clervaux of Croft', in Pollard, *The Worlds of Richard III* (Stroud: Tempus, 2001), p. 104.

- 16 Durham, Dean and Chapter Library, Misc. Ch 625.
- 17 M. H. Keen, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p. 8.
- 18 Durham, Dean and Chapter, Misc. Ch. 7012; Pollard, 'Richard Clervaux', p. 105; G. E. Corrie, ed., *Sermons by Hugh Latimer*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Parker Society, 1884–5), p. 101.
- 19 Sir John Fortescue, *On the Laws and Governance of England*, ed. S. J. Lockwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.43. For jury service of the type Fortescue had in mind, see Anne DeWindt, 'Local Government in a Small Town', *Albion*, 23 (1991), 627–54; R. Goheen, 'Peasant Politics? Village Community and the Crown in Fifteenth-Century England', *American History Review*, 96 (1991), 46–62; Francesca Bumpus, 'The "Middling Sort" in the Lordship of Blakemere, Shropshire, c.1380–c.1420', in T. Thornton, ed., *Social Attitudes and Political Structures in Fifteenth Century England* (Stroud: Sutton, 2000), pp. 202–18; Keith Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain, 1470–1750* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 99–102, and Pollard, *Fifteenth-Century England*, pp. 188–90.
- 20 C. L. Kingsford, ed., *The Stonor Letters and Papers* (London: Camden third series, 29, 1919), p. 95. See also the discussion in Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*, pp. 34–5.
- 21 Thomas Ohlgren, 'Richard Call, the Pastons, and the Manuscript Context of Robin Hood and the Potter', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 45 (2001), pp. 215, 220–25; Colin Richmond, *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: Endings* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 94–5.
- 22 See pp. 22–5.
- 23 Anne Crawford, ed., *The Household Books of John Howard, Duke of Norfolk, 1462–74, 1484–3* (Stroud: Sutton for Richard III and Yorkist History Trust, 1992), pp. xl–xlii; C. M. Woolgar, *The Great Household in Late Medieval England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 189.
- 24 A. R. Myers, ed., *The Household of Edward IV: The Black Book and Ordinances of 1478* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959), pp. 116–17. One can note too that Sir John Paston, en route to Calais in 1473, found himself delayed by the failure of a 'yonge man' to join his retinue. Accordingly he wrote to his brother John asking if he knew of any 'lykly men, and fayr condyioned, and good archers' (*Paston Letters*, v, no. 834, p. 185).
- 25 *Potter*, stanza 49.
- 26 *Gest*, stanzas 163–71, 178.
- 27 *Gest*, stanzas 80–1.
- 28 *Gest*, stanza 406.
- 29 *Adam Bell*, stanza 165.
- 30 Durham, Dean and Chapter, Misc. Ch. 6253, 6145; Michael Jones and Simon Walker, eds, 'Private Indentures for Life Service in Peace and War, 1278–1476', in *Camden Miscellany*, 32 (London: Royal Historical Society, 1994), pp. 171–2.

- 31 Coss, 'Aspects of Cultural Diffusion', p. 74, n.145.
- 32 Holt, *Robin Hood*, p. 122 and 'Origins and Audience', pp. 244–6, 50.
- 33 Coss, 'Aspects of Cultural Diffusion', p. 74, n.145, pp. 96, 98.
- 34 *Gest*, stanzas 221–2.
- 35 *Gest*, stanza 377.
- 36 The irony of the situation would not have escaped the audience's attention.
- 37 G. J. Turner, ed., *Select Pleas of the Forest* (London: Selden Society, 13, 1899–1901), introduction; C. R. Young, *The Royal Forests of Medieval England* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1979), esp. ch. 8 for the later middle ages.
- 38 D. J. Stagg, ed., *A Calendar of New Forest Documents: The Fifteenth to the Seventeenth Centuries* (Winchester: Hampshire Record Office, 5, 1983), p. 8; National Archives, DL 39/2/20, m10 (Clarendon); SC 6/1085/20, DL 29/648/10485 (Wensleydale); Westminster Abbey Muniments, 6052 (Durham).
- 39 Fortescue, *Laws and Governance*, p. 119; Westminster Abbey Muniments, 6052.
- 40 *Gest*, stanzas 13–14.
- 41 Nottingham, Special Collections, MiL 3/1&2, Sherwood Forest Book, fo Dxxii.
- 42 *Ibid.*, MS 72/2, p. 108.
- 43 *Adam Bell*, stanzas 1–2. However, the use of the word 'walk' is more ambiguous in *Gamelyn*. In lines 672–4, describing the hero and his companions when they first enter the forest, the word has the sense of wandering. Later, after he is crowned king of the outlaws, *Gamelyn* 'walked in whyle under the wode-schawes' (l. 96). This line, so similar to the line in the *Gest*, is, in its context, not easily interpreted as a reference to the forester's occupation (Chaucer, *Complete Works*, pp. 661–2).
- 44 *Gest*, stanzas 448–9, 356–67. 'Chief gouverneur' is from a mid-sixteenth century dramatisation of *Robin Hood and the Potter* (Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*, p. 218).
- 45 W. A. Baillie-Grohman and F. Baillie-Grohman, eds, *The Master of Game* (London 1909), p. 189; Ralph Whitlock, *Historic Forests of England* (Bradford on Avon, 1979), p. 42; Nottingham, Special Collections, MiL 3/1&2, fo Dxxii.v, a late-fifteenth-century copy of the oath of the bowbearer of Sherwood stresses the supervisory role. The bowbearer of the New Forest between 1487 and 1494, Robert Mour, occasionally presented offences against the venison to the forest eyre (Stagg, *New Forest Documents*, pp. 5, 14, 18).
- 46 *Monk*, stanza 33.
- 47 *Adam Bell*, stanza 162.
- 48 *Gest*, stanza 211.
- 49 *Gest*, 421–2.
- 50 Chaucer, *Complete Works*, vol. 4, p. 4; *Canterbury Tales*, 'Prologue', ll. 103–17.
- 51 *Ibid.*, pp. 361–2; 'The Friar's Tale', esp. ll. 87–91, 121–5.
- 52 J. S. Roskell and others, *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1386–1421* (Stroud: Sutton, 1993), p. 518.
- 53 For fifteenth-century seigniorial forest courts see, e.g., I. M. W. Harvey,

- 'Bernwood in the Middle Ages', in John Broad and Richard Hoyle, eds, *Bernwood: The Life and Afterlife of a Forest* (Preston: Harris Paper Two, 1997); Christine M. Newman, *Late-Medieval Northallerton* (Stamford, Lincs: Paul Watkins, 1999), pp. 39–40; R. C. Shaw, *The Royal Forest of Lancaster* (Preston: Guardian Press 1956); R. B. Turton, ed., *The Honour and Forest of Pickering* (North Riding Record Society, new series, 1, 1894).
- 54 John Cummins, *The Hound and the Hawk: The Art of Medieval Hunting* (London: Phoenix, 1988), p. 266; Richard Almond, *Medieval Hunting* (Stroud: Sutton, 2003), pp. 116–20. The master forester was required to warn the sheriff where any hunt was to take place. Somerset and Dorset was a joint shrievalty; Baillie-Gohman and Baillie-Gohman, *Master of Game*, pp. 188–9.
- 55 Almond and Pollard, 'Yeomanry of Robin Hood', pp. 69–70.
- 56 *Gest*, stanzas 446–7; *Adam Bell*, stanza 105. A hart of grease was a mature male red deer in his prime, from mid-June to mid-September (Almond, *Medieval Hunting*, pp. 86–7).
- 57 *Gest*, stanzas 182–8.
- 58 Pollard and Almond, 'Yeomanry of Robin Hood', pp. 64–6; Almond, *Medieval Hunting*, pp. 82–5.
- 59 *Gest*, stanzas 387–8. The technical meaning of 'tryst' has eluded editors of the texts. Dobson and Taylor suggest a rendezvous (*Rymes*, p. 99); Knight and Ohlgren, more ingeniously, offer 'trystyll' (trestle or platform) tree, 'presumably suitable for speeches or even hangings' (*Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, p. 182).
- 60 *Monk*, stanza 37.
- 61 Edward Hall, *Chronicle* (1809), p. 582, cited and discussed by Holt, *Robin Hood*, p. 161; Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*, pp. 42–3; Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), pp. 152–3. A vivid account is given by Alison Weir, *Henry VIII: King and Court* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001), pp. 181–2.
- 62 Corinne J. Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1993), pp. 172–3.
- 63 Malory, *Works*, p. 375. In this passage, it would seem, Malory used the term 'yeoman' as an intermediate social category.
- 64 Anne Rooney, *Hunting in Medieval English Literature* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1993), pp. 14–15.
- 65 C. D'Evelyn, ed., *Peter Idley's Instructions to his Son* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935), p. 160.
- 66 *Guy*, stanzas 7 and 34.

3 A Greenwood Far Away

- 1 *Monk*, stanzas 1–2
- 2 Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), pp. 142–5.