

## **Robin Hoods: A Myth in Flux**

Justin Paonessa

Robin Hood has remained one of the most infamous outlaws in European history. His popularity has transcended national boundaries and his myths appear in Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England. Scholars have often wondered how Robin Hood was able to remain such a prominent figure of folklore for so long without dying out as other outlaw stories have. This paper will show that the reason the Robin Hood myth was able to survive the tests of time was the Storytellers ability to adapt it to any time period in which it was told. The beginning of the paper will start by examining the common themes represented in the Robin Hood myths. It will then move on to a discussion of source problems inherent within this myth. A discussion of Robin Hood as a historical figure will then commence. Having then established the historical Robin Hood, an examination of his relationships with the medieval church, political authorities, and the “common man” will then take place. After having established all of these essentials arguments about Robin Hood it will finally be time to discuss the thesis through an example of how the myth of Robin Hood was used during Henry VIII’s reign in order to better represent his own ideas and policies. This adaptability is what made Robin Hood’s myth able to survive the tests of time, and become as famous as the King Arthur myths. The time periods in which this paper will be examining the myths of Robin Hood are from the early thirteenth century to the late sixteenth. While the myths seem to have been popular even before then, most of the myths currently in possession of historians are from these time periods.

## What is a Myth?

One important factor that must be established before this examination can begin is a discussion of what is meant by the “myth.” It makes the most sense to use the definition of both of these terms found in the Oxford Dictionary. According to this source a myth is “a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events.” A myth is different from a [legend](#) in that it is a “traditional historical tale (or collection of related tales) popularly regarded as true but usually containing a mixture of fact and fiction.” Using these criteria as explanations for these two terms an examination of Robin Hood can now begin.

## Sources

The primary sources that will be used for this paper are; *The Gest of Robyn Hode*, *Death of Robin Hood*, *The Death of Robert, Earl of Huntington*, *Maid Marian and Robin Hood: A Romance of Old Sherwood Forest*, and *Robin and The King* and other minor myths taken from the secondary sources that have been gathered. The myths that are being used are some of the most famous and most often adapted of all of the different myths and myths surrounding Robin Hood. As such, it is important to analyze them and some of the changes that may have taken place throughout the years in which they were popular.

## The Themes of Robin Hood

The Robin Hood myth was not just a simple story of good triumphing over evil. The myth holds many themes that are integral to understanding why the Robin Hood myth has survived. One of the main themes that the Robin Hood myth possesses is the idea that “justice” will come to those who are corrupt in a position of power. This is the most prevalent idea within the myths and therefore must be discussed. As Maurice Keen points out, Robin Hood was, “an enemy of the existing order.”<sup>1</sup> What makes this

---

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Keen, *The Outlaws of Medieval Myth* (London: Routledge, 1961), 128.

interesting is that during this time period in history as Keen explains, “Rule of Law was respected as a foundation of good Government, those who put themselves outside and against the law nevertheless became popular heroes.”<sup>2</sup> The same people who viewed their sovereign’s laws as the will of God also understood that mere men carried these laws out. Often, though the law itself was good the men placed in charge of carrying out the order were not, and corruption seems to have been common enough that those who fought against it were held up as heroes. Robin Hood was not just an outlaw seeking to run from the law but a man who was trying to right the wrongs of a corrupt kingdom. Robin fought against injustices most notably of the corrupt political or religious authority figures, represented by Sheriffs of Nottingham or greedy Abbots. The model of Robin bringing his own brand of justice upon the tyrannical wicked has stuck with the myth since its inception and is the glue which holds these myths together.

Robin’s generosity towards “people of the lower orders” is another major theme of the myths, while many scholars have actually identified Robin as the construction of the middle to upper aristocracy. It was as Bellamy puts it, “the disenfranchised and the downtrodden that Robin Hood defended and helped, with particular vindictiveness towards those corrupted by power.”<sup>3</sup> This theme has stuck with Robin since the earliest stories of the hero when he helped out a disenfranchised Knight who would later become one his staunchest supporters.<sup>4</sup> This was extremely important to the myths, as Robin’s role as a defender changed often when it came to who he defended. Was Robin the defender of upper aristocrats who were brought low by injustices? Or did he instead defend the common people who had a tyrannical official or even a King, such as in the case of King John? The answer to both of these questions is “yes.” Robin’s myths often had him defending anyone who was disenfranchised during the period of the myth. Robin’s generosity towards these disenfranchised men was another important theme in the many plays and sonnets about him. His willingness to spare his coin, table, or even give a membership into his “Merry Men” to particular just-hearted outlaws was another aspect of all the myths.

---

<sup>2</sup> Keen, *The Outlaws of Medieval Myth*, 128.

<sup>3</sup> John Bellamy, *Robin Hood: A Historical Inquiry* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1985), 67.

<sup>4</sup> William H. Clawson, *The Gest of Robyn Hode* (Toronto: University of Toronto Library, 1909), lines 83-167.

Robin Hood has also been associated with both the woods and disguise. These two aspects are placed together for the reason that they both represent an essential theme of the outlaw plays: mystery. To many of the people living in medieval England knew that, “The woods were forbidden by the King to even step foot into, Robin’s refuge in these woods was in open defiance to the laws and gave the woods a ‘mystical’ quality about them, even long after much of these woods had been cut down.”<sup>5</sup> What is interesting is that the laws proclaiming that no one was allowed to hunt or enter the “King’s woods” actually made the woods seem even more mystical once the myths had placed the outlaw inside of them. The woods also represented mystery especially to those not allowed to enter them. According to John Bellamy, “Woods like Sherwood Forest often had all kinds of ghost stories or other superstitions linked with them, the fact that an outlaw like Robin Hood could live in them fascinated people.”<sup>6</sup> Robin Hood also possessed the uncanny accuracy of a master archer, which many scholars suspect was in part originally placed into the myth to make it seem as if, among his other crimes, he often poached illegally.<sup>7</sup> It was also the favored weapon of peasants and low-born aristocrats during the time period of most of the Robin Hood telling.

Robin’s utilization of disguise is another aspect of the myths that added to his mystique. As was the popular theme in many medieval and early modern plays and other stories, so too was Robin’s ability to disguise himself and hoodwink the officials often a theme in the myth.<sup>8</sup> In many instances Robin was able to disguise himself as either a potter, lowland archer, or at one point, even an old man in order to fool his enemies.<sup>9</sup> Robin also used the disguises to free his captured men from harm and he even used one when asking for the mercy from the King’s wrath on his own head. These disguises added levity to the plays and stories, as the people who knew it was Robin could laugh as he hoodwinked a Sherriff or Abbot easily. Disguise was not just restricted to the likes of Robin Hood, as is evidenced when he was

---

<sup>5</sup> J. C. Holt, *Robin Hood* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1982), 35.

<sup>6</sup> Bellamy, *Robin Hood*, 27.

<sup>7</sup> Holt, *Robin Hood*, 36.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Q. Adams, *Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924), 74.

<sup>9</sup> Clarence G. Child, *The Second Shepherds’ Everyman: And other Early Plays* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1910).

hoodwinked by King Edward, who, disguised as a pauper man, entered Robin's camp. Later the King reveals himself after defeating Robin in an archery match and severely chastises the outlaw for his treatment of his own men.<sup>10</sup> Mystery and deceit seems to have been a big theme during the Robin Hood plays, for without them, many of the myths would never have been possible or even entertaining.

The purpose of the Robin Hood myth creation was often twofold. On one hand the many myths represented a social critique on the corruption of power and how one way or another justice found corrupt men and made them pay. The other was a source of entertainment for people looking to see justice done to wicked and corrupt authority figures in their own time period. Often these two purposes would intertwine in order to get their messages across. It is important to see that though these plays were for entertainment purposes this does not reduce the significance of the storytellers attempt to give the audience a dose of criticism. The ballads, sonnets, and plays were a way for critics of the time to express their own views and problems with the current regimes or even their rulers. This aspect of the overall myth of Robin Hood should not be overlooked as they are just as important as every other aspect being discussed.

An underlying but still extremely important theme in the Robin Hood ballads is Robin's own religiosity. It is important when reading the ballads or plays to realize that despite his outlaw status Robin was a deeply religious man, especially in his devotion to the Virgin Mary. Religion played a significant role in the ballads also. Oftentimes Robin's targets were greedy or over-pious religious men playing the role of the villain.. In many of the early myths, Robin often spent quite a lot of time either praying to the Virgin or speaking in scripture to his men. Robin's obvious disgust for corrupt clergy was also prevalent in the myths. According to J. C. Holt, in one of the ballads Robin is so angry at a particularly corrupt Bishop that he orders his men to have the Bishops' head removed. When questioned by Little Jon on what God would do if his man on earth was killed Robin responds, "This cretin is no man of God, let his corpse rot so that it matches his heart."<sup>11</sup> This aspect of Robin as God's justice on religious corruption is part of

---

<sup>10</sup> Clawson, *The Gest of Robyn Hode*, 82-96.

<sup>11</sup> Holt, *Robin Hood*, 126.

what makes him the loveable rogue. His religiosity is also what leads to his premature death, when he believes that his cousin, a prioress, to be a woman of God and places his trust in her. In return the prioress and her lover instead murder him.<sup>12</sup> The myth concerning Robin's death has many individual myths but none stray from the story that names his Prioress cousin and her betrayal as the main perpetrator of his demise. In some myths she has a lover who joins her in killing Robin, in others it is the Sheriff or sometimes even King John.<sup>13</sup> Regardless of who was present at his death one aspect does not change. Even in death, Robin called upon the Virgin Mary to protect his soul, and bid that Little Jon not hurt his cousin as hurting a woman is a sin of the highest order.<sup>14</sup> All of these different themes are present throughout the different ballads, sonnets and plays about Robin Hood, and all are extremely important to both the character and myth of the outlaw. This holds true in all of the sources that scholars currently have on Robin Hood.

### **A Real Robin Hood?**

It is impossible to discuss Robin Hood in a scholarly debate without briefly discussing the possibility that Robin Hood was a real historical figure, the debate by scholars on this particular topic has been raging since study first began on the Hood myth and there is no clear end to the debate in sight. Finding a historical Robin Hood and placing him within a time period is one of the great hopes of many of the scholars involved in this topic. While some have simply given up on this particular aspect of research others believe that Robin Hood can truly be traced. Most of the more prestigious scholars such as J. C. Holt, John Bellamy, and Maurice Keen agree that the most likely time period in which the historical Robin Hood may have lived was the fourteenth century. This is difficult as there is evidence to suggest that the Robin Hood myth may have begun as early as the twelfth century and perhaps even earlier. Most scholars seem to have found evidence that both a Robert Hood and a Robin Hode did indeed live during

---

<sup>12</sup> Holt, *Robin Hood*, 25.

<sup>13</sup> Bernard Barton, "The Death of Robin Hood," in *A New Year's Eve, and Other Poems* (London: John Hatchard and Son, 1828), 114.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

the fourteenth century. Bellamy actually goes further and claims that evidence of the other members of Robin's band such as Friar Tuck, Little Jon and Will Scarlet having also lived during this same time period.<sup>15</sup> J. C. Holt contributed to Bellamy's findings by also indicating that Robin Hood was most likely, as the myth indicates, a yeoman and not a disgraced Earl, which was a later addition to the myth. Furthermore, Holt was actually able to find a man by the name of Robert Hode of Yeoman status. Holt also found another individual who was raised to Yeoman status named Robyn Hode whom Holt believes could have been the true Robin Hood.

The main issue with these findings is that by the late fourteenth century and through the sixteenth, it would seem that the name Robin Hood, or similar spellings, had become a popular name. It was especially popular among outlaws who would take the name in order to gain the prestige and support that went with it. In fact, according to Graham Seal, "Twelve different 'Robin Hoods' were arrested and tried as bandits throughout the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth century."<sup>16</sup> This does make it extremely difficult to those in the pursuit of finding the historical Robin Hood, but it is interesting that the name had become widely popular and even used widely by this time period. Surely this indicates that by this time, the myths and myth of Hood were well-known and liked if not respected by many of the people living in England and the countries under its control.

The fourteenth century remains viable for yet another reason, Robin's skill with the longbow. Being an expert marksman with a longbow was a skill admired up through the sixteenth century, but the longbow was used as a weapon mostly in the fourteenth century according to scholars like Holt, and Bellamy.<sup>17</sup> What is interesting is that there are even entire ballad's dedicated to Robin use of the bow and even an entire ballad about the importance of the bow and the wood it was made out of.<sup>18</sup> The longbow was not only the signature weapon of the outlaws, it became the symbol for the outlaw. This is evidenced

---

<sup>15</sup> Bellamy, *Robin Hood*, 58.

<sup>16</sup> Graham Seal, "The Robin Hood Principle: Folklore, History, and the Social Bandit," *Journal of Folklore Research* 46 (April 2009): 78.

<sup>17</sup> Bellamy, *Robin Hood*, 59.

<sup>18</sup> Eliza Cook, "The Bow," in *The Poetical Works of Eliza Cook* (London: Frederi Warne and Co., 1870), 15.

in the fact that at some point all of the ballads seek to remind the reader of Robin's uncanny archery ability. Through examining many of the ballads, sonnets and other works on Robin Hood, it is clear that this message of the importance of the longbow was reinforced by almost all of the myths on Robin Hood. Robin's accuracy with the bow, and the fact that this was his favored weapon, says a lot about the time period in which he may have existed. This also places Robin into a more probable existence in the fourteenth century. The reason for this is that by the fifteenth and sixteenth century, having great skills with a longbow seems to have been viewed as a dead art.

In relation to Robin's living area, scholars have also attempted to place their Hood candidates as living at least in close proximity to Sherwood Forest. Many of these candidates actually did live near the area of Nottingham and at least two were found to live on the fringes of Sherwood.<sup>19</sup> This makes the idea that there may have been a historical Robin Hood more believable, as Holt admits, "If there was a true Robin Hood who became an outlaw it would make the most sense for him to seek refuge in his own 'backyard' then to travel down to the forest in Nottingham."<sup>20</sup> Once again, the primary sources on Robin Hood or even his name equivalence are extremely vague and are mostly taken from ballads and other aspects of the myth. Holt's most likely candidate, Robert Hode, lived during the fourteenth century and seemed to have earned his Yeoman status at some point during his later life. This status was apparently granted upon him for "services to his country," and Holt points out that in the area around Nottingham "there seemed to be an extreme amount of references to banditry and attacks on caravans during Hode's life."<sup>21</sup> Holt also points out that in the same area a man by the name of Jon Lytle was located as well as a man bearing the name William Scathelocke (who Holt believes may be Will Scarlet).

The idea that Robin Hood achieved Yeoman status in his life is tenuous at best as according to the primary sources this particular part of the Robin Hood myth is not very clear. In fact in the early years of Henry VIII's reign it would seem that many of the ballads maintained that Robin Hood was born a noble

---

<sup>19</sup> Bellamy, *Robin Hood*, 62.

<sup>20</sup> J. C. Holt, "Robin Hood: Some Comments," *Past & Present* 66 (November 1961): 17.

<sup>21</sup> Holt, *Robin Hood*, 56.

and was disenfranchised by the greedy nobles who would become his later victims.<sup>22</sup> As Henry's reign progressed the myths turned more towards the myths in which Robin Hood was born poor and eventually given the title of Yeoman by King Richard. This turn of the myths could have been an attempt by the author to show that Henry the VIII also would reward those men loyal to him with a title.

One of the most difficult aspects of proving that a historic Robin Hood exists is proving where he was buried. This is because currently there are at least three confirmed graves of Robin. One in England, close to Sherwood Forest, the second is in Scotland and the third is in the middle of Ireland. With each of the countries also possessing tales about the origin of the Hood, it is difficult to tell which place may contain the bones of the real Robin Hood. Though most of the scholars deny that Robin Hood would have lived or died in either Scotland or Ireland, the fact remains that even in death the origin of Robin Hood remains a mystery. Concerning the myth of Robin Hood's betrayal and death, his resting place is of great significance. Robin's coffin is extremely difficult to determine as all of these different lands each have their own version of his death. With so many conflicting reports on how or where he died, it is nearly impossible to determine where in fact it may have happened. Part of the reason many scholars seek to find the place of Robin's death is that the ballads tell that after Robin was slain by his cousin a weeping Little Jon took his body and laid it to rest "ne'ar the forest of which Robin gained his renown."<sup>23</sup> This particular ballad is important in discovering the place of Robin's death as it says he was buried close to Sherwood Forest. In light of this, scholars such as Holt and Bellamy have deemed the coffin in England as the most probable resting place for the lovable outlaw.

### **Source Problems**

One of the reasons that placing a historic Robin Hood is exceedingly difficult is actually because the main devices that historians use to prove their theories, primary sources, give mixed messages. The primary sources with which scholars can examine a historical Robin Hood are written in the format of

---

<sup>22</sup> Evidence of this is found in Leigh Hunt, "Robin Hood, A Child," *The Indicator* (November 1820): 42; and Annie Ingle, *Robin Hood* (New York: Random House 1993), 45.

<sup>23</sup> Sebastian Evans, "Of Robin Hood's Death and Burial," *In Brother Fabian's Manuscript and Other Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1865)

ballads, sonnets or plays. In Lois Potter's *Playing Robin Hood: The Myth as Performance in Five Centuries*, Potter discusses the fact that oftentimes in addition to different time periods and even rulers changing, the Robin Hood myths may have been changed by the writers to better fit the current rulers' tastes. Potter concludes, "The North and South of England possessed different versions of the same story, and Scotland, Ireland and Wales also had their own versions of the outlaw during the same event."<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, scholars are also missing many of the primary sources on the myth of Robin Hood. One of the major problems being that there is no way to tell exactly when and where the Robin Hood myth began.

Furthermore many of the sources that scholars believe would provide transition points are also missing. These "transition points" or missing links are described by J.C. Holt, "there are many instances in which the Robin Hood myths have aspects taken for granted, such as Robin's skill with a bow or how he came by his outlaw status, the myths and myths pertaining to these are still missing."<sup>25</sup> The earliest compilation of the myth that is currently in existence is *The Gest of Robyn Hode* which is dated as being written between 1492 and 1534. Unfortunately for many scholars even this tale according to J. C. Holt, "shows every sign of having been put together from several already existing tales."<sup>26</sup> Before the *Gest*, other stories, and sonnets seem to have been written anywhere from the thirteenth century to the sixteenth century and yet none of them seem to be the original. All of these sources show a Robin whose backstory and skill with a bow are already common knowledge and thus do not discuss them.<sup>27</sup> Instead, it is from the sixteenth and seventeenth century that most of the sources have been found. Scholars such as J. C. Holt and John Bellamy have both lamented, "If only we had just a few more of the older ballads, we just may have been able to locate Robin Hood in history."<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Lois Potter, *Playing Robin Hood: The Myth as Performance in Five Centuries* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998), 54.

<sup>25</sup> Holt, *Robin Hood*, 26.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>27</sup> Bellamy, *Robin Hood*, 30.

<sup>28</sup> Holt, *Robin Hood*, 35.

## **Robin the Creation**

In opposition to this idea, a new line of thought has come forward. This new line of reasoning suggests that Robin Hood may have in fact never existed at all, but instead was born in the ballads and songs about him. Scholars who adhere to this new view of the Robin Hood origin attacks the notions that Robin Hood was actually a historical figure and instead proposes that Robin Hood was the product of the combination of many outlaw stories to make the “perfect outlaw hero.”<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately without more evidence the debate continues rage on about how reliable the sources possessed truly are. For some scholars even these few sources are enough to pursue finding a historical Robin Hood. As can be imagined this discussions will not be settled anytime soon and will remain a touchy subject among historians until new evidence is uncovered regarding this issue.

## **Robin’s Changing Relationships with Authority**

Robin Hood’s relationships with people of authority including with the Church, secular authorities, and Kings is extremely important to discuss. As each relationship is different they have been broken down to ensure an easier examination of each. Robin Hood’s myths and by extension his myth have everything to do with his relationship with both the authorities and those of the lower order. Robin’s ability to keep the goodwill of the people on his side in the face of such authorities as the Sheriffs or Bishops is an important aspect of the myth. Though the people and positions of authority may change from myth to myth, Robin maintains his main theme of bringing low corrupt, authoritarian people and helping the downtrodden.

### *Robin Hood Vs. Secular Authority*

Robin’s relationship with secular authority has an extremely colored history in the ballads. Robin’s interactions with the Sherriff of Nottingham are a staple to his adventures, from his outwitting the

---

<sup>29</sup> David Wiles, *The Early Plays of Robin Hood*, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1981) 74. For further reading on Robin Hood as creation, see Elsa Watson, *Maid Marian: A Novel* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2004); Simeone E. William, “The Mythical Robin Hood,” *Western Folklore* 17 (Jan., 1958): 21-28; and M.I Ebbutt, *Hero-myths & Myths of the British Race* (New York: T.Y. Crowell & Company, 1910).

sheriff on countless occasions to beating the sheriff in the May Games which were then created as a real holiday out of the love by rulers and lower class of Robin Hood myth, namely the event in archery. In the older ballads there are actually quite a few instances in which Robin does not just beat the Sheriff in a game of wits but slays the man as well.<sup>30</sup> Robin was not always just a simple lovable rogue who did not kill the men he faced but simply outclassed them. The Robin from the original ballads or at least the oldest currently in existence *The Gest* was actually quite bloody and the people loved him for it. In fact one of the most notable instances is that in the *Gest of Robyn Hode* Little Jon at one point murders not only a monk riding to the King but his young page, who was just a boy.<sup>31</sup> This more brutal Robin Hood was one severely opposed to corrupt secular and religious authority.

In another ballad called “Dowsing the Demon” Robin Hood endures a particularly bloody adventure in which he is pitted again a man who murdered his father and attempts to blame it on witchcraft caused by his neighbor and Robin actually works along with the Sherriff to discover the truth. By the end of the ballad of course Robin Hood is shown outsmarting the Sherriff and escaping before the Sherriff realizes that his “intelligent companion” is really the infamous outlaw.<sup>32</sup> Robin Hood, as the story goes, opposed secular authority most of all because it was in this position that the “King’s servants” were actually the most corrupt. Given power of expanses of land and its people, these corrupt men, such as the Sheriff of Nottingham were able to wield a lot of power. In this particular ballad the Sherriff is willing to believe the boy’s claims of which despite Robin’s evidence otherwise, which point to the child murdering his parents. This ballad also seems to be a commentary on law enforcement during this particular time period as ineffective and superstitious and willing to overlook evidence in order to establish a quick response.

The ballads also make reference to the fact that Robin Hood became an outlaw based on his disenfranchisement by these secular lawmakers. Robin Hood often in the early ballads also seeks to

---

<sup>30</sup> Bruce Grant, *The Adventures of Robin Hood and His Merry Men* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1955), lines 48-64.

<sup>31</sup> Clawson, *The Gest of Robyn Hode*, lines 168-235.

<sup>32</sup> Clayton Emery, “Dowsing the Demon,” *The Indicator* (Dec. 1994): 8.

regain his honor, not in the eyes of these men but in the eyes of the King. Robin constantly became a thorn in the side of secular authority, whether it was playing pranks, battling against the corrupt sheriffs placed in charge of the area, or attacking the merchant caravans of well to do merchants or mayors who prided themselves on their corruptions.<sup>33</sup> Robin Hood was first and foremost an outlaw, which by its very nature means “outside the law”. Robin’s distaste for corrupt members of the secular order is one of the main subjects of the ballads, and is also a reflection of the time periods own dissatisfaction with the power these authorities possessed.

Not all secular authority was subject to Robin’s “justice”, and this is important to understand. As with all of his targets in the many myths, only those who were corrupted paid the price. Robin at one point actually allies himself with a disenfranchised knight, Sir Richard of Lee, who is a just and honest man who had fallen on hard times. Robin decides after talking to him to help the man with his money problems.<sup>34</sup> Robin eventually falls into a bad situation himself, and it is his old friend Richard of Lee who saves him from an untimely demise. It is important to remember that in the Robin Hood myths, secular authority itself was not a bad thing. What caused authority to be bad was corrupt men who infiltrated an otherwise good system. Robin also at many points in the early myths seeks help from men in secular authorities whose causes and hearts are just. Robin Hood, more than many of the other outlaws,<sup>35</sup> did make a distinction between good and evil men of secular authority.

### *Robin Vs. The Corrupt Church*

Robin’s relationship with religious authorities was actually much in the same line as his view of secular authority. In the ballads Robin often targets rich and pompous religious authorities who use the religion to further their own selfish desires. Being a religious man himself this sort of misuse of religion was an affront to Robin Hood, and he would often seek out these corrupt men. In the *Gest* as well as other sources Robin Hood captures the same bishop who disenfranchised Richard of Lee, and not only takes the

---

<sup>33</sup> William E. Simeone, “The Mythical Robin Hood,” *Western Folklore* 17 (Jan., 1958): 25.

<sup>34</sup> Clawson, *The Gest of Robyn Hode*, lines 84-96.

<sup>35</sup> Holt, *Robin Hood*, 117.

gold Richard had paid him but everything of value the man possesses after he lies about his wealth to the outlaw.<sup>36</sup> Robin also had problems with religious officials who used their power over the masses to force extra tribute from them and in many of the ballads Robin steals these tributes and gives them back to their rightful owners.<sup>37</sup>

Having these feelings towards the church higher echelon, it is no surprise that often in the Robin Hood myth, the friars became his closest supporters and friends within the church. The friars were an order of monks sworn to poverty and modesty. The order did not wear nice clothing or ask for tribute from those they helped, this seems to have been more in line with Robin's own religious beliefs.<sup>38</sup> It is very interesting that an outlaw was still a religious man, but as some scholars pointed out, "being beyond the rule of law of men did not necessarily mean beyond the law of God. In fact it would have been more unusual at this time period if Robin had not been religious".<sup>39</sup> Robin Hood's relationship with religious authority, much like secular authority, depended on the person he was dealing with at the time. In the ballads, those of higher religious authority often came off as corrupt and selfish men, obsessed with their own authority and power. While these men of lower religious "authority" such as the friars often came off as being jolly, good, god-loving men who believed in Robin and his cause. This may have had something to do with how people in England saw their own religious authority figures during that particular time. In many cases in Henry VIII's England for example, before the reformation according to G.W. Bernard, "many people in England would much rather consort with friars than their local abbots or bishops, there seems to have been a slight distrust of these powerful religious figures."<sup>40</sup> It may have been this distrust which caused the storytellers to write myths in which corrupt churchmen had justice find them in the form of the outlaw. This would explain the changes in certain Robin Hood myths during Henry's reign and perhaps in the reigns of other monarchs.

---

<sup>36</sup> Clawson, *The Gest of Robyn Hode*, lines 84-96.

<sup>37</sup> Ronald Gow, *Five Robin Hood Plays* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1932), 86.

<sup>38</sup> Clawson, *The Gest of Robyn Hode*, lines 102-164.

<sup>39</sup> T. H. Aston, "Robin Hood," *Past & Present*, no. 20 (Nov., 1961): 9.

<sup>40</sup> G. W. Bernard, *The King's Reformation: Henry VIII and the Remaking of the English Church* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2007), 159.

## *Robin Vs. The Crown*

Robin Hood's relationship with the King also changes depending on when the myth was being discussed. In the early ballads, Robin Hood was actually still a loyal subject to the King despite his outlaw status. In the early ballads it was from the secular authorities that Robin hid from, but when brought before the King he dutifully bent his knee and asked for forgiveness for his transgressions. During the early ballads, the King was often Edward or Richard the Lion Heart, and the King would grant Robin amnesty and even grant him the title of Yeoman and ask the outlaw to serve at his court. In these versions Robin usually would become bored and quickly run back to Sherwood.<sup>41</sup>

In later versions of the myth especially the ones involving King John that still are used in modern times, Robin would actually attempt to outwit and make a fool of the King. In these later ballads his respect for state authority, or more importantly monarchical authority, was non-existent and the outlaw took it upon himself to "take back England" as it were from the tyrannical King.<sup>42</sup> These later myths were popular after King John's reign up until King Henry VIII came into power. Henry did not like the idea of his favorite outlaw making sport of the King as he believed that this would embolden his own enemies.<sup>43</sup> Robin's relationship with the King is the most interesting of the relationships because it was constantly changing depending on the Monarch who was currently reigning at the time.

### **Robin Hood: A Man of the "People"**

Robin's relationship with the "people" was obviously as the lovable outlaw. Only when one was unjust, greedy, or a liar did Robin's justices descend upon them. In the myths there is only the rare moment when anything resembling a "peasant" or low-born person is subject to being targeted by Robin. Most of Robin's "merry men" were these common people who had committed "crimes" against the secular government that had pushed them into outlaw status, Much the Miller and Little Jon being prime

---

<sup>41</sup> Parke Godwin, *Robin and the King* (New York: Avon Books, 1994), lines 111-254.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>43</sup> Joseph Falaky Nagy, "The Paradoxes of Robin Hood" *Folklore* 91, (1980): 207.

examples of this. Robin was the savior of the “people” or the downtrodden. Even though it seems reasonable that his creators were of the middle to upper class, the ballads more often than not have Robin helping common or low-status citizens.<sup>44</sup> Even Robin to a certain point only possessed a yeoman status and was really only a few steps above the peasantry, but it seems as if at least in most of the myth Robin was seen as the defender of the lower classes against an oppressive upper class.

### **Henry VIII and His Robin Hood Obsession**

One of the best examples of when the Robin Hood myths experienced significant change was during one particular monarch’s reign, Henry VIII’s. When Henry came into power he was already known to be a great supporter of the Robin Hood myth. Robin Hood seems to have made quite an impression on the young King as Henry would often dress up as the infamous outlaw and had his friends be his “merry men” who would also dress up in green livery.<sup>45</sup> Henry and his friends would then play pranks on people in the castle, most notably his first bride Catherine. Sean Field describes these jests in detail, “In 1510, the young king and twelve of his nobles burst into the queen's chamber dressed in short coats, hoods, and hose, carrying bows and arrows and swords 'like outlaws, or Robyn Hodes men.’”<sup>46</sup> The King was also fond of meeting with other nobles and conducting “outlaw feasts” for them. What is fascinating about this behavior is that a King thought of himself as an outlaw. Indeed many of the reformations that Henry would make during his reign would make him an outlaw from justice, most notably with the Church and its continental allies.

---

<sup>44</sup> Bruce Grant, *The Adventures of Robin Hood and His Merry Men* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1955), lines 64-211.

<sup>45</sup> Sean Field, “Devotion, Discontent, and the Henrician Reformation: The Evidence of the Robin Hood Stories,” *Journal of British Studies* 41 (Jan., 2002): 22.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

## *“Outlaw” Reforms*

Another aspect of Henry VIII’s reforms that is an interesting link between Henry and Robin Hood is Henry’s dissolution of the monasteries. Now this seems to be a direct violation of what Robin Hood a devotee of the Virgin Mary would agree with, but in reality Henry’s reasoning is akin to something out of the ballads. Sean Field argues that “it seems likely on the evidence of the Robin Hood tradition that the most dramatic and irrevocable act of Henry's Reformation, the dissolution of the monasteries, would have been among the easiest for the English people to countenance.”<sup>47</sup> Field argues that during this period of England, the people were actually able to stomach the dissolution of the monasteries, because most people were willing to lose those houses of religion but keep to the old ways of religion. In many ways Field argues this kind of a decision would have also sat well with Robin Hood also who often saw the leaders of these monasteries to be corrupt. What is even more interesting is that during this time period many of the storytellers also changed Robin’s stories fit these new policies. A new string of Robin’s targets included priests who clung to, “too much material wealth, and those who would not transfer over their religious views to Henry’s reformation.”<sup>48</sup> In this way, the writers of Henry’s reign seem to have been sending important messages for Henry, to those priests who still were attempting to cling to the old ways.

Furthermore as G.W. Bernard points out, “Henry may even have viewed himself as his modern day Robin Hood when he liquidated the monasteries wealth in order to fill his own coffers and therefore better his nation.”<sup>49</sup> What is interesting is that King Henry may also have seen his displacement of some of the more radical church leaders as his own cleansing of corrupt church authorities. “Given his penchant for casting him-self in these tales of a pious layman who redistributed monastic wealth and a king who made a better abbot than any cleric, it is tempting to speculate that Henry VIII might well have envisioned

---

<sup>47</sup> Field, “Devotion, Discontent, and the Henrician Reformation,” 21.

<sup>48</sup> M.I. Ebbutt, *Hero-myths & Myths of the British Race* (New York: T.Y. Crowell & Company, 1910), 113.

<sup>49</sup> G. W. Bernard, *The King's Reformation: Henry VIII and the Remaking of the English Church* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2007), 444.

himself as the Robin Hood of the English Reformation.”<sup>50</sup> In placing himself at the head of the church instead of giving over rule to the Pope Henry had officially declared himself an outlaw of the Catholic religion.

Just like his hero Robin Hood, Henry VIII was also considered a defender of the good and righteous when he earned the title of “Defender of the Faith” a title he had earned by denouncing Martin Luther's teachings and promoting the Roman Catholic Church early in his reign in his "Defense of the Seven Sacraments.”<sup>51</sup> Much like his former hero, Henry still remained Catholic throughout his reign and according to Field was, “very religious; heard three Masses daily when he hunted, and sometimes five on other days. He generally displayed the most profound reverence for the sacrament of the Mass. In his own religious outlook, Henry VIII, like the Robin Hood of the late medieval tradition remained attached to these foundations of traditional Catholicism.”<sup>52</sup> With this quote Field is showing that Henry was actually closer to what the imagined Robin Hood would have been like in regards to religion. This is extremely interesting as it shows just how much like Henry was to the mythical outlaw he used to dress up as. Field's sources on the matter include books about Henry's reformation, and one particular source about certain reformed myths and Robin Hood myths. Field also examines some of the myths and myths that were contemporary to Henry's time in order to draw his conclusions about Robin Hood. Field's research is well founded and his conclusions give a greater insight into what Henry VIII's England may have looked like and the myths that would have been most popular.

### **Changes to the Robin Hood Myth**

The actual changes made to the overall Robin Hood myth during Henry's reign by writers were not much different than the writers of the ages beforehand. In fact the Robin Hood myths change quite frequently and often unsurprisingly reflect the society values of the time period it's written in. What is interesting to examine is exactly what changes were made and why. It does seem as if one of the myths

---

<sup>50</sup> Field, “Devotion, Discontent, and the Henrician Reformation,” 20.

<sup>51</sup> Bernard, *The King's Reformation*, 400.

<sup>52</sup> Field, “Devotion, Discontent, and the Henrician Reformation,” 21.

more popular during Henry's early years was the Robin Hood myth of his facing the corrupt King John. After King Henry's turn from the Catholic Church and religious reformation, a change is seen in the Robin Hood myth. After the reformation, the Robin Hood myths that became popular were the ones in which Robin Hood was subordinate to King Edward and attacked only corrupt officials.<sup>53</sup> This is a little too circumstantial to be merely a coincidental change. At a time of some unpopularity due to Henry's radical reformation of the religion in England, the changes writers made to the myths in existence seem obvious and necessary. It could be used as both a warning to dissenting nobles, and a reinforcement that many of the problems in England came not from the King but corrupt officials.

The Robin Hood myths concerning Edward giving Robin his Yeoman status in return for Robin's faithful service in rooting out corruption also became more popular during Henry's reign. Coming from a King known for dressing up as the mythical outlaw, the message sent to religious dissenters and disgruntled lords by the myths writers is blatantly obvious: "Submit or the King's justice will find you."<sup>54</sup> Henry's view on the dissent from the church aside, it is proven that Henry remained religiously conservative throughout the rest of his reign. His people's views of some of the higher church officials also did sour, as in his time period the myths of Robin taking out corrupt church officials, particularly, Abbots and Bishops, also experienced an increase in popularity.

It was during this time period that the myths about Maid Marian and Friar Tuck also began to surface. Both of these myths also show an interesting view on Henry's reign. Elsa Watson's *Maid Marian: A Novel* gives an interesting take on the Marian myths, "Marian may have been used during Henry's reign in part to show how love can transcend boundaries."<sup>55</sup> Henry was looking for a way to appease his people over his divorce and remarriage to Anne Boleyn, and Watson in a portion of her book makes the point that the love between Maid Marian and Robin Hood may have been used to show that

---

<sup>53</sup> Bernard, *The King's Reformation*, 513.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Elsa Watson, *Maid Marian: A Novel* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2004), 60.

even an Outlaw can marry the women he loves, so why not a King?<sup>56</sup> This is an interesting theory and may be valid but as of this moment the evidence for this kind of link seems a little lacking.

Friar Tuck is another character who makes more of an appearance during Henry VIII's reign. This may be because the Friar represents what Henry VIII was trying to do when he liquidated all of the monasteries. In Henry's new religious England, the church would not have a vast amount of wealth and would be sustained by their faith. This view on how Churchmen should live is embodied in the order of the Friars, and so it makes sense that the Friar would appear more frequently during Henry's reign. Henry's use of the Friar in certain Robin Hood myths as a strong supporter of the outlaw, especially in Robin's fight against corrupt religious authorities, also says a lot about Henry's own England in the turmoil of change.

Other myths also experienced slight changes during Henry's reign as King; the myths of a more subservient Robin began to make their appearance during Henry's reign. The Robin Hood in these myths often proclaimed his love for "good King Edward", and the myths which included Hood bending his knee to the King also seemed to have been more popular during Henry's reign as King. This is another coincidence that seems to have more meaning behind it. When considering Henry VIII's reign, it is easy to make a connection between the increase in certain myths and current problems in the current regime. Henry also seemed to have been fond of the myths in which traitors lost their heads or at least their positions to the outlaw.<sup>57</sup> These myths carry their own warnings, as it would stand to reason that the writers of Henry's reign may have been attempting to send a message to potential rebels.<sup>58</sup> Though Henry did not actually write new myths to be included in the Robin Hood myth it does seem that the storytellers did choose myths that would please the monarch during his reign.

---

<sup>56</sup> Watson, *Maid Marian*, 61.

<sup>57</sup> Bernard, *The King's Reformation*, 146.

<sup>58</sup> Holt, *Robin Hood*, 66.

## What the Robin Hood Myth can really tell Historians

Examining the Robin Hood myths are an easy way to establish what kind of troubles monarchs were experiencing, or at least what the elites believed was the problem based on what myths became popular. For example, in Henry's reign, as was described, myths that included religious and secular lord corruption being brought to justice were incredibly popular. This of course does not mean that Henry created their popularity or even the myths themselves. What is being suggested is that Henry had writers and playwrights during his reign who understood what kinds of myths would please their monarch. These myths also included many events in which Robin praised the King and his laws while dealing with those who used these same laws to further their own ambitions. The ability of the storytellers of the time to adapt the Robin Hood myths to better suit Henry's own policies is what made these myths able to withstand the tests of time. To use the Robin Hood myths to perhaps send messages to un-lawful citizens is also a fascinating concept, as it shows how political these myths could be as well as entertaining.

Another interesting fact that links Henry to Robin Hood was an increase in the May Game events during Henry's reign. As Holt describes them, the May Games "had their origin in the Robin Hood myths, where woodland skills and festivities became more popular, most notably archery competitions".<sup>59</sup> These May games seem to have been popular during Henry's reign and his use of them also shows just how much influence the myths may have had on the King. King Henry, who was said to be talented with a longbow, seemed to enjoy these games immensely.<sup>60</sup>

The reason that the Robin Hood myth was able to become as popular as it was and survive through all of the years was its adaptability to different time periods. Robin Hood the outlaw is timeless because he represents justice against corruption. What this corruption was is never exclusively defined, as it could be the corruption of secular authority, religious authority and even state, or in Robin's case the King's corruption. Robin Hood is loved as the layman's hero, though it seems to be actually middle to upper elites who created the myth. His popularity is obvious when examining how many "real" Robin

---

<sup>59</sup> Holt, *Robin Hood*, 64.

<sup>60</sup> Bellamy, *Robin Hood*, 47.

Hoods have appeared throughout history, and how popular the name was for other brigands to use. Robin Hood was a justice unto himself, and the Monarchs of England all seemed to enjoy the myths as much as their people did. In particular the ability of the Robin Hood myths to be adapted in order to fit each monarch's circumstances may have been a big part of its popularity. In the prime example of King Henry VIII, it seems as if the Robin Hood myths were used to send important messages to his people and certain dissenters to his rule. The one constant within the Robin Hood myths is that he can fit any historical need necessary. Even in this age the tale of Robin Hood, the lovable rogue and kind-hearted thief is just as popular as it was in medieval and early modern England.<sup>61</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The importance of Robin Hood during both medieval and early modern England is without doubt. While many aspects yet remain a mystery to scholars such as the existence of a historical Robin, or where he died, the importance of these myths for historians is undeniable. The importance these myths hold to allow scholars to examine cultural and political values of the time in which the myths are written, make Hood's myth particularly important. The ability of the myth of Robin Hood to fit into any time period, situation, or historical context with relative ease makes it a good indicator of a time period's moods, values and problems. Robin Hood, being the avatar of justice against corruption, was easily adapted by any writer of any time, or in some cases, individual towns, as a representation of what they wanted their justice to look like. Henry VIII's reign was no exception to this particular aspect as the ballads, songs and plays of his time also attest. By choosing which Robin Hood myths would be popular, Henry VIII sent messages to his people. The most fascinating aspect of the Robin Hood myth is its adaptability over time, never growing dull or fading away into simple folklore. This adaptability explains its popularity, including its depiction in movies today. However, Robin Hood is the final arbiter of justice, and the

---

<sup>61</sup> Clarence G. Child, *The Second Shepherds' Everyman: And other Early Plays* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1910), 79.

message, however adaptable the myth, has remained very clear through the ages: corrupt authorities beware the hand of justice.

## Bibliography

- Adams, Q. Joseph. *Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924.
- Aston, H. T. "Robin Hood." *Past & Present* (1961): 7-9.
- Barton, Bernard. "The Death of Robin Hood". In *A New Year's Eve, and Other Poems*. London: John Hatchard and Son. 1828: 114-15.
- Bellamy, John. *Robin Hood: A Historical Inquiry*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1985.
- Bernard, G.W. *The King's Reformation: Henry VIII and the Remaking of the English Church*. Yale: Yale University Press, 2007.
- Child, G. Clarence. *The Second Shepherds' Everyman: And other Early Plays*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1910.
- Clawson, H. William. *The Gest of Robyn Hode*. Toronto: University of Toronto Library, 1909.
- Cook, Eliza. "The Bow." In *The Poetical Works of Eliza Cook*. London: Frederi Warne and Co., 1870.
- Ebbutt, M.I. *Hero-myths & Myths of the British Race*. New York: T.Y. Crowell & Company, 1910.
- Emery, Clayton. "Dowsing the Demon." *The Indicator* (1994): 8-18.
- Evans, Sebastian. "Of Robin Hood's Death and Burial." In *Brother Fabian's Manuscript and Other Poems*. London: Macmillan, 1865.
- Field, Sean. "Devotion, Discontent, and the Henrician Reformation: The Evidence of the Robin Hood Stories." *The Journal of British Studies* 41 (Jan., 2002): 6-22.
- Gow, Ronald. *Five Robin Hood Plays*. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1932.
- Grant, Bruce. *The Adventures of Robin Hood and His Merry Men*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1955.
- Holt, C. J. *Robin Hood*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1982.
- Hunt, Leigh. "Robin Hood, A Child." *The Indicator* (1820): 41-44.
- Ingle, Annie. *Robin Hood*. New York: Random House, 1993.
- Keen, Maurice. *The Outlaws of Medieval Myth*. London: Routledge, 1961.
- Manly, M. John. *Specimens of the Pre-Shakespearean Drama*. London: Ginn and Company, 1897.
- Morsberger, E. Robert. "In Quest of Robin Hood." *The Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association* 25 (1971): 75-85.
- Muddock, J.E. *Maid Marian and Robin Hood: A Romance of Old Sherwood Forest*. Ill. Stanley L. Wood. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Co., 1892.
- Munday, Anthony. *The Death of Robert, Earl of Huntington*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967.

- Nagy, Falaky. Joseph. "The Paradoxes of Robin Hood." *Folklore* 91 (1980): 198-210.
- Ohlgren, H. Thomas. *A True Tale of Robin Hood*. Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997.
- Parke, Godwin. *Robin and the King*. New York: Avon Books, 1994.
- Potter, Lois. *Playing Robin Hood: The Myth as Performance in Five Centuries*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998.
- Seal, Graham. "The Robin Hood Principle: Folklore, History, and the Social Bandit." *Journal of Folklore Research* 46 (2009): 67-89.
- Simeone E. William. 'The Mythical Robin Hood.' *Western Folklore* 17 (1958): 21-28.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 'The Historic Robin Hood.' *The Journal of American Folklore* 66 (1953): 303-308.
- Watson, Elsa. *Maid Marian: A Novel*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2004.
- Wiles, David. *The Early Plays of Robin Hood*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1981.
- Yolen, Jane, *Sherwood: Original Stories from the World of Robin Hood*. New York: Philomel Books, 2000.

Robin Hood was the legendary bandit of England who stole from the rich to help the poor. The stories about Robin appealed to common folk because he stood up against "and frequently outwitted" people in power. Furthermore, his life in the forest "hunting and feasting with his fellow outlaws, coming to the assistance of those in need" seemed like a great and noble adventure. Early Sources. The earliest known mention of Robin Hood is in William Langland's 1377 work called *Piers Plowman*, in which a character mentions that he knows "rimes of Robin Hood." This and other references from the Robin Hood stole money from the rich and gave it to the poor. And Prometheus stole fire from Zeus and gave it to man. Is this a reference to that myth or just a coincidence? However, there is also an important difference between the myths of Robin Hood and those of Prometheus: Prometheus is also an "origin" myth, in this case a myth to explain humanity's mastery over fire which underpins the whole of civilisation, whereas Robin Hood is a lot more difficult to pin down, but doesn't really include myths of origin; the tales are much more concerned with social themes (usually contemporary to any given writer). The notion of "robbing the rich to give to the poor" is today fundamentally linked to the Robin Hood myth, but this hasn't always been so. Hood, and "Robin Hoods: A Myth in Flux", this paper will prove Robin Hood was not an actual person but, instead a conglomeration of outlaws from the day, whose notoriety led to the tales of a fictional character called Robin Hood. First, we will examine the evidence that claims he did exist and was an outlaw. The proof that Robin Hood was a singular person is very thin, the most recent argument is from David Baldwin, who wrote *Robin Hood: The English Outlaw Unmasked* in 2011. A thousand years and people are still talking about you, now that is some fine notoriety. Baldwin speculates that Ro...