



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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Imagining Robin Hood

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THE LATE-MEDIEVAL STORIES IN
HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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History and Memory

Audiences listening to or reading the *Gest* when it was first compiled were emphatically reminded that Robin Hood had been a living person, with the implication that the adventures to be recounted had actually happened.

*Robyn was a prude outlaw,
Whyles he walked on grounde
So curteyse an outlawe as he was one
Was never none founde.¹*

The *Gest* is constructed as a tale of his deeds, just as the *Gesta Henrici Quinti* was the tale of Henry V's deeds. It is, however, unlike *Henrici Quinti* (we suppose) a fiction, and one would be surprised if listeners or readers thought it other than a fiction. One would similarly be amazed if late-fifteenth-century readers of Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* took literally as historical facts the stories he told of the exploits of the knights of the round table. Robin Hood comes no closer to ever having actually walked on ground than a Romano-British leader who defeated the Saxons and briefly rallied the British peoples in the fifth century AD, and possibly as close as Brutus of Troy, the great-grandson of Aeneas, who came to Britain

in 1170 BC to be its first king. But just as the compiler of *The Brut* and Geoffrey of Monmouth fixed these stories as historical fictions of a supposed past, so also the anonymous authors of the Robin Hood stories created a fiction about an English past which not only entertained their audiences, but also recounted for them a history. That history was not what the twenty-first century understands to be history, but the stories derived some of their relevance from the notion that they were indeed about a past that had once existed 'while he walked on ground'. Scholars try to track down an 'ur' Robin Hood, just as they do a King Arthur, and there is an undeniable fascination in the quest, but the more pertinent question concerns what collective memory of which past the setting and incidental detail of the stories woven around the hero reveal.

Some historians have treated the rymes of Robin Hood, and especially the *Gest*, as quasi-historical sources, seeking to demonstrate that they are grounded in events that actually happened and are thus accounts of them. John Bellamy ingeniously sought to identify the models for Robin Hood, Little John, Will Scarlock, the Sheriff of Nottingham and Sir Richard at the Lee in the 1320s and argued that the *Gest*, commissioned by a later Lee, was a genuine account of the exploits of an outlaw band led by a man named Robin Hood.² In an article published seven years earlier J. R. Maddicott more cautiously proposed that the *Gest* was composed in the mid-fourteenth century, drawing upon events and people active between 1334 and 1338. He suggested that the Sheriff of Nottingham was modelled on the notorious John de Oxenford, who held that office from 1334 to 1339, the abbot of St Mary's based on Thomas de Multon, abbot 1332–59, and the 'high justice' on Sir Geoffrey le Scrope, chief justice of the King's Bench, 1324–38. Much of the action took place in and around York because in that decade the king's government was frequently based there.³

While not going as far as Maddicott in specifically identifying persons with the events in the 1330s, Ohlgren and Ayton have suggested a specific military context in the same decade in which the figure of the sorry knight/Sir Richard at the Lee and the outlaw band can be set. The knight goes off to fight the wars 'in Englonde ryght' in Brabant, or Flanders, or Brittany after 1337, and returns enriched to repay his loan to the abbot. 'England's right' was, as Ohlgren points out, Edward III's rallying cry at the beginning of the Hundred Years War. This argument depends, however, on an ambiguous line in the text.⁴ Ayton similarly has looked to the late 1330s, inspired by the remarkable manner in which a member of the royal garrison on the Isle of Wight in 1338 gave his name to the musterer as Robin Hood, as a starting point for his suggestion that Robin Hood's 'meyny' is modelled on one of the many gangs of discharged soldiers who for a while plagued England in that decade.⁵ One can add to this the copious evidence of social conflict in the royal forests in the early fourteenth century, the tensions between lesser landowners and religious corporations which still echoed after the passing of the Statute of Mortmain, and the conflicts between some urban communities and their neighbouring Benedictine monasteries in 1327.⁶ If not the story of an actual outlaw band, a powerful argument can be made that the *Gest* drew upon knowledge of circumstances, people and events that happened in the early fourteenth century.

It is, however, difficult to sustain the argument, as both Bellamy and Maddicott did, that the *Gest* itself, as a complete work in the form we now have, was compiled almost immediately after the events it thus describes. The *Gest* was not itself a primary text. Its pre-eminence depends on a combination of having been printed and of being the first known attempt to create one Robin Hood story. The text itself is clearly a later compilation of different stories, coming from different traditions and in different tones into one loose narrative. It also has more than the one plot; it

incorporates subplots of a completely different tone. One might argue that the central narrative of 'Robin Hood and the Knight', their dealing with the abbot of St Mary's, their brush with the sheriff and reconciliation with the king, did in fact draw upon such a specific milieu, but an immediate or even later composition of the *Gest* in the precise form in which it later came to be written down is, to say the least, unlikely. It is even more difficult to identify the other surviving stories, including the story of 'Little John and the Sheriff' interpolated in the *Gest*, as historical evidence of events of the first part of the reign of Edward III.

Historians are agreed, however, and this consensus needs no further elaboration, that the setting of the stories is, at its widest, the era encompassing the reigns of the first three Edwards up to c. 1340. Whether or not the legend of Robin Hood, as opposed to articulated stories about him, already existed is impossible to tell. 'It may well have been in the 1320s and 1330s', Barrie Dobson wrote in 2000, 'that the legend began to expand, to explode indeed, and to be adapted to narrative form and to take on many of what we regard as its critical defining features'.⁷ But then again it may not have been. One might agree that one can go further than the earlier more cautious proposition that the tales 'may be at their most historically revealing in exposing, if through a glass darkly, social attitudes to authority and disorder during the reigns of Edward II and Edward III rather than earlier or later'.⁸ But as Maddicott, Ohlgren and Ayton have suggested, more than attitudes to authority and disorder is revealed.

That there was an outlaw persona, possibly based on a person or persons who had once existed, called Robehod or variations of that name, known fairly widely by the 1260s, is not in doubt. But we do not know when or by whom stories about this persona were first created, let alone when and by whom some of them were brought together as a narrative recognisably set in the early fourteenth century. Do we possess early-fourteenth-century

storytelling about Robin Hood, which has been reworked over the generations, or do we have later storytelling about Robin Hood consciously set in an earlier period?⁹ Since no texts earlier than those of the fifteenth century survive, we cannot know. However, since attitudes to the past are as much to do with the present as with the past itself, arguably the more important question is what that past meant to audiences and listeners when the first surviving written versions of the stories were in circulation. History is a process by which the present makes sense of the past and gives it contemporary meaning. And since the present itself is endlessly (one hopes) and remorselessly (one knows only too well) moving into the past, so the interpretation of the past is itself ever changing. What is true of the twenty-first-century present was surely broadly true of the fifteenth-century present as contemporaries then reflected on an earlier age. The stories may first have come into shape in the early fourteenth century (or even earlier), but they need not then have contained the same detail, or carried the same interpretation, as they did when first written down.

This principle can be illustrated vividly by reference to the changes over the centuries since 1500.¹⁰ Four features stand out in the story as it exists at the beginning of the twenty-first century: Robin Hood robs to give to the poor; Robin, himself a dispossessed Anglo-Saxon earl, is a freedom fighter resisting the Norman occupation; the sheriff is an agent of the evil Prince John and is restored by Richard I returning from the crusades; Robin has a romantic attachment to Maid Marian. None of these featured in the stories in circulation before 1550; all entered into the stories from the later sixteenth century, reflecting the growth of modern class consciousness, the development of the myth of the Norman Yoke, the emergence of the Whig interpretation of Magna Carta, and the displacement of Catholicism by Protestantism as the established religion. It is of no moment that

most recent historians are sceptical about the Norman Yoke and question the traditional interpretation of the reign of King John, or even class consciousness, for interpretation of the past has always been contested. What matters is that these elements were, and in some quarters still are, believed to be 'historical' and integral to our 'national story'. They thus carried, and still carry, a set of political values germane to the English-speaking peoples. The mythology of the Norman Yoke had a long and influential pedigree influencing radical thought in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. It is thus of particular note that to accommodate these ideological transformations the pre-Reformation tales were altered. The identity of the king changed from an Edward to Richard I and the setting moved back more than a century, while Robin's divine love for Our Lady, the Blessed Virgin Mary, is replaced by his romantic love for Maid Marian, herself an aristocrat of Anglo-Saxon descent.

It follows that if such important details changed in the age of print culture, it is not less likely that other details might have changed before the stories were set down in the earliest form we now possess. By the very nature of things we cannot know how. But we can be reasonably certain that the earliest surviving texts, set down in the fifteenth century and little changed before the Reformation, had resonance for that particular present. In so far as they contain history we can thus focus on the history as it was understood and had relevance for that time, and no earlier time. What follows seeks to identify what was historical in the stories in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries and to assess the significance of that history to that present. The endeavour will involve identifying absences as well as presences, and evaluating the significance of those absences, potentially as revealing as the presences themselves. The focus will be on the *Gest*. But first one needs to consider the mechanism of how knowledge of the past might have been transmitted into the written text.

It is now acknowledged that oral tradition and written texts have always interacted. It is not the case, as is sometimes supposed, that literary cultures supplanted oral cultures. Thus in grappling with the question of how history was transmitted through to the written texts of Robin Hood it is not to be assumed that a purely oral tradition of storytelling, passed on from generation to generation was, at a defined point in the fifteenth century, committed to writing. Rather the earliest surviving written texts will reflect the interchange over previous decades, if not centuries, of written and oral traditions, the one infusing and transforming the other. Adam Fox has amply demonstrated the way in which orality and literacy constantly intersected and interacted in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Oral culture drew on and elaborated literary culture. Literate culture was not above inventing tradition and fabricating myths to enhance venerability or authenticity. These inventions could then be enshrined in oral tradition. Illiteracy was no barrier. Reading aloud transmitted the written to the oral; dictating to an amanuensis transferred the oral to the written.¹¹

Fox concluded that written culture was probably more culpable than oral in the fabrication of distorted, exaggerated and spurious versions of the past. He observed that it was the very popularity and widespread distribution of the written versions of the stories in the sixteenth century that led to the proliferation of Robin Hood place names, and identifications of the tombs of Maid Marian and Little John, neither of which are recorded before 1540.¹² One might also trace the conversion of the king from Edward to Richard during the sixteenth century through Scottish influence. The first identification of the king as Richard I is to be found in John Mair's history of Britain in which 'the most famous' and 'humanest' robber is located in the late twelfth century.¹³ It may be that sixteenth-century Scots found it more comfortable to associate the heroic outlaw with Richard I, who had

acknowledged Scottish independence, than with any of the Edwards who, to say the least, had not. How this was then transmitted back to England is not so apparent, but it may be no coincidence that Henry II granted Malcolm IV of Scotland the title of earl of Huntingdon and that his younger son, David, Richard I's contemporary, inherited that title. By the end of the sixteenth century Robin Hood had been transformed in Anthony Munday's plays into the disinherited earl of Huntingdon.¹⁴ Thus we might be able to discern a process of transmission in the sixteenth century, via Scotland, whereby Robin Hood becomes an outlawed noble in the reign of Richard I.

It is surely no less likely that what happened in the second half of the sixteenth century might also have occurred in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The intersection of the written and the oral did not depend on printing for reproduction and circulation. In the century and a half before Caxton set up his press there were many English language texts in circulation; the homilies and metrical paraphrases which have already been discussed; popular political poems; Lollard texts and writings; royal proclamations; rebel manifestos; and in approximately 200 surviving copies, the popular history of England known as *The Brut* after the mythical founder of Britain, Brutus. Significantly, perhaps, these vernacular texts proliferated from the beginning of the fourteenth century. Robert Mannyng of Brunne stated in the opening lines of his *Handlyng Synne* in 1303 that,

*For lewde men y undertok
On englyssh tunge to make this boke.*¹⁵

Lewd originally meant lay, not clerical, and thus unlearned in Latin, and in the early fourteenth century still held this meaning. Not until the later part of the century had it begun to develop a social dimension characterising the uncultured, vulgar lower

orders. But the fact is that once in English, texts such as this were accessible as well. We inadvertently get a glimpse of one way in which a text might be subversively disseminated, even in the early fourteenth century, from the last stanza of *The Outlaw's Song of Trailbaston*. The *Outlaw's Song* was undoubtedly composed for a gentle audience (its language is French) and is a complaint against the then recently instituted commissions of trailbaston. Yet it adopts the form of being a popular protest. The last stanza reads (in translation):

*This rhyme was made in the wood, beneath a laurel tree.
There sing the blackbird and nightingale, and there hovers the hawk.
It was written on parchment to be better remembered,
And thrown on the highway so that people should find it.*¹⁶

It is hardly likely that subversive verse written in Anglo-Norman French and distributed in this way would have much impact. But the author's literary device reveals how songs of popular protest in the lewd tongue could be circulated; how leafleting, as it were, was believed to be done in the early fourteenth century.

The *Outlaw's Song of Trailbaston*, albeit originating in French, might have been an influence on the Robin Hood stories, or equally might have been a variation on the same common tradition. It represents the outlaw band sympathetically and as unjustly pursued. It identifies the green forest as a Utopia where there is no bad law or deceit, to which men flee to escape miscarriages of justice and where they can join an outlaw band, become skilled in archery and live by poaching and highway robbery. While the Song accuses named early-fourteenth-century justices of corruption (who do not subsequently feature in the Robin Hood stories), it nevertheless identifies sheriffs as typically corrupt officers of the crown. One line, 'Nor was I wicked robber to do people harm', is remarkably close to the last two lines of the

Gest: 'For he was a good outlawe, / And dyde pore men moch god'.¹⁷

Equally striking is the contrast in tone between the *Outlaw's Song* and the rhetoric deployed by the crown in the commissions of trailbaston themselves, of oyer and terminer, and of the peace of the early fourteenth century, which conjured up an image of outlaws roaming all over England, gathering in the woods, ambushing honest wayfarers whom they robbed and sometimes slayed, aided and abetted by the rebellious common people.¹⁸ Of course Robin and his men ambush honest wayfarers (the knight, the potter) as well as dishonest ones (monks) and they also rob, assault and sometimes kill their victims. Yet they are constructed as good, not evil, outlaws who deserve the support of the common people. It almost certainly was, as Barbara Hanawalt has shown, that early-fourteenth-century highwaymen and outlaws lived a miserable existence, preyed most frequently on ordinary people like themselves, and terrorised whole districts. Just as the burgesses of Nottingham feared the outlaw rout that was apparently descending on them after the king had taken Robin Hood into his service, so Scarborough and Whitby were on occasion in the early fourteenth century seized by local bandits.¹⁹

Yet several texts transformed such bandits into heroes. These texts can be linked with the publicity given later to the activities of the Cotteril and Folville gangs, and the emergence of the idea of Folville's laws, whereby the outlaw was seen to put right the wrongs suffered by the weak at the hands of the powerful. They interacted with and helped shape a whole body of outlaw tales, which include *Gamelyn* and *Adam Bell* as well as of Robin Hood. Some elements were clearly in place by 1357 when Edward III devised a mock ambush of his prisoner King John of France as he journeyed from Winchester to London, probably at the notorious Pass of Alton. Household men, dressed in green, it was reported, imitated outlawed foresters who waylaid travellers. The story was

taken up and repeated by the author of the *Anonimale Chronicle*, probably a monk of St Mary's, York, compiling his text at the end of Edward III's reign. If, as it has been suggested, the incident of the mock ambush were taken from a contemporary newsletter, one would have early evidence of the widespread circulation of this central trope of the outlaw gang of foresters dressed all in green. The idea was already commonplace; the royal household enacted it; a newsletter recorded it; the idea became even more deeply embedded in popular imagination.²⁰ In the matter of the forest outlaw, the interpenetration of orality and literacy is readily apparent.

One can also see how the scene in the *Gest* in which the chief justice conspires with the abbot of St Mary's to deprive the knight of his lands is derived from stock complaint against venal judges found in the same or similar texts. The high justice's retort to the knight, 'I am holde with the abbot, both with cloth and fee', can be placed in a specific early-fourteenth-century context too. From the late thirteenth century judges tended to be retained by nobles, corporations and religious institutions, a circumstance which led to frequent complaint and occasional purges. In 1346, however, Edward III in his Ordinance of Justices took more radical action by requiring all his judges to take an oath not to receive robes or fees. While this was difficult to enforce, leading to its restatement in 1384, circumstances in the later fourteenth century did combine to bring the regular taking of fees as retainers to an end.²¹ Antagonism towards the king's officers is more strongly developed in the mid-to-late-fourteenth century *Gamelyn* in which the hero, himself the youngest son of a knight, is unjustly dispossessed by his wicked eldest brother of the lands left to him by his father.²²

Much incidental detail in *Gamelyn*, as we have seen, tallies with detail in the *Gest*. The outlaw band of yeomen live by poaching and highway robbery, especially of monks. His principal enemy is the sheriff, although in this version also his brother. He too

meets a sticky end. But this is the story of a wronged younger son of the gentry, who becomes the 'king of the outlaws' to avenge himself and secure the restoration of his lands. It is in effect a version of the story of the sorry knight. But its date of composition, set variously between 1340 and 1370, clearly establishes that several of the conventions concerning Robin Hood's milieu were in circulation long before the *Gest* itself was compiled.²³ The Robin Hood stories, as did the story of William of Cloudesly, drew upon and reworked this established textual tradition. The earliest fragment of the text of the story of William of Cloudesly dates from 1536, but it is almost certainly an older tale in circulation at the same time as the first written Robin Hood tales.²⁴ Other literary influences on the texts can be discerned. The story of 'Little John and the Sheriff', in which John vows to be a bad servant, draws upon and inverts homilies criticising disloyal servants. Maurice Keen has shown how many incidents such as the disguise of the hero as a potter, or the robbing of a monk who would not tell the truth about the amount of money he was carrying, have long literary pedigrees. Peter Coss has drawn attention to a degree of crossover from chivalric romances.²⁵ Many different written sources influenced and shaped the early stories of Robin Hood.

It is not always possible, of course, to detect a written source. There might, for instance, have been enshrined in the Robin Hood stories a memory, transmitted orally or textually, of the notorious Pass of Alton as a haunt of highwaymen. The pass was, as we have seen, almost proverbial for William Langland. The king's own household was ambushed there in 1261. It was a place, the justices of eyre recorded in 1269, where foresters and shepherds who used the neighbouring woods, committed heinous crimes against innocent travellers. It might well have been the refuge of Adam de Curdon, one of Simon de Montfort's prominent followers, who fled there after the battle of Evesham and lived for a while by

highway robbery and plundering the local countryside. He was brought to account by Henry III's son, the Lord Edward, the future Edward I, was pardoned and rehabilitated in 1267, being granted property in Alton. A fictional account by Nicholas Trivet had the two engage in personal combat with the prince, who being impressed by his foe's prowess pardoned him forthwith. There are enough echoes here to make one wonder whether the story did not find its way into the *Gest*.²⁶ It may be too that there is a link with Walter Bower's assertion that the famous robbers Robin Hood and Little John 'arose' 'from among the disinherited', i.e. Simon de Montfort's followers in 1266, although in Barnsdale not Alton, and were remembered to his own day by the commons who loved to sing of their deeds.²⁷

But there are some elements for which we have virtually nothing to go on. The story of the foreclosing of a mortgage, by which a grasping abbot endeavours to swindle an honourable knight fallen on hard times, does not appear to have an immediate written source. The scene in which the knight presents himself as poverty stricken at the abbey gate echoes a passage in the early-fourteenth-century *Simony*. This contrasts the cold reception given to a poor man seeking alms from a monastery and the warm welcome given to a person of influence.²⁸ But the mortgage story itself is not to be found in fourteenth-century songs of protest or homilies. It appears not to have been part of the stock complaint against clergy. The detail may reflect a memory of the behaviour of a particular abbot of St Mary's, but if so it would seem to have been carried by oral tradition.²⁹ More broadly, too, the ambience reflects the 'crisis' of the gentry in the thirteenth century when some lesser gentry families were forced to sell and mortgage lands, often to monasteries.³⁰ This too might draw on oral tradition and memory rather than texts then in circulation, which are now lost.

It is possible that the antagonism towards the Benedictine Order found in the stories drew on memories of the conflicts

between certain abbeys and their urban communities that came to a head in the early fourteenth century.³¹ Memory is probably even more important as far as poaching and conflict in the king's forests is concerned. Whereas there are many texts concerning outlawry, there are few to be found concerning poaching and the long-running conflict over the rights to game, which was particularly intense in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. The records of forest eyres reveal innumerable local Robin Hoods living off the king's deer in the royal forests of England at that time. The legal documents themselves, in Latin and not circulated beyond the courts, carry the detail of local poaching in the royal forests by ordinary men and women, who believed they had an equal right to game. But again early-fourteenth-century songs of protest, such as *The Simony* and especially *The Song of the Husbandman*, are notably silent about this grievance. By the mid-fifteenth century, like large outlaw bands roaming the land, conflict over the right to game in royal and seigneurial forests were distant memories. As we have seen, the poaching of deer was not perceived to be a major problem by crown or lords. Only when large gangs took systematically to poaching, as did Robert Stafford, alias Friar Tuck, and his men in the Weald in the 1420s, was it of any concern to the crown. As Stafford's pseudonym indicates, and as the likening of another riotous gang fifteen years later to Robin Hood's meyny also suggests, conflict over rights to game and the outrages of outlaw bands had by this time become memories of the past more familiar through storytelling than current experience.³² Life was beginning to imitate art.

It is therefore possible, but impossible to demonstrate, that the Robin Hood stories drew on oral traditions alone for the memory of some of their historical detail. Memory was long. The *Libelle of English Policy*, written in the 1430s, claimed that there were old knights living who participated in Edward III's victories and still,

like Falstaff and Justice Shallow, recalled the days they had seen.³³ It was common practice in manorial courts and parochial administration for jurors and churchwardens to call upon the memory of their elders to elucidate custom and to establish precedent. The churchwardens of Yeovil, for instance, when faced at the beginning of the seventeenth century with a dispute over seating in the church sought the advice of old men.³⁴ The most cited example of this process, yet still the most vivid, is John Smyth of Nibley's reminiscence that in the late sixteenth century he often heard old men and women of the neighbourhood, who had been born in the reign of Henry VII, relate the reports of their parents, kinfolk and neighbours, who as children had witnessed the 'battle' of Nibley Green in 1470.³⁵ Such oral transmission might perhaps explain the way in which very particular and precise geographical locations as Sayles near Wentbridge found their way into the stories, which may have drawn upon incidents of which there is some record in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.³⁶ It is therefore conceivable that memories of the era before the Black Death were transmitted, by ordinary men and women in town and country, over two or three generations.

On the other hand, not all the potentially relevant memories of that era carried either orally or in writing found their way into the stories of Robin Hood. The modern story of Robin Hood makes much of his resisting the exploitation of the peasantry by the Anglo-Norman aristocracy. This is not prominent in the earliest texts. Although it was once the subject of considerable debate among twentieth-century historians, it is now accepted that the early texts have little to say about the condition of husbandmen, serfs and agricultural labourers. This is to some extent surprising in that there was a well-established literary discourse, from the early fourteenth century, on this theme. In the *Song of the Husbandman*, the poet/narrator laments the manner in which, on

top of the bad weather which has destroyed his harvest, he is harassed by the officials of the lord of the manor and subjected to incessant taxation by the king to the point that he is driven off the land. It is a complaint that can be specifically placed in the context of Edward II's reign. It was later echoed, almost summarised, in the complaints of the shepherds, driven to the point of despair by exploitation, in the opening of the *Wakefield Second Shepherd's Play*. The Wakefield play is contemporaneous with the Robin Hood tales.³⁷ Yet there is little reflection of the same complaint. Robin was a good outlaw who did poor men much good and he charged his men not to molest a husbandman. But that is it. He did not even rob the rich to give to the poor. It was John Mair, once more, who first established this leitmotif ('nor would he despoil the poor, but rather enriched them from the plunder taken from the abbots').³⁸ The past suffering of the peasantry, intense in the early fourteenth century, and it *was* in the past in the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, was not part of the historical memory in the Robin Hood stories.

Even more remarkable, given its later prominence, is the absence of the notion of the Norman Yoke, in the Robin Hood stories. In the late thirteenth century Robert of Gloucester developed in his English verse history of England, followed by Robert Manning in 1338, the elaborate and ingenious idea that the English people were subjected after the conquest to Norman servitude. Thus the present feudal system, 'the thraldom that now in England is/through Normans it came, bondage and distress',³⁹ was a consequence of the occupation of England by a foreign power and the subjugation of the Anglo-Saxon people. The history of England in the two centuries following the conquest that they tell, especially Robert of Gloucester, focuses on the effort of the English to recover their lost liberties. It may well be specious and tendentious, but it highlights the wickedness of King John and links the oppression of the English people with the rule of an alien

aristocracy.⁴⁰ The myth of the Norman Yoke has had a long and venerable part to play in English history, and has become embedded in the modern story of Robin Hood, but it was entirely absent from the pre-Reformation versions. One possible reason may be that their principal reference point lay not in circumstances before the early fourteenth century, but in the still vivid memory of the reign of Edward III.

Attention has recently been drawn to the political poetry of Laurence Minot, himself a minstrel or ribauldrer, whose rhymes commemorating English victories against the Scots and French, between 1333 and 1352, were drawn together as a continuous narrative shortly after 1352. One poem in particular, written about 1339, remarks how

*Edward oure cumly king
In Brabant has his woning
With mani cumly knight.*

As Thomas Ohlgren has suggested, a direct link can be proposed between this passage and the description of 'Edwarde oure comly kyng' in the *Gest*. Furthermore the story of that comely king in disguise is remarkably similar in content to two other mid-fourteenth-century ballads, *King Edward and the Shepberd* and *King Edward and the Hermit* which deal with the king, clearly identified in the texts as Edward III, engaging in disguise with his outlawed subjects in their sports, listening to their complaints and finally revealing himself and pardoning the outlaw who has proved his loyalty. The similarities do not end here. In *King Edward and the Hermit* the setting is Sherwood Forest, and the king, in disguise, is enticed into the forest by a forester's promise of a great-headed deer, gets lost and finally meets a hermit-friar who makes his living by poaching. Thomas Hoccleve in his *Regement of Princes*, written in 1411–12, knew them, for he advised the future

Henry V to find out what his subjects thought of him and whether his officials were oppressing them by moving in disguise among them like the 'benyngne Edward the laste'.⁴¹ Later, of course, William Shakespeare had Henry V carry out this advice on the eve of Agincourt, while the whole plot of *Measure for Measure* hangs on the same trope. The story of the king in disguise was commonplace (surely not restricted to Edward III), but was repeated about that monarch, and appeared in several different texts, not just in the *Gest*. There is thus good reason to suppose that 'Edwarde oure comly kyng' is Edward III. This identification provides the key to understanding the historical significance of the main narrative of the *Gest* and the broad significance of the early-fourteenth-century historical context of the stories for the late-fifteenth century present.⁴²

'Here lies the glory of the English, the flower of kings past, the pattern of kings to come, a merciful king, the bringer of peace to his people'. So ran part of the epitaph displayed on a tablet near Edward III's tomb in Westminster Abbey, written in both Latin and English so that all could understand.⁴³ Very shortly after his death he was being remembered in such glowing terms that the word comely seems but faint praise. The continuation of *The Brut* covering his reign, completed before 1399, ends with this peroration to his eulogy:

*And ther sprang and shone so muche grace of hym that,
what maner man had byhold his face, or had dremd of
hym, he hoped that day that all shold hap to hym joyful
and lykyng . . . and that in no land under heven had be
brought forth so noble a kyng, so gentyll and so blessyd,
or myghte reyse such another when he were dede.⁴⁴*

He was incomparable. This may be set alongside the words of the recognition scene in the *Gest*:

Robyn behelde our comly kyng
Wystly in the face
So dyd Syr Richard at the Lee

And so did all the wylde outlaws
Whan they se them knele
My Lorde the kyng of Englonde,
Now I knowe you well.⁴⁵

There follows Robin's pardon and his welcoming into the king's service. Is not the king in the *Gest* the same as the king in *The Brut*?

By 1400 Edward III was already established in the imagination as the king who had restored justice and social peace to an England torn apart during the reign of his father. He was not only the great warrior king, but also a merciful and loving king, whose concern for his subjects was close to his heart. Hence the spread of stories of him moving in disguise among them so that he could discover their true complaints and root out those servants of his who were perverting the course of justice in his name. The extent to which this king became associated with the restoration of true justice and the proper order of society is revealed in the preamble to a private petition probably presented to the parliament of 1472–5. 'Revolve chroniques', the petitioner begged Edward IV, 'serche tymes passed, remember the dayes and blessed acts of your most noble progenitors (when the laws were obeyed), and especially the immortal fame of Edward III', consider how chaos consumes kingdoms if the law fails and note how in *these* times, 'owte of venymose rotes and kursed simony and perjury greweth al maner exorbitant myscheves . . . Whereby in your realm peas hath ben exyled and law subverted, without thextirpation of which', prosperity cannot be restored.

He then moves to his main purpose, to suggest some rather radical reforms of the administration of the law that in fact stood little chance of enactment. It is the preamble which is

significant.⁴⁶ The petitioner no doubt knew that Edward IV had already launched an appeal to his subjects for support for war in France on the grounds that outward war brought inward peace. He was no doubt also aware that Edward IV himself was self-consciously presenting himself as the heir to Edward III. But his appeal nevertheless suggests that the image of Edward III as the restorer of law and order was deeply etched in general memory. Moreover, the reference to simony, conjures up an immediate historical comparison with the evil days of Edward II, and suggests familiarity with *The Simony* which blamed the failure of the law in his reign on the covetousness and simony of the knights, justices, merchants and above all the clergy.

One does not need, therefore, as Bellamy and Maddicott proposed, to match incidents in the stories of Robin Hood closely with people and events to place the action of the stories in the first four decades of the early fourteenth century, including the young Edward III's own difficult apprenticeship. One should not rule out altogether the possibility that a particular sheriff or a particular abbot was the inspiration for a character in the later stories of Robin Hood, but the historical significance does not depend on it. While the *Gest* contains no reference to the political history of the years 1300 to 1340 available by the late fourteenth century in English through the pages of *The Brut*, it reflects some aspects of the social history of that era and draws on the notion that Edward III, the benign king of blessed memory, brought decades of injustice and corruption to an end. The *Gest* contains a set of memories of what that 'corruption' had been; a mixture in fact of specific grievances with which Edward III dealt, as in the instance of the high justice taking robe and fee from the abbot, of knowledge that outlaw gangs had been a much publicised problem, and of more general complaints about the state of the kingdom. Moreover it builds on the widely held belief that Edward III emerged in the 1340s as a king who guaranteed the rights of all his subjects,

supervised his judicial agents scrupulously, and tempered the severity of the law through the prerogative of mercy, all for the common good.⁴⁷ It is not a question of whether Edward III did in fact personify this ideal; it is that he was widely represented as having done so. As history, therefore, the Robin Hood stories remind their audiences of how Edward III, 'pereless of alle princis that regnyd over England',⁴⁸ restored good government after a period of misgovernment.

What did this past mean for the pre-Reformation present? As we have seen in 1472–5, the notion that Edward III was a king to be emulated because through outward war he had secured inward peace was being given very heavy emphasis. We might link this to Edward IV's dynastic propaganda, that the kingdom had recently fallen into disorder and lawlessness because of the Lancastrian usurpation, a theme recycled and recalibrated to meet the needs successively of both Richard III and Henry VII. But there is more to it than a reflection of the aspirations of Yorkist and early Tudor kings. We must bear in mind that in the *Gest* Robin Hood abandons the court after fifteen months. Most of his merry men, whom he took with him into royal service, have left. He misses the freedom of the outlaw life and regrets his failing skills at archery. His true worth and virtue are being undermined; 'My welthe', as he puts it, 'is went away'. Moreover he finds the cost of keeping up with court life is crippling. 'Alas and well a woo', he bemoans,

*'Yf I dwele longer with the kyng,
Sorowe wyll me sloo'.⁴⁹*

There is contained here a conventional critique of the court and courtiers, the caterpillars of the common weal. It is worth stressing, however, that Robin is not forced to leave the court. He is not an innocent victim of court intrigue. He breaks his bond with the king. To do so he deceives him. He seeks and is given

permission to go on pilgrimage to a chapel he had founded in Barnsdale. He is given leave of absence for a week, but never returns. And thus the narrator concludes,

*Robyn dwelled in grene wode
Twenty yere and two,
For all drede of Edwarde our kyng,
Agayne wolde he not goo.⁵⁰*

Robin deserts his comely king. It is a deliberate act of defiance and rebellion.

There is underlying the action an implicit message that no king, not even Edward III, of whom it was said

*That in no land under heven had be brought forth so
noble a king, so gentyll and so blessyd, or might reyse
such another when he were dede*

could in fact match the ideal of kingship. Indeed, as audiences were just as likely to know, even Edward III in the end revealed he had feet of clay. For, as the eulogy in *The Brut* continues sadly to recall, 'moving of his flesh' was the undoing of him.

*In his age, drawing down his lechery and other sins, little
by little all the joyfull and blessed things, good fortune
and prosperity decreased and misshaped. And infortunate
things and unprofitable harmes, with much evil began for
to spring and, the more harme is, continued long after time. (my
italics)⁵¹*

Ultimately, no king is perfect.

This eulogy was composed during the reign of Richard II. By implication it is a criticism of his rule. The 'harmes and evils'

continued well into the fifteenth century, one might even argue became far worse by mid-century. While Henry V briefly restored the confidence and optimism of the high point of Edward III's reign, disorder and misgovernment were perceived to return thereafter. The stories of Robin Hood, and especially the *Gest*, had continued resonance in the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Both Edward IV, after 1471, and, at the beginning of his reign in 1509, Henry VIII raised hopes of the restoration of just government. In his games of Robin Hood, Henry might self-consciously have seen himself as the comely king Edward, bringing in a new golden era, just as he fabricated himself as a new Henry V abroad. But if Edward III, memorialised in the *Gest* as *our* comely king, fell from the supreme standard attributed to him, how could any other later and lesser king, an Edward IV, a Henry VII or Henry VIII or whoever might be raised when he were dead, surpass him?

In this respect it is particularly germane that after a year and three months at court, Robin Hood took to the woods again. He, and with him the audience, understand that there can be no lasting restoration of good government. It is but an illusion. Covetousness and simony will always return. History repeats itself. Robin's abandonment of the court and his return to his life are thus ultimately more significant than his pardon by the king. In the other outlaw stories the restored hero, whether it is Gamelyn or William of Cloudesly, prospers for the rest of his life at court. William becomes the king's bowbearer and chief riding forester of the northern forests, is made a 'gentleman of clothing and of fée' (an esquire of the body?) and his brothers yeomen of the chamber. They came to court and died contentedly still in service, 'good men all thre'.⁵² Only Robin Hood rejects the court, promotion and prosperity. His rejection declares that there will always be a need for the outlaw, who stands as a reminder to all rulers that the court glows like rotten wood and that justice is never administered fairly for the true good of the common weal.

It is sometimes suggested that the outlaw stories, by dealing with restorative justice, are essentially conservative. They end, it has been argued, with 'a resounding restoration of the status quo' and that all it does through the reconciliation of the outlaw with the king is merely legitimise royal authority.⁵³ This may be true of *Gamelyn*, or of the story of William of Cloudesly, which does indeed end with an affirmation of the proper order. But it is certainly not true of the *Gest*. Robin Hood, until his betrayal and death, remains at large in the greenwood, a threat and a warning to his king. The *Gest* does not merely represent wishful thinking about an ideal order either. By being placed in a specific and recognisable English past, and by invoking the collective memory of England's most heroic king, it carries an explicit historical interpretation. While the audience 'knew' that Edward III had been a king who once restored a just society, they also were aware that that restoration did not last. The *Gest*, as history, not only reminded the audience that there had once been a time when a king ruled justly, but also reminded it that his just rule was short lived. It ends by emphasising that a remedy always lies at hand against any king, any regime, which neglected the common good. Robin Hood defied Edward *our* king, who was both the king who had reigned as the third of that name in the fourteenth century and his successor of any name occupying the throne at any time. The outlaw hero, who flouted authority, and reminded a king where his duty lay, is a perpetual reminder to all kings that their authority can be flouted again.⁵⁴ Men who played Robin Hood in their parish fund-raising games were men, too, who risked outlawry by flouting the king.⁵⁵

There is moreover an underlying intimation running through the texts in the confrontations which take place with the king that Robin, loyal as he is, will never bow to royal authority. In the action of the *Monk*, Little John is pardoned and taken into the king's service as a yeoman of the crown. But he dupes the king as

well as the sheriff in rescuing Robin Hood. The king is not pleased with John's treachery.

*Then bespake oure cumly kyng,
In an angur bye,
'Little John has begyled the schereff,
in faith so base he me'.⁵⁶*

For which crime, he continues, Little John should be hanged. But the crime is condoned, for he has proved his greater truth to his own master, Robin Hood, whom he loves better than either the king or the sheriff. Thus it ends, abruptly, with the king declaring:

*'Speke no more of this mater', seid oure kyng,
'But John has beguiled us alle'.⁵⁷*

The king gives way, accepting and endorsing Robin Hood as an alternative and equal authority.

In the *Gest* Robin behaves in much the same way. When the king in disguise as the abbot produces a letter sealed with the privy seal, Robin kneels before him. The seal itself is as sacred as the king in person.⁵⁸ But thereafter, when Robin summons his men to attend, they all then kneel before him. As the king wryly observes:

*'Here is a wonder seemly syght
Me thinketh, by Godddes pyne,
His men are more of his byddyng
Then my men be at myn'.⁵⁹*

As in the *Monk*, the equal status of the outlaw is acknowledged. The reconciliation between king and outlaw that then ensues is itself conditional. Robin agrees to join the king's service with seven score and three of his men, but adds,

*But me lyke well your servyse,
I will come agayne full soone,
And shote at the donne dere
As I am wonte to done.⁶⁰*

A royal pardon is not conditional. No outlaw being readmitted to the king's grace negotiated the terms of his pardon. These are the words of an equal concluding a treaty with a king, not of a subject submitting to his authority. And in time he duly carries out his threat. He returns to his kingdom and summons again his seven score men to his side:

*And fayre dyde of theyr hodes,
And set them on theyr kne.
'Welcome', they sayd, 'our mayster,
Under this grene wode tre'.⁶¹*

They do fealty to their returning lord under his *trystel tree*. Thus Robin remained at large for a further 'twenty yere and two' and 'for all drede of Edwarde our kyng' would not return to court. He defies him. The warning of the sheriff to the king earlier in the narrative concerning Sir Richard at the Lee that:

*He will be lorde, and set you at nought
In all the northelonde⁶²*

proves all too prescient in the case of Robin Hood himself.

The ambivalence in this relationship is clear. Robin recognises and respects royal authority. He shows all deference to it. But he challenges it, negotiates with it and in the end defies it. The greenwood offers an alternative kingdom, an alternative social order, and an alternative 'popular' law. In this respect the Sheriff of Nottingham, who loyally serves his king in seeking to bring the

outlaws to justice is *not* the personification of the king's evil minister, but the representative of his constituted authority. The alternative *regnum* is founded on an awareness that kings never live up to their rhetoric, or reach the ideals of monarchy set out in the 'Mirrors for Princes' literature, not even the peerless prince, King Edward III. It recognises, too, that all new governments fail in their promise to put right the evils of the past. A Henry V, an Edward IV or Henry VIII may claim that a new age is dawning, but it never does. Everything is changed, but everything remains the same. Robin Hood is deeply distrustful of the exercise of power, and of people in power. He is not unlike Raphael Hythlodæus, Thomas More's proponent of Utopia, who, adapting St Augustine, commented:

when I consider and turn over in my mind the state of all commonwealths flourishing anywhere today, so help me God, I can see nothing else than a kind of conspiracy of the rich, who are aiming at their own interests under the name and title of commonwealth.⁶³

In this respect the *Gest* is fundamentally subversive, for no government is to be trusted to maintain the common weal. When Robin walked on ground things were different, in an alternative greenwood kingdom. But then, of course, so courteous an outlaw was never found.

Farewell to Merry England

It has been a recurring refrain in these pages that Robin Hood at the end of the fifteenth and in the early sixteenth centuries was all things to all men. The differing figuration of his persona, the varied tone of the stories addressed to audiences from different social backgrounds, the evident enjoyment of them from king to commoner, the range of media from the printed story to the dramatic performance, and the continuing controversy over the morality of the tales reveal that Robin Hood was at the heart of English popular culture. They were seen by some contemporaries, a vocal minority perhaps, as lewd ribaldries, low-taste comic stories that led people astray, by others simply as harmless entertainment. During the century before the Reformation they were brought together in a narrative compilation that had pretensions to something more highbrow, and more self-consciously literary.

It is essential for our understanding and interpretation of what Robin Hood meant to contemporaries to recognise that the stories were told on different occasions, in different places, at different levels and to different audiences. They were not fixed but were infinitely variable. There was a continuously changing relationship between texts and contexts and, thus, reflected in the tales,

continually changing social relationships and social messages. They were texts, in the jargon, which were being constantly renegotiated and contested. Thus they appealed to the gentry because Robin was courteous and respectful of those that lived up to the values of that status and rank. On the other hand, they also appealed to the non-gentry because the hero, and more particularly his lieutenant, Little John, could be a prankster who mocked aristocratic values and flouted the authority of the sheriff. Robin was a conventionally pious and devoted son of the Church who loved the Virgin Mary. On the other hand he despised Benedictine monks. These differences and contradictions should be neither ignored nor reconciled in one composite figure. They are the consequence of the kaleidoscopic character of the texts.

However, it is possible to find a set of dominant motifs, especially as they emerge in the *Gest*, which, after it established itself as the central narrative of the story of Robin Hood at the end of the fifteenth century, became the basis of all later developments of it. As we have seen, there are certain significant differences between the narrative as it emerged then and what it later became. It is this version, in its printed form, that received the widest circulation and became best known to audiences of all ranks. In it, more than any other working of the stories, a mirror is held up to Merry England.

First, it is crucial to our understanding that in all the stories, not just the *Gest*, Robin Hood and all his merry men are yeomen. He is not a gentleman, but he is not a peasant either. He is in between. The 'in-between' is a much contested area. It is part of the argument of this work that he, and all his men, are something altogether more precise than the generalised representation of a particular intermediate status group in late-medieval English society. He is figured as a particular type of yeoman – a yeoman of the forest, or a forester. He is also a 'strenuous' yeoman, who exercises great prowess in combat, for foresters as we have seen

were believed to make some of the best archers in English armies. As a diligent and well-informed forester, he also knows the codes and skills not only of woodcraft, appropriate to a working man, but also of venery appropriate to a gentleman. This positions him as a figure not just intermediary but straddling the worlds of the gentry and non-gentry. It is one reason why it is possible to hang on him adventures of different sorts that appealed to one or the other, or sometimes both audiences. Nevertheless, he is quintessentially of the middling sort. He is, in fifteenth-century context, most closely linked in social standing to those men in town and village who carried the local government of the kingdom at the lowest level, who led parish or ward communities and frequently represented them in their dealings with higher authority, especially in legal and fiscal matters. The relationship between middling sort and higher authority was ambiguous. These men accepted their place in the social order and willingly acted as agents for royal government. But they were also independently minded and when they were so moved were not afraid to remonstrate and protest against the abuses of royal authority. Robin Hood can thus be located in a specific social space from which particular historical significance arises.

The forest bathing in perpetual springtime, which his fellow outlawed foresters inhabit, and he rules, is a paradigm of a just and well-ordered society. Being northern it is distanced from many of the audience. While it is a wilderness, as the north was stereotypically imagined in the south to be, it is benign. It is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a 'real' setting. Yet neither does it represent mere escapism; nor is it an elegy for a lost world of liberty; nor is it a utopian dream of a world which will never be. In the relationship with the action of the story, the greenwood represents something with a far sharper edge: awareness that the dreams and aspirations of spring always end in the disappointment of autumn. It thus grounds the stories psychologically in that

human contradiction between optimism and pessimism; between recurring hope that things can be made better and a realisation that this never happens.

The greenwood is home to a fellowship of the forest outlaws. The words 'fellow' and 'fellowship' are key words in the texts, not only of the *Gest*. In encounters with Robin, even within the band itself, men have to prove themselves 'good fellows'. There are many different shades of meaning of this term, and the ambiguity not insignificant. A duality of association is evoked. One connotation is the fellowship of men in arms with its Arthurian overtones and its association with aristocratic affinities and retinues of war, of the kind in which it would be no surprise to find these outlawed yeomen. But another mirrored in the texts is the late medieval fraternity or guild, of which there were thousands of different types and sizes in England on the eve of the Reformation. Fraternities were societies of respectable men and women bound together in virtuous common purpose, for religious, charitable, economic and, in some cases, administrative ends. In earlier days distrusted by the authorities, they were by 1500 the characteristic social organisation of the middling and lesser sorts of society in town and country, defining their ideal, at popular and communal level, of how society should be ordered. It is the evocation of this kind of fellowship rather more than the military fellowship which links the outlaw band to the world of the middling sort with which yeomen of all kinds, including foresters, were associated. Paradoxically, Robin Hood and his fellowship, exiles in the greenwood who violently live by theft like an irregular military fellowship, also maintain the true values of such peaceful, respectable and law-abiding associations.

A contrast is drawn between the true fellowship to be found in the forest fraternity and the false fellowship to be found in a great monastery. The outlaw feasting in the forest represents true conviviality and hospitality, the celebration of inclusive brotherly

love and charity, while the feast in the hall at St Mary's, York, is exclusive, selfish and lacking in charity. Robin has a true devotion to St Mary; the monks in an abbey dedicated to her do not. No doubt, as in so much in these stories, there is much that is stereotypical and humorous. However, one cannot escape the conclusion that there is also a significant strain of anti-monasticism, and specifically anti-Benedictine feeling, in them. The repetition of ridicule tends to undermine the standing of the ridiculed. In the great debate about anticlericalism on the eve of the Reformation this needs to be taken into account. It suggests not a general distrust of the clergy, but a particular cynicism about the richest and most worldly of the religious orders. As such it may reflect growing lay involvement in religious practice and, in certain contexts, control over ecclesiastical affairs discernible among the gentry and at parochial level in the later middle ages. Tensions may have existed between the assertive and more independent laity and the old orders who still considered themselves the princes of the Church, especially where urban societies and religious communities rubbed shoulder to shoulder. If so, and we ultimately do not know how the stories were read or heard, it may have contributed to the willingness of the laity in general to accept the dissolution of the greater monasteries, including all the Benedictine Orders, between 1538 and 1540.

Just as Robin and his fellowship might be seen to embody more sincerely than a great Benedictine monastery the true Christian ideals, so also he is an outlaw who maintains justice more impartially than the chief justice of the realm. He was a good outlaw while he walked on ground, which is fundamentally a contradiction in terms: a thief, a murderer and a renegade upholding the law? The pattern of his crime does not entirely fit the pattern of crime in England in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Poaching was not a matter of serious concern or site of social conflict in the fifteenth century, though it became more so

during the sixteenth. Highway robbery was a continuing problem. But it does not matter so much whether the crime he commits is characteristic of the period; its purpose is to signify that a fellowship living beyond the law does more to uphold true justice than the enforcers of the law themselves. Moreover Robin is an outlaw who does not hesitate to use extreme violence, even to take life, in the cause of true justice. Violence is 'valorised' for two reasons; one is that, in imitation of chivalric values, it is a demonstration of his prowess and a sign of his honour; the other is that the just use of violence is what underpins all enforcement of law. In the inverted world of Robin Hood in which an outlaw defends the law, the violence of a just outlaw is likewise justified.

Robin Hood is apparently in legitimate rebellion against a regime that is undermined by an evil and corrupt minister, the Sheriff of Nottingham, who has prevented the king from fulfilling his true vocation of protecting and serving the common weal. Self-seeking officials and venal ecclesiastics are legitimate targets, for these are the people who have failed the king and corrupted society. The outlaws in this reading are thus not in rebellion against the king, but against the misdoers and misleaders in his service. They are perpetually in such loyal rebellion. This is an ideology very much in tune with the ideology of loyal rebellion to be found articulated, justified and practised in England from 1450 to 1550. It is to be found in the manifestos produced during Cade's rebellion, was taken up by York and Warwick, and remained a standard call right through to the Pilgrimage of Grace in 1536 and the risings of 1549. Those who rebelled in these years, whether following a dissident nobleman or, more spontaneously, to air their own grievances, were led at the local level by the same middling sorts who were the agents of local government. The appeal was to gentlemen as well as to commoners. They shared the conventional ideal about justice and due order, but in rebellion sought to enforce it, violently.

The crown, however, insisted that no rebellion could be justified; that only through complete obedience can the true interest of the common weal be served. Yet this was a contested principle in the years between 1450 and 1550, in both high and not so high circles. The *Gest* of Robin Hood engaged in this debate, for it implied through its hero's defiance of the king that rebellion can be justified if it is undertaken in the true interest of the common weal. An alternative ideology can be discerned that the common weal cannot ultimately be guaranteed by the unfettered authority of the crown, but only by the action of subjects. The story elaborated in the *Gest* is thus implicitly political. It uses history by referring back to Edward III, the paradigm of kingship. Its avowed and apparent line is that Robin Hood stands for the perfection of the desired order, and in this respect is intensely conservative: in line with loyal rebellion to reform and make perfect that which should be. Yet there is also something beyond the conventional rhetoric of loyal rebellion: an underlying subversiveness contained in the denouement of the story. It implies that all kings fail, even the best; that society can never work as it is meant to and that there will always need to be rebellion to assert the rights of the ruled. Robin Hood treats with the king; he does not submit. While he recognises the king's sovereignty and overlordship, he is an independent ruler of his own forest lordship, where the ideal of the perfect commonwealth is sustained. In so doing he represents independence of mind and independence of action in a social order that abhorred such independence. There is something in this reminiscent of more modern theories of anarchy, an ideal of a society with no rule, as well as the long-standing English tradition of independent thinking. This ideal commonwealth was Merry England.

In *Henry VI, Part 2* Shakespeare entertains his audience with a parody of this perception. Jack Cade addresses his fellowship of comic handicraftmen who have risen in rebellion. He promises a

realm in which all shall be in common and it will be a felony to drink small beer. And he shall be king and 'apparel them all in one livery, that they may agree like brothers, and worship me their lord'. As John Holland, one of the fellowship, declares, 'Well, I say it was never merry world in England since gentlemen came up'.¹ The Robin Hood stories did not advocate overturning the social order, but in many respects they located a Merry England in the communitarian ideals of the era before the Reformation. The texts are self-consciously aware of this Merry England. The outlaws are merry men, who we meet on merry mornings in the merry greenwood.² When Robin tires of the court he watches yeomen shooting and regrets that he gave up that life.

*Somtyme I was an archere good,
A styffe and eke a stronge,
I was comted the best archere
That was in mery Englonde.*³

The king proclaims Little John's pardon through all 'mery Englonde'.⁴ When Little John is wounded in the fight with the sheriff's men, he begs Robin to kill him rather than let him fall into his enemy's hands. But Robin refuses to abandon him:

*'I wolde not that,' said Robyn,
'Johan, that I were slawe,
For all the golde in mery Englonde.'*⁵

The same oath is sworn by the sheriff after his uncomfortable night in the forest:

*For all the golde in mery Englonde
I would not longe dwel ber.*⁶

The king proclaims that he will reward any man who kills the good knight, Sir Richard at the Lee, with all his lands

*To have and hold for ever more
In all mery Englonde.*⁷

There is, however, a subtle difference between the phrase in Robin's mouth and in the mouths of the sheriff and king. When used by Robin, it represents the ideal world; by the sheriff and the king, the unjust world as it is. The sheriff turns his back on the forest; as far as he is concerned Merry England is not there. The king punishes the honest knight in the name of Merry England. Robin Hood abandons the court because it weakens the sinews of Merry England. Merry England was not associated with the king or his authority: it was to be found at a distance from the throne.

This Merry England was orthodoxly Christian; it was communitarian on the model of fraternities, and justice could be enforced by direct action. It was rooted in a contemporary view of the common weal. Merry England was not just a construct of a later era looking back nostalgically to a perfect world before the break with Rome. Yet Merry England was swept away by the political and religious revolution of the mid-sixteenth century. Among the casualties were the fraternities and guilds that were so central to pre-Reformation local society. An alliance of crown and Protestants (holy or unholy depending on one's standpoint) removed one of the principal elements of the popular culture in which the Robin Hood stories had flourished. Ethan Shagan has drawn attention to the puzzle of the uncontested abolition of intercessory prayers, and of the dissolution of the institutions which had sustained them, so apparently important in the century or so before the Reformation. How come, he asks, that the chantries folded so easily after 1547? His answer is that in many different ways, including a desire to share in the spoils, men and

women, who could have done more to resist, willingly collaborated with the regime.⁸ The same question can be asked, even more pressingly, about the fraternities and guilds which were so much more than collective chantries and were even more embedded in communal life.

It is difficult to comprehend the completeness and relative ease with which thousands of fraternities and guilds, which for a century and more had played such a significant secular as well as religious role in local society, were swept away. To say the least, it makes one wonder whether they really were so important. It raises serious questions about the depth of the roots of fraternities and guilds, and the validity of a conclusion that suggests that Robin Hood tapped into popular involvement in secular and religious affairs at the local level. Perhaps we do not fully grasp the revolutionary nature of events in the mid-sixteenth century. Men and women had for centuries grown accustomed to dual allegiances: one to the crown and the other to the Church. Now they had been merged into one. The Church became an arm of the state and not a separate focus. The power of the crown was immense. There was little choice but to accept and obey, especially after the collapse of Mary's counter-revolution. We should not belittle the bewilderment and powerlessness of local communities in the face of a government and local magistracy determined to carry out reform, especially as it occurred incrementally, small step by small step, backwards as well as forwards, over a period of thirty years or more.⁹ Second, the Protestant Reformation did offer, in alternative ways, a continuation, indeed in some respects an enhancement of lay involvement in and control over religion and the clergy, and reinforced the code of respectable behaviour. But there was a price to pay, and that price was the old guild and fraternity structure, which had been one of the mainstays of local communal association and promoters of the stories in May Games and related rituals.

Even so May Games and ales did not disappear as rapidly as intercessory prayers for the dead. Only after 1560 was the process of closing down the plays and gatherings begun, at a quickening pace after 1570. They held on at Chagford until 1588. In 1607 a complaint was raised in Weston Zoyland against the vicar there, Mr Wolfall, that he encouraged his parishioners on a Sunday in Whitsuntide to leave church and, according to custom, follow Robin Hood to the ale. In Yeovil in the same year some parishioners complained to the justices of similar sports in the name of Robin Hood, which, shamefully, included the churchwardens keeping the church house open until midnight and allowing the youth to dance and drink.¹⁰ There were to be no more cakes and ale and the Robin Hood performances at local level were expunged in both England and Scotland, though not finally until the end of the seventeenth century.¹¹

Robin Hood performances were removed along with the fraternities and parochial rituals. But the stories survived in different media in the new social and political order. The view of the crown that it alone could maintain the common weal was ruthlessly enforced in order to protect Henry VIII's dynastic settlement and the unchallenged right of his descendants to the throne. Absolute and unquestioning obedience was demanded. There could be no loyal opposition. The break with Rome, the gathering threat from religious dissidents and the growing gulf between rich and poor, all put greater stress on obedience to the crown as the only hope of maintaining order and of advancing the common good. A yeoman hero, who defied the crown in maintaining justice, was no longer politically correct. Other forces were at work too. A commercial theatre in London and its suburbs, backed by aristocratic patronage, supplanted parochial playing. A significant increase in literacy speeded up the transition from the spoken to the written word. The Robin Hood stories changed to match these contexts. A new, more aristocratic and

affirmative story version emerged, encapsulated at the end of the century in Anthony Munday's plays. When Duke Senior took refuge in the forest of Arden he was likened, we should note, to the Robin Hood of *old*. Respectability was put back into outlawry.

However, the radical Robin Hood refused to lie down; a new popular ballad literature, in single-sheet broadside form, emerged, which in the seventeenth century sustained the old traditions. The commercial broadside, as Dobson and Taylor have stressed, became the main vehicle for the transmission of the stories of Robin Hood in the seventeenth century. Subsequently they were collected together and sold in 'garlands'. In the process the content and form tended to fossilise as traditional entertainment.¹² In the revolutionary and romantic decades of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Robin Hood of old was revived and rediscovered in literary circles, later adapted to music hall entertainment, and transferred to film. And so, it eventually came to pass that the 'Hood Myth' was given priority rating in a project to turn the Isle of Wight into a heritage theme park. For it was:

A primal myth, better still, a primal English myth. One of freedom and rebellion – justified rebellion, of course. Wise, if ad hoc principles of taxation and redistribution of income. Individualism deployed to temper the excesses of the free market. The brotherhood of man. A Christian myth, too, despite certain anti-clerical features. The pastoral monastery of Sherwood Forest. The triumph of the virtuous yet seemingly outgunned over the epitomic robber baron.¹³

- 57 M. A. Hicks, *English Political Culture in the Fifteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 194–202.
- 58 J. L. Watts, 'Ideas, Principles and Politics', in A. J. Pollard, ed., *The Wars of the Roses* (London: Macmillan, 1995); Watts, "'A New Foundation of is Crowne": Monarchy in the Age of Henry VII', in B. Thompson, ed., *The Reign of Henry VII* (Stamford, Lincs.: Paul Watkins, 1996); 'Bishop Russell's Parliamentary Sermons of 1483–84', in G. W. Bernard and S. J. Gunn, eds, *Authority and Consent in Tudor England: Essays Presented to C. S. L. Davies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), esp. p. 51 for the democratic implications. See also Watts, 'Politics, War and Public Life', in Richard Marks and Paul Williamson, eds, *Gothic: Art for England, 1400–1547* (London: V&A, 2003), pp. 35–6, in which he refers to a 'mass public with an interest in its own political, moral and spiritual health'.
- 59 Harvey, *Cade's Rebellion*, p. 189.
- 60 M. L. Kekewich and others, eds, *The Politics of Fifteenth-century England: John Vale's Book*, (Stroud: Sutton for the Richard III and Yorkist History Trust, 1995), pp. 208–15, 218–21.
- 61 This paragraph draws upon John Marshall, 'Comyth in Robyn Hode', *passim*, and a private communication from Ian Arthurson, who generously provided me with details of villagers of Croscombe fined in the aftermath of the rebellions of 1497.
- 62 Ian Arthurson, *The Perkin Warbeck Conspiracy, 1491–1499* (Stroud: Sutton, 1994), pp. 181–8; Arthurson, *Cornwall Marches On! Keskerdh Kernow 500*, ed. S. Parker (Truro, 1998), pp. 22–9; Shaw, *Wells*, p. 205.
- 63 A. F. Pollard, ed., *The Reign of Henry VII from Contemporary Sources*, 3 vols (London, 1913), vol. 1, p. 153.
- 64 See M. L. Bush, 'The Risings of the Commons in England, 1381–1549', in J. Denton, ed., *Orders and Hierarchies in Late Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (London: Macmillan, 1999). Montgomery Bohna, 'Armed Force and Civic Legitimacy in Jack Cade's Revolt, 1450', *EHR*, 118 (2003), 563–82, appeared too late for me to incorporate. His argument that the revolt was an expression of political violence grounded in a customary right to bear arms as a way of registering political opinion is clearly germane to my discussion.

8 History and Memory

- 1 *Gest*, stanza 2.
- 2 J. C. Bellamy, *Robin Hood: An Historical Inquiry* (London: Croom Helm, 1985).
- 3 J. R. Maddicott, 'The Birth and Setting of the Ballads of Robin Hood', *EHR*, 93 (1978), 276–99.
- 4 Thomas H. Ohlgren, 'Edwardus redivivus in A *Gest of Robyn Hode*', *Journal of English and German Philology*, 99 (2000), pp. 5–9. The hypothesis depends on interpreting 'he is' in stanza 89 of the *Gest*. The knight is ferre beyonde the

- see 'In Englonde he is ryght', as meaning England 'his' right, or England's, i.e. Edward III's, right. Dobson and Taylor (*Rymes*, p. 85, n. 6.), however, gloss the words as an error for 'is his'. The knight's right, in this reading, would be his estates, which the abbot of St Mary's hopes to acquire because the knight is abroad and cannot redeem his mortgage.
- 5 Andrew Ayton, 'Military Service and the Development of the Robin Hood Legend in the Fourteenth Century', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 36 (1992), 126–47.
 - 6 See pp. 126–8.
 - 7 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), p. 69.
 - 8 Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*, p. xxxiii.
 - 9 J. C. Holt inclined, in his second edition, to an earlier formation and evolution of the legend from 1261–2: *Robin Hood* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1989), pp. 191–2.
 - 10 For which see Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*, pp. 36–65; Holt, *Robin Hood*, pp. 159–86; Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994), pp. 115–201.
 - 11 Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500–1700* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp. 1–49.
 - 12 Adam Fox, 'Remembering the Past in Early Modern England: Oral and Written Traditions', *TRHS*, sixth series, 9 (1999), pp. 255–6.
 - 13 Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*, p. 5; eds Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University Press, 1997), p. 27.
 - 14 I owe this suggestion to David Ditchburn. One might note how the invention of Robin as the dispossessed Anglo-Saxon earl of Huntingdon mirrors the manner in which Alfred the Great invented an Anglo-Saxon past for the kingdom of Wessex (Sarah Foot, 'Remembering, Forgetting and Inventing: Attitudes to the Past in England at the End of the First Viking Age', *TRHS*, sixth series, 9 (1999), pp. 197–200).
 - 15 See Thorlac Turville-Petre, *England and Nation: Language, Literature and National Identity, 1290–1340* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 28.
 - 16 Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*, p. 254.
 - 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 251–4, esp. stanza 24, p. 254; *Gest*, stanza 456. For a discussion of the likely authorship and circulation of the Outlaw Song see J. R. Maddicott, 'Poems of Social Protest in Early-Fourteenth Century England', in W. M. Ormrod, ed., *England in the Fourteenth Century* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1986), pp. 130–44.
 - 18 E. L. G. Stones, 'The Folvilles of Ashby-Folville, Leicestershire, and their Associates in Crime, 1326–41', *TRHS*, fifth series, 7 (1957), p. 131.
 - 19 Barbara A. Hanawalt, 'Ballads and Bandits: Fourteenth-Century Outlaws and the Robin Hood Poems', in Hanawalt, ed., *Chaucer's England: Literature in*

- Historical Context* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp. 154–75.
- 20 V. H. Galbraith, ed., *The Anonimale Chronicle, 1337–1381*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1927), p. 152; Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England, II, c. 1307 to the Early Sixteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1982), pp. 111–12. Also see above, p. 92–3.
 - 21 A. Musson and W. M. Ormrod, *The Evolution of English Justice: Law, Politics and Society in the Fourteenth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 36–40.
 - 22 See , pp. 102–3.
 - 23 Maurice Keen, *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1977), p. 78; Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, p. 185.
 - 24 Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*, pp. 258–9.
 - 25 Keen, *Outlaws of Medieval Legend*, pp. 130–1; Peter Coss, 'Aspects of Cultural Diffusion in Medieval England: The Early Romances, Local Society and Robin Hood', *Past and Present*, 108 (1985), *passim*. Also see above pp. 171–3.
 - 26 Rupert Willoughby, 'Sir Adam de Gurdon and the Pass of Alton', *The Best of '98* (Winchester: Annual Writers' Conference, 1998), pp. 134–6. Also see above pp. 92–3.
 - 27 Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, pp. 25–6; Keen, *Outlaws of Medieval Legend*, p. 177.
 - 28 *Thomas Wright's Political Songs of England*, reissued with an introduction by Peter Coss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press for the Royal Historical Society, 1996), ll. 126–37, p. 329.
 - 29 See p. 128. In the *Simony* the porter turns them away; in the *Gest* he welcomes them.
 - 30 P. R. Coss, 'Sir Geoffrey de Langley and the Crisis of the Knightly Class in Thirteenth-Century England', *Past and Present*, 68 (1975), pp. 5–17, 24–5, 33–4; D. A. Carpenter, 'Was There a Crisis of the Knightly Class in the Thirteenth Century?', *EHR*, 95 (1980), 721–52, esp. p. 724.
 - 31 Local memory, as the histories of these disputes show, was long. How widely knowledge of them spread elsewhere is hard to tell. See pp. 123–4.
 - 32 See p. 95.
 - 33 *Thomas Wright's Political Songs*, p. 198; but one might doubt whether anyone alive then could remember the victories.
 - 34 Katherine L. French, *The People of the Parish: Community Life in a Late-medieval English Diocese* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), p. 54. See pp. 45–67 *passim* for a discussion of written and oral memory at parochial level.
 - 35 J. Smyth, *The Lives of the Berkeleys*, ed. Sir John Maclean, 3 vols (Gloucester, 1883–5), vol 2, pp. 114–15.
 - 36 See for example Oscar de Ville, 'The Deyvilles and the Genesis of the Robin Hood Legend', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 43 (1999), pp. 90–109.
 - 37 *Thomas Wright's Political Songs*, pp. 149–52; J. Stephenson, ed., *The Townley*

- Mysteris* (Woodbridge: Surtees Society, 3, 1836), pp. 98–9. It has recently been proposed that the composition should be dated c.1500 (P. J. P. Goldberg, 'Performing the Word of God', in D. Wood, ed., *Life and Thought in the Northern Church* (Studies in Church History, Subsidia 12, Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewster, 1999).
- 38 Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, p. 27.
- 39 Turville-Petre, *England the Nation*, p. 96 (my modernisation).
- 40 *Ibid.*, pp. 91–100.
- 41 This paragraph draws on Ohlgren, 'Edwardus redivivus', pp. 4–5, 10–12, in which detailed references are given. My argument here and later is not based on the ambiguity of the second line of stanza 89 of the *Gest*, for which see note 4, and its possible specific reference to military service under Edward III, but on Edward III's known reputation. Elements of *Edward and the Hermit* are recycled in the story of 'Little John and the Sheriff'.
- 42 One can reconstruct from the narrative that the king was on the throne for at least twenty-four years. This is based on the statements that the king dwelt at Nottingham for six months and more when trying to track Robin down (*Gest*, stanza 365), that Robin was at court for fifteen months (stanza 433) and that Robin lived for a further twenty two years after he fled the court (stanza 450). All numbers fit the rhyming scheme, and should not, perhaps, be taken literally, but the impression is given that the king reigned for an exceptionally long time. Edward III reigned for fifty years. Neither Edward II nor Edward IV for more than twenty-two. Edward I, who reigned for thirty-five years, is, for reasons I suggest later, too early.
- 43 D. A. L. Morgan, 'The Political After-Life of Edward III: The Apotheosis of a Warmonger', *EHR*, (1997), p. 861. The following paragraphs draw heavily on this important assessment of Edward's late-medieval reputation.
- 44 F. W. D. Brie, ed., *The Brut or the Chronicles of England* (Oxford, EETS, old series, 196, 1908), vol. 2, p. 334.
- 45 *Gest*, stanzas 410–11.
- 46 Morgan, 'Political After-Life', p. 873.
- 47 The words are those of Musson and Ormrod, *Evolution of English Justice*, p. 163, in their characterisation of the 'didactic discourse' on fourteenth-century justice.
- 48 *Great Chronicle*, p. 338. The context is an obituary notice on Henry VII, who, in comparison with Edward III, in the authors' opinion, did not quite make the grade. See Morgan, 'Political After-Life', p. 858.
- 49 *Gest*, stanzas 436 and 438.
- 50 *Gest*, stanza 250.
- 51 *The Brut*, vol. 2, p. 334. Here lies another reason for supposing that the central thread of the *Gest* began to take shape in the last quarter of the fourteenth century.
- 52 *Adam Bell*, stanzas 165–73.
- 53 Musson and Ormrod, *Evolution of English Justice*, pp. 169–70.

- 54 Fox, 'Remembering the Past', pp. 239–40.
- 55 See pp. 180–2.
- 56 *Monk*, stanza 84.
- 57 *Monk*, stanza, 88.
- 58 *Gest*, stanzas 384–5. Mark Ormrod has pointed out in an unpublished paper that the *Gest* contains much that is reverential of the king, his office and his authority. This, it seems to me, makes the ultimate challenge to and rejection of royal authority all the more significant.
- 59 *Gest*, stanza 391.
- 60 *Gest*, stanza 417.
- 61 *Gest*, stanza 449.
- 62 *Gest*, stanza 324.
- 63 Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. Edward Surz (New Haven, CT: University of Yale Press, 1964), p.148.

9 Farewell to Merry England

- 1 *Henry VI, Part 2*, Act IV, Scene 2. Holland's words, almost verbatim, were reportedly spoken in a Sussex pub in 1450 (see pp. 176–7).
- 2 *Gest*, stanzas 145 and 445; *Monk*, stanza 1.
- 3 *Gest*, stanza 437.
- 4 *Monk*, stanza 86.
- 5 *Gest*, stanza 306.
- 6 *Gest*, stanza 198.
- 7 *Gest*, stanza 361. The text deploys part of the standard formula of a title deed.
- 8 E. Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 239–66.
- 9 For an evocative and empathetic account of how one parish, Morebath, which did resist as much as it could, resigned itself to revolutionary times see Eamon Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village* (New Haven, CT: University of Yale Press, 2001).
- 10 Jeffrey L. Singman, *Robin Hood: The Shaping of the Legend* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998), p. 70; James D. Stokes, 'Robin Hood and the Churchwardens in Yeovil', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 3 (1986), p. 6.
- 11 Singman, *Robin Hood*, p. 70; see also R. Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year, 1400–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 111–152, esp. pp. 143 ff, but note also his suggestion, p. 67, that by the mid-1520s the popularity of the Robin Hood theme in May Games was waning all over the West Midlands and the Thames basin.
- 12 Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*, pp. 46–53.
- 13 Julian Barnes, *England, England* (London: Picador, 1999), p. 146.