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# IN SEARCH OF THE MEDIEVAL OUTLAW: THE TALES OF ROBIN HOOD

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I would like to begin this lecture with a bold statement about Robin Hood's identity: there is absolutely no evidence whatsoever that there was a physical person called Robin Hood who was the progenitor of our mythical Robin Hood. Neither the most diligent archivist nor the most inventive historian has been able to find him, yet despite this fact, Robin Hood still has a place in the definitive *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. He is, therefore, one of those liminal characters who have a place in a work of national history even though their historicity is, to say the least, doubtful.

But this statement about his historical reality in no way belittles the importance of Robin, both to us now, and to those who lived in the medieval period and who had Robin as part of their imaginative framework. Just like his literary counterpart, King Arthur, who equally has a place in the *ODNB* despite the fact that there is no historical evidence for his existence, Robin has a central part to play in the medieval imagination. But unlike Arthur, who was a character with an extensive medieval literature, Robin Hood was a man of the people. If Arthur was the hero of the French-speaking elite of the court, then Robin was his counterpart in the tavern and in the May-games celebrated in some of the villages of medieval England. And because Robin was a hero in medieval popular culture and did not become popular with aristocrats until the sixteenth century, he is a figure without a literary culture until the sixteenth century. We are, therefore, in the case of Robin Hood, in the realm of 'memory' rather than 'written record'. The medieval Robin Hood is a character of orality, not literature, and yet it is only through literature that we can approach him for the obvious reason that it is the written word which conveys to us across time something of his character.

I will have something to say about the literary record of Robin Hood in a moment, but first I want to say something about the May-games with which Robin Hood was associated and in which he became hugely popular in the second half of the fifteenth century, because it is his presence in the May-games that tells us something about his popularity amongst ordinary people in medieval England.

The May-games marked the traditional start of summer and were part of a wider annual cycle in which medieval men and women marked the changing of the seasons. The first half of the year was one given over to focus on the religious cycle. It began with the Christmas festivities, starting with Advent (four Sundays before Christmas Day) and ending on the Epiphany, 6 January. Christmas was, therefore, the transitional phase from one year into the next. Spring began on 2 February, the feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, to be followed by Lent and the preparation for the greatest of the Christian festivals, Easter. Easter, of course, is a moveable feast, tied to the movements of the moon (the first full moon after the Equinox), so Lent might begin as early as 4 February (when Easter fell on 22 March) or as late as 10 March (when Easter fell on 25 April). Summer began on 1 May, and the May-games, which marked the celebrations associated with summer, began at Whitsun (as early as 10 May, and as late as 13 June). These games went on until midsummer (24 June, the feast of the Nativity of John the Baptist), after which the year moved into its secular phase, when there were no significant religious festivities or long holidays, and it was a time for 'uninterrupted economic activity'. The hay harvest was gathered between 25 June and Lammas Day (1 August) when the Lammas pastures were opened to grazing.



Lammas Day marked the beginning of Autumn. Michaelmas pastures (The feast of the Archangel Michael fell on 29 September). Winter began on 1 November, the feast of All Saints (all Hallows).<sup>1</sup>

The May-games which marked the beginning of summer, were the occasion for the appearance of Robin Hood. The person who was to play the part of Robin would be elected from amongst the better sort in the community, sometimes at Easter time, sometimes on Ascension Day. At the same point, the person playing the part of Maid Marian, his companion in the May-games, would also be chosen, again from the better sort in the community. Robin was to be the lord of misrule (also known as the summer king or the Whitsun king), and if that misrule were not to get out of hand, then the person chosen for the role needed to be trustworthy.<sup>2</sup> But that man was also young. The summer season was a celebration of youth, of young love, and of courtship. Those playing the role of Robin Hood had to be of an appropriate age and condition in life. And Robin's role, with his companions Little John and Friar Tuck, and accompanied by Maid Marian, was to go out into the community to raise money which would then be handed over to the church for use in pious works.<sup>3</sup>

Robin, then, was cast in the role of the young outlaw, taking money from the rich (those in the community who had money) and handing it to the poor (in this instance the church). He was dressed in green because he represented summer, and he was the lord of misrule, so he could be counted on to make a commotion. As one of the hack writers of the capital put it in the 1580s: the lord of summer and his companions

march into the churchyard, pipers piping, drummers thund'ring, their stumps dancing, their bells jingling, their handkerchiefs swinging about their heads like madmen, their hobby-horses and other monsters skirmishing amongst the rout.' After which they go into the churchyard where 'their summer halls are set up, their bowers, arbours, and banqueting houses, wherein they feast, banquet, and dance all that day and peradventure all the night too.'<sup>4</sup>

These May-games tell us that the name Robin Hood was well-known to men and women in late medieval England. As William Langland makes the illiterate and lazy Priest, who he calls Sloth, say in *Piers Plowman*,

I know not Paternoster · as the priest it singeth,  
But I know rhymes of Robin Hood · and Earl Randolph of Chester...

... I am occupied each day · holidays and other,  
With idle tales in the alehouse · and sometimes in churches.  
God's pain and his passion · seldom think I thereon.  
I visited never feeble men · nor fettered folk in jail;  
I had liefer hear an harlotry · or cobbler's summer games.<sup>5</sup>

Langland was writing about the year 1377, so Robin had a place in every-day life in fourteenth-century England, and he was associated with the lower ends of society: the alehouse, the whorehouse, and the places where summer games took place.

There is, however, an important caveat about Robin Hood's existence in the May-games of late medieval England, and that is that he did not exist everywhere. When scholars have gone looking for Robin Hood and his gang in the May-games, they have found him only in Scotland, the south of England, and the south-west of England. He does not appear in Wales, neither does he appear in East Anglia (with one exception, unsuccessfully imported by the Paston family), and nor does he appear anywhere in the north. In fact, Robin Hood is entirely absent from the May-games in any of the locations in which we would expect him to be found: he is not to be found in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire, and he is not to be found in the north, most

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<sup>1</sup> C. Phythian-Adams, 'Ceremony and the citizen: the communal year in Coventry, 1450-1550', in *Crisis and Order in English Towns, 1500-1700*, ed. P. Clark and P. Slack, London 1976, pp. 57-85; Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Les Rythmes au Moyen Âge*, Paris, 2016, pp. 277-305.

<sup>2</sup> E. K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, 2 vols, Oxford 1903), i, p. 173.

<sup>3</sup> D. Wiles, *The Early Plays of Robin Hood*, Cambridge, DS Brewer, 1981, pp. 7-9.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Stubbes, *Anatomy of Abuses*, ed. F. J. Furnival, 1877-9

<sup>5</sup> Passus V, lines 395-6; 403-409.



especially not in Yorkshire where, as we shall see, many of his adventures take place.<sup>6</sup> The medieval Robin Hood was part of the imaginative landscape of people of the south when they thought about the north.

So we know that Robin Hood was well-known in certain parts of late-medieval England (the Thames Valley, the Severn Valley, the West Country, and in the separate kingdom of Scotland), and we know that he was a harbinger of summer, a symbol of fertility, a lord of misrule, and that he played a role in relieving people of their hard-earned cash and handing it onto the church to be used in good works. The celebrations that accompanied Robin's appearance were dissolute, involving drink, dancing, and the unlicensed acquisition of the flora which decorated the bowers and arbours that were set up in the church grounds. And the May pole was the central attraction (also acquired by stealth from the property of rich landowners), the erection of which symbolised the start of the summer celebrations.<sup>7</sup>

At the outset of this talk, I stated that the medieval Robin Hood is a character of orality and not of literature, and yet it is only really through literature that we can come to grips with him. But the written evidence that we have for the medieval Robin Hood is very sparse indeed and must represent a small fraction of the stories that were circulating about the eponymous hero of these outlaw tales (about which more in a moment). I want to devote this section of the lecture to those medieval tales. By 'medieval tales', I mean those which certainly have a pre-Reformation provenance.

By far-and-away the largest collection of medieval ballads that we have concerning Robin Hood are encapsulated in the cycle known as the *Gest of Robyn Hode*. There is no surviving manuscript of the *Gest*, all versions having survived to the modern world in printed editions, but the earliest printed editions pre-date the Reformation by some years.<sup>8</sup> The text of the *Gest* runs to almost 14,000 words, which makes the text by far the longest of the pre-Reformation Robin Hood stories. It has been postulated that the *Gest* was brought together by a single author from a series of stories about Robin Hood which were circulating in the very late fifteenth century. Perhaps that speculation is correct. The first publisher of the *Gest*, Wynkyn de Worde, William Caxton's successor after that man's death in 1492, was a man of considerable entrepreneurial acumen. Wynkyn was in the business of making money out of printing, and his first printing was of the hugely popular *Golden Legend*.<sup>9</sup> That he chose to publish the *Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode* early in his career (about 1506) speaks to the suggestion that he intended to introduce an already popular Robin Hood to a literate audience. The *Gest* was then printed in York about the year 1509 by Wynkyn's associate, Hugo Goes, and was thereafter reprinted throughout the sixteenth century.

The Robin Hood of the *Gest* is in fact two distinct characters. The first Robin Hood is in the mould of King Arthur, and, like King Arthur, this first Robin Hood of the *Gest* does not play a central role in the story. The focus of the *Gest* is on the actions of others, and while Robin is crucial to the tale, he acts as catalyst for others to act, while he holds court in the Greenwood (named as Barnsdale, Yorkshire).

The *Gest* opens with Robin in the Greenwood

Lythe<sup>10</sup> and listin, gentilmen,  
That be of frebore blode;  
I shall you tel of a gode yeman,

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<sup>6</sup> Wiles, *The Early Plays*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>7</sup> Morris dancing in a window dating from about 1621, but perhaps the figures were from an engraving by the German printmaker Israhel van Meckenem, d. 1503 (see E. J. Nichol, 'Some notes on the history of the Betley window', *Jnl of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, 7 (no 2) (1953), 59-67). Robin Hood is absent, but present are Maid Marian, Friar Tuck, and the May-pole.

<sup>8</sup> In all textual matters I have followed R. B. Dobson and J. Taylor, *The Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Introduction to the English Outlaw*, London 1976. Unlike the editor of the compendious *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 5 vols, ed. F. J. Child, 1882-98, Dobson and Taylor did not seek to improve their texts. As a result, when examining the medieval ballads of Robin Hood, they provide a far more secure edition of the texts. Dobson and Taylor worked from 'a single base manuscript or printed version' (p. 66). In the case of the *Gest*, Dobson and Taylor used a variety of printed editions to create their base text (described pp. 71-4).

<sup>9</sup> N. F. Blake, 'Wynkyn de Worde', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

<sup>10</sup> attend.



His name was Robyn Hode.

Robyn was a prude outlaw,  
Whyles he walked on grounde:  
So curteyse an outlawe as he was one  
Was never non founde.

Robyn stode in Bernesdale,  
And lenyd hym to a tre,  
And bi hym stode Litell Johnn,  
A gode yeman was he.

And alsoo dyd gode Scarlok,  
And Much, the millers son:  
There was none ynch of his bodi  
But it was worth a grome.<sup>11</sup>

Immediately we know that it is a story about Robin Hood, since he is named in the first stanza, after which we are told the essential elements of the man: he is a yeoman who is proud of his status as an outlaw, but he is not a dangerous outlaw, but a courteous one; he lives in Barnsdale; his right-hand-man is Little John, also of yeoman stock, and his principal men are Will Scarlock and Much the Miller's son. So far, so good. He is almost recognisable as our Robin Hood, though he is in Barnsdale Forest South Yorkshire, not in Sherwood Forest.

And then spake Lytell Johnn  
All unto Robyn Hode:  
'Maister, and ye wolde dyne betyme  
And wolde doo you moche gode.'

Than bespake hym gode Robyn:  
'To dyne have I noo lust,  
Till that I have som bolde baron,  
Or some unketh<sup>12</sup> gest.

Till that I have som bolde baron,  
That may pay for the best,  
Or som knyght, or some squyer  
That dwelleth bi west.

Encouraged by Little John to eat, Robin declines, saying that he has no desire to eat unless he has the company of someone who can pay for the best food and drink, whether he be a baron, a knight, a squire, or some other unknown guest. This, too, is recognisably our Robin Hood, who demands that those brought to the Greenwood are dined and wined, and then pay for the privilege. But then the tone of the ballad changes:

A gode maner than had Robyn;  
In londe where that he were,  
Every day or<sup>13</sup> he wold dyne  
Thre messis wolde he here:

The one in the worship of the Fader,  
And another of the Holy Gost,

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<sup>11</sup> man.

<sup>12</sup> unknown.

<sup>13</sup> before.



The thirde of Our dere Lady,  
That he loved allther<sup>14</sup> moste.

Robyn loved Oure dere Lady;  
For dout of dydly synne,<sup>15</sup>  
Wolde he never do compani harme  
That any woman was in.

'Maistar,' than sayde Lytil Johnn,  
'And we our borde shal sprede,  
Tell us whedar that we shal go  
And what life we shall lede;

Where we shall take, where we shall leve,  
Where we shall abide behynde,  
Where we shall robbe, and where we shall reve,<sup>16</sup>  
Where we shal bete and bynde.'

Robin is characterised as extremely religious: he hears three masses a day before he will eat (even kings only heard two masses a day, three is extreme); two of these masses are dedicated to a particular part of the Trinity (one the Father, one to the Holy Ghost), but the third is dedicated to the Virgin Mary. It is a strange sort of Trinity, not at all what one might expect from a text expressing the extreme religiosity of its principal character, but the point is that Robin is dedicated to the Virgin Mary. The Marian cult was especially strong in the late middle ages, so in dedicated himself to the Virgin, Robin was being utterly conventional, even if in his expression of that dedication, he was acting in a manner which was zealous. This is not our modern Robin, though in being unwilling to harm neither a lady nor the company in which she was in, he is our chivalrous Robin Hood.

The key point of departure for us, then, is his religiosity; but I want you to focus on the fact that Little John asks Robin to set the band a task, or, if we were being Arthurian about it, to set the band a quest. The quest isn't the Holy Grail, or some such Arthurian myth, but it is, nonetheless, a quest. Little John and his companions have to find someone with who their master can dine.

The first person the companions find is a knight who has fallen on hard times; they bring him back to the forest and the knight is dined magnificently. Robin asks the knight to pay for his fair, and the knight is forced to admit that he does not have the means to pay for his sumptuous meal, having but 10 shillings on his person. Little John checks the knight's possessions and finds that he is telling the truth. The knight then recounts the tale of his woes: his son killed a knight of Lancaster and so he had to pay the blood price, an extremely large £400. The knight mortgaged his lands to the Abbot of St Mary's at York, and now the debt was due to be paid, but the knight did not have the means to pay it. Robin then orders Little John to provide the knight with twice what he needs (£800) and to dress him in quality cloth befitting his knightly station. Much humour is had at the way in which Little John hands out the cloth in an overly generous manner. The knight takes his leave, promising to repay Robin in a year's time, swearing to do so by the Virgin Mary; Little John is gifted to him by Robin while Robin remains in the forest.

'I shal the lend Litell John, my man,  
For he shalbe they knave;<sup>17</sup>  
In a yeman's stede he may the stande,  
If though greate nede have.'

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<sup>14</sup> above all.

<sup>15</sup> deadly sin.

<sup>16</sup> despoil.

<sup>17</sup> servant.



So ends the first fyttē.<sup>18</sup>

In the second fyttē, Robin has no part to play, though he is still very much present in the way in which the action is presented because he becomes the paradigm of good virtues (chivalric ones, even) against which all others are measured. The scene switches to York where the knight, now with the means of repaying his loan, appears at St Mary's Abbey. This is the day on which the loan must be repaid, or the knight's lands are forfeit, so the abbot should have been expecting the knight. Worse still, the abbot, with the justiciar who is in his pay, and the Cellarer who has his eyes on the knight's lands for the community, has been plotting what to do with the land that is coming his way.

When the knight and his company arrive, the abbot has already started to eat (note the contrast with Robin who courteously waits for a guest before he will dine), and when the knight entered the dining hall, the abbot continued to eat, keeping the knight standing, and certainly not inviting the knight to join the meal. When the knight pretends that he does not have the means to pay the debt, the abbot gratuitously enjoys the moment, until the knight produces the cash, much to the abbot's discomfort. The knight returns to his lands, gathers the money he owes to Robin, and, with a company of 100 men, begins his journey to Barnsdale. The second fyttē ends with the knight being delayed in his mission, waylaid by the desperate plight of a young man threatened with death.

In the third fyttē, the action switches to Nottingham, where Little John leaves the knight's service to join the service of the sheriff of Nottingham. He deliberately behaves like a bad servant, and eventually leads his new master to Barnsdale Forest, where Robin Hood dines the sheriff at the sheriff's expense, and Little John returns to Robin's service. It is a riotously funny fyttē, all at the sheriff's expense, and it is worth noting that this is the first time that the *Gest* returns to Robin Hood since the first fyttē; he has been absent from the story for eighty-nine stanzas while Little John and the knight have taken centre stage in the tale.

In the fourth fyttē, Robin Hood is waiting for the knight to keep his appointment and, unlike the abbot before him, cannot eat before the appointed hour of the knight's return. He is also worried that the Virgin Mary is angry with him, because the knight is now late for his appointment. Little John, Will Scarlok and Much the Miller's son are sent again on an errand to find Robin a guest before he can eat. This time, the crew happen upon the Cellarer of St Mary's Abbey.

But as they loked in Bernysdale,  
By the hye weye,  
Than were they ware of two black monks,  
Ech on a good palferay.<sup>19</sup>

Then bespake Lytell Johan,  
To Much he gan say,  
'I dare lay my lyffe to wedde,<sup>20</sup>  
That these monks have brought our pay.

And here is one of the principal jokes that the text has been leading to. The monks are, of course, monks of St Mary's Abbey, York, dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Robin, too, is dedicated to the Virgin Mary, but yet he performs his dedication not by stealing land from unfortunate knights, but by putting right wrongs, by helping, not predated on, those experiencing difficult times. The Virgin has not abandoned Robin, nor is she cross with him; on the contrary, she intends that Robin should receive back the money he lent to the knight from the abbey of St Mary's. The Cellarer, who had been looking forward to enjoying the knight's land in fyttē 1, is the principal monk. He is wined and dined, lies to Robin about how much money he has in his sacks, and then is forced to pay £800 for the privilege of the meal. At the end of the fyttē, the knight arrives, ready to pay Robin

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<sup>18</sup> A part or section of a poem or song.

<sup>19</sup> A travelling horse of some quality.

<sup>20</sup> pledge.



what he owes, but Robin replies that he has been repaid by the Virgin Mary. The joke is blatant, I know, but none of the humour in the ballads is exactly subtle.

In the fifth fytte, the second Robin Hood emerges. He is no longer the king in the Greenwood holding court and sending his men on quests, he now takes centre stage, and we see him driving forward the story. There is an archery competition at Nottingham, which Robin wins (this is our Robin Hood, of course, the master archer), and then has to make his escape; the outlaws take refuge with the knight they had helped in the first fytte (now named as Sir Richard at the Lee). In the sixth fytte, the sheriff appeals to the king, the knight is captured, Robin Hood and his men go to Nottingham, kill the sheriff, and then return with the knight to Barnsdale to await the arrival of the king's pardon. The king is named as Edward. Robin as sheriff-killer is not our Robin, and now we see, too, that the *Gest* is not set in the reign of King Richard (in the early 1190s), but in the reign of one of the Edwards (1272-1377), most likely in the reign of Edward III (1327-1377).

King Edward arrives in Nottingham at the beginning of the seventh fytte. He disguises himself as an abbot and takes with him five of his best knights attired as monks, and, sure enough, Robin waylays the disguised king, dines him, then recognises his king, and then begs the king's forgiveness. In the eighth fytte, the two return to Nottingham, Robin serves the king for a year, but then returns to the forest to take up his former life again where he lives a further twenty-two years before being killed by the treachery of the prioress of Kirklees, Robin's kinswoman. The fact that he has a relation who is a prioress is an indication that the second Robin Hood of the *Gest* has a status that is greater than that of a simple yeoman.

So Robin Hood, despite his outlaw status, is, in fact, a loyal subject of King Edward. His enemies are those in office who exercise sovereign power corruptly. The sheriff of Nottingham we know, of course, but also the abbot of St Mary's York and his cellarer; the chief justiciar, too, who is in the abbot's pay. He certainly does steal from people, but not the rich generally, only specifically. Sadly, he does not seem to give to the poor. In fact, Robin keeps his wealth, using it when he sees fit: to help the knight, for example, but never to give money to the destitute ordinary folk of late medieval England.

So we have now seen three late medieval Robin Hoods: the first, the character of the May-games who has a female companion in Maid Marian and who, in the company of Little John and Friar Tuck, emerges each Whitsun to celebrate the arrival of summer, takes money from people in the community and hands it to the church for use on good works, and is the lord of misrule when drinking and riotous games are the order of the day; the second, an Arthurian figure who sends his men on quests, who is overly religious even in the context of a religious society, has two companions not mentioned in the May-games (Scarlock and Much), and has no love interest (there is no Maid Marian), and has no Friar Tuck in his company; and the third, much more active Robin Hood, one who wins an archery competition, justifiably kills the sheriff of Nottingham, is a hero to his men (rescuing Little John from certain death) but is a loyal subject of King Edward. These three Robin Hoods, while recognisable Robin Hoods, are all very different from one another.

We find a fourth type of Robin Hood in our medieval sources. In what is widely regarded as the best of the medieval ballads, *Robin Hood and the Monk*, the character that emerges from the text is an even more complex one than the three we have met already. It is the earliest surviving ballad (dating from about 1450), existing in manuscript form (unlike the *Gest*). Robin is the same religious enthusiast, and this time he complains that he has not heard mass for more than a fortnight, and so he determines that he must go to Nottingham to hear a mass. His men advise against his going, and when Robin protests his determination to go, they advise him to go with a crowd of his men. Robin refuses to heed that advice, and says that:

'Of all my mery men', seid Robyn,  
'Be my feith I will none have,



But Litull John shall beyre<sup>21</sup> my bow,  
Til that me list<sup>22</sup> to draw.

Little John's immediate response is to say to Robin:

'Thou shall beyre thin own,' seid Litull Jon,  
'Maister, and I wyl beyre myne,  
And we shall shete a peny,<sup>23</sup> seid Litul John,  
'Under the grene wode lyne.'<sup>24</sup>

Robin at first refuses the challenge, and when he does eventually accept it, he loses the contest so badly that he ends up owing Little John five shillings (12d in a shilling, so 5s = 60d). Robin denies that he owes Little John the money, calls him a liar, and then slaps him. Little John responds by bringing out his sword and telling Robin that he no longer wishes to serve in his band. With that, Robin stalks off to Nottingham, enters the church, where he is recognised by a monk who calls the hue and cry, is captured and then put in prison. Ironically, by this point, Robin has still not heard his much-wished for mass. The remainder of the story focuses on the attempt by Little John to spring his master from Nottingham gaol.

The rescue that Little John and his companions now concoct is one that involves the murder of the monk and his page boy, buried in unmarked graves at the side of the road; the impersonation of a sheriff's man to the king by Little John and therefore the false acquisition of the king's seal; the use of the royal seal to gain entry to Nottingham castle, and then the release of Robin. At the end of the story, the two companions make up: Robin admits that he has been very foolish, and Little John forgives his master, and the two return to their company in the Greenwood. The king is left to wonder at the loyalty of Little John to Robin Hood, as are we, too, for Robin has been contemptuous of his companion. Perhaps we are supposed to think that the love of friendship is stronger than any other force in the land: the king; the law; the sheriff; the prison; and that friendship can even overcome the failure of one friend to respect another.

This Robin Hood is, therefore, a liability, still recognisably Robin Hood, but behaving in a way which is reckless; he is petulant, like a teenager, and he manages to alienate his constant friend, Little John. And as a result of his foolish behaviour, he falls into the hands of his mortal enemy, the sheriff of Nottingham. He is not now the loyal subject of the king, and the king is left to lament the fact that Little John and Much the Miller's son are more loyal to Robin than they are to the king. That Robin was rescued owed more to the dogged loyalty of the outlaw band led by Little John than it did to Robin's ability as a swordsman or as an archer. And Robin's release was engineered by Little John's ability to be a trickster, just as he was a trickster in the *Gest* when he spent a year working for the sheriff of Nottingham. And this Robin Hood is no longer in Barnsdale:

The scheref made to seke Notyngnam,  
Both be stret and stye,  
And Robyn was in mery Scherwode,  
As light as lef on lynde.

So in fact now we have four distinct Robin Hoods: 1. the Robin of the May-games located in Scotland, the Thames Valley, the Severn valley, and the West Country; 2. the Robin who is like King Arthur, keeping court in the Greenwood in Barnsdale Forest, and sending his men on quests; 3. the central character in trials of skill and strength, but intensely loyal to his king; and 4. the petulant, teenage-like Robin Hood of Sherwood Forest who recklessly puts his and his men's lives in danger and has to be rescued by his band of men, and who is certainly not loyal to his king.

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<sup>21</sup> Carry.

<sup>22</sup> It pleases me.

<sup>23</sup> shoot for a penny-stake.

<sup>24</sup> lime tree.



There are constants in each of these Robins: The Greenwood; archery, as, indeed, is the fact that Robin is an outlaw and that he is devoted to the Virgin Mary. But in each of the cases I have outlined for you this evening, Robin Hood is a fundamentally different character. The engine that drives the narrative of Robin is different each time. In the May-games, it is the celebration of summer and young love, and the raising of money for the local church; in the *Gest* it is the quest (for part of the cycle) and then the adventure; and in *The Monk* it is the rescue of Robin from his own folly.

In *Robin Hood and the Potter*, which I don't propose to discuss in detail tonight, the location of Robin's hideaway returns to Barnsdale Forest and the engine that drives the narrative is the trick on the sheriff of Nottingham. Incidentally, apart from the BVM, who I don't suppose counts in this regard, the one love interest that the medieval Robin has is the ballads with the sheriff's wife. She obviously likes Robin and takes quite a bit of pleasure from the sheriff's discomfiture when he returns home from a bruising encounter with Robin in the Greenwood. In *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne* (the hideaway is also in Barnsdale Forest), the engine is the retribution on the sheriff of Nottingham for having hired an assassin (Guy of Gisborne) to kill Robin. There is a dramatic fragment of this story which dates from about 1475 which shows that this story of Guy of Gisborne is a firmly medieval one.<sup>25</sup> The retribution is the only one that counts: Guy is killed and his body disfigured, and the sheriff is duly dispatched to meet his maker. Robin shows no mercy to his would-be assassin nor to the man who hired him. The body-count in this tale is five (plus other incidental deaths), including two of Robin's men, making it a thoroughly violent piece in the context of the Robin Hood oeuvre.

In the *Gest*, the first Robin is gentrified, and perhaps even more so turned into the king of the Greenwood; the second Robin is more of a ruffian, but his connection to a prioress suggests that he was more than a simple yeoman. In the *Monk*, the *Potter*, and *Guy of Gisborne*, Robin is firmly of yeoman stock. In the May-games, Robin Hood is likewise a man of the people, even if he is chosen from the better sort of the community. At no point in the medieval tales is Robin raised to the aristocracy. The outlawed Earl of Huntingdon, Robert of Locksley, is a post-medieval character.

Somehow or another, we have to explain why Robin Hood is so different whenever we meet him in a text or in a situation, and I think that the answer is that he was a vehicle on whom it was possible (and indeed still is possible) to place whatever Robin Hood one wanted. Robin never was a single character, even from his inception, rather he was multiple characters on whom was laid the story or celebration that suited the times. There was no one Robin Hood. As an individual human being, he probably never existed; as a character, he existed in multiple forms, the vast majority of which have been lost to us because those forms were part of an oral culture. The written forms that we have are the ones that a very few people decided to set down in writing.

In the muniments at Lincoln Cathedral, for example, is a medieval reference to Robin Hood and Sherwood Forest in a form not known elsewhere. This particular rhyme is in English and Latin: 'Robyn hod in Scherewood stod, hodud & hathud, hosut & schod, Ffour and twynti arrowus he bar in hit hondus' and then is translated into Latin by the same writer, perhaps a boy learning his grammar.<sup>26</sup> As we have seen so far, in the literary texts, Robin was firmly entrenched in Barnsdale, and although he went often to Nottingham, only once was he to be found in Sherwood Forest, and then only when he was escaping from Nottingham gaol, so it looks more like an immediate haven from the sheriff's men, rather than the permanent hideaway of the outlaw which is the status of Barnsdale Forest.

And yet this graffito on a thirteenth-century manuscript of John Garland's grammar in Lincoln Cathedral shows that, at Lincoln at least, the link between Robin Hood and Sherwood Forest was strong and alive in the minds of schoolboys at Lincoln at the end of the fifteenth century. Were it not for this one chance reference, we might be tempted to think that Robin's permanent base in Sherwood Forest is entirely a post-Reformation creation. We are reminded, therefore, of the fragility of the link that connects the medieval tales of Robin Hood and us in the modern age. The further interest of the piece is that it is a poem in a West Midlands dialect, and the metre is

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<sup>25</sup> Holt, *Robin Hood*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>26</sup> G. E. Morris, 'A ryme of Robin Hood', *Modern Language Review*, 43 (1948), 507-8. The Latin reads: 'Robertus hod stetit in ... de metore capiciatus et tropellatus calligatus et caucius tenens quatuor et viginti sagittas in mane'.



rhyiming couplets. Nothing now in existence of the medieval Robin Hood corpus is preserved in this manner. But it seems likely that there was a thriving oral poetical culture swishing around in the heads of bored schoolboys who wanted to be somewhere else than in the schoolroom. The Latin grammar that the boy employed is execrable, and the script barely legible. This was a student who sat at the back of the class and dreamed of running free of his lessons and into the Greenwood to join the legendary band of outlaws.

As I mentioned a moment ago, the aristocratic Robin Hood, the disgraced earl of Huntingdon who also went by the name of Robert of Locksley, is not a medieval character, and seems to have been an entirely late creation. He was, unlike his yeoman counterpart, a character of writing, not orality. He was created at the end of the sixteenth century to satisfy a demand for a Robin Hood who could be played in front of the highest in the land. The author of the piece was Anthony Munday, who wrote his *Downfall of Robert Earl of Huntingdon* (as a romantic comedy) to be performed by the Admiral's men at the Christmas court in 1598.<sup>27</sup> Presumably, therefore, no less a person than Queen Elizabeth I saw Munday's play about Robin Hood.

It is in Munday's Robin Hood that the character emerges almost fully formed as we know him. The scene is set in the reign of Richard the Lionheart who is away on crusade, which seems to reflect the fact that, certainly by 1521, one author had placed Robin in the 1190s.<sup>28</sup> Prince John is present, as is Eleanor of Aquitaine, and Maid Marian (also called Matilda in the text) is the love interest of the earl of Huntingdon (Robin Hood) and Prince John is his rival for Marian's affections. Meanwhile, Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine (in reality a 70-year old widow) is Marian's rival for the earl of Huntingdon's affections. The earl is outlawed and takes the name Robin Hood, settles in Sherwood Forest with his men, including Little John, Will Scarlet, Friar Tuck, Much the Miller's son; and his principal enemy is the sheriff of Nottingham. They live happily in the woods, Marian joins Robin (though remains chaste until Robin is pardoned and they can be married), and the crew swears an oath to protect the poor. Prince John rules in his brother's absence and abuses his power. King Richard returns, and Robin is pardoned, but decides to remain in Sherwood. All that is missing is the name Robert of Locksley.

That association had to await the seventeenth century (probably), when in a manner I have yet to discover, Robin was given an entirely fictional pedigree. In a Society of Antiquaries of London Commonplace book presented to the Society 23 May 1721 by Rev William Stukeley we have the tree drawn out for us. The 'Loxley' name first appears as a pseudonym in the play *Robin Hood and Queen Katherine*, a seventeenth-century text which described an encounter between Robin and Queen Katherine of Aragon, Henry VIII's first wife. She is said to give Robin the alias 'Loxley'.

This is the Robin Hood of literature, not of oral culture, and it is the Robin Hood who is acceptable to polite society. But he is not the medieval Robin Hood. The Robin Hood of this lecture was a man of the people and hence his literary footprint is very sparse indeed. This upper-class Robin Hood was to have a much larger literary presence and hence his impact on our imaginations of Robin Hood today.

When writing this lecture for tonight, I tried to think of how I might characterise the medieval Robin Hood to a modern audience in a way that could push home my main message. I concluded that the way to help you see how we should view the medieval Robin Hood is to encourage you to see him as a superhero, but not a superhero like Spiderman or Batman, but a particular sort of Superman: in fact, not a man at all, but a Time Lord. There have been thirteen Doctor Who's, each one played by a different actor, each one with a different characteristic, but each one is undoubtedly Doctor Who. Whether the Doctor is the zany Tom Baker or the clown-like Sylvester McCoy or the, frankly, slightly threatening Christopher Eccleston, he is recognisably Doctor Who. And now Doctor Who is to be played by a female actor, Jodie Whittaker. The change of gender will make no difference to our understanding of the role: she, like her predecessors, is a Time Lord, she will travel through time and space in the TARDIS, disguised as a 1920s Police Box; she will have adventures where she heroically

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<sup>27</sup> M. A. Nelson, 'The earl of Huntingdon: the Renaissance plays', in *Robin hood: Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism*, ed. S. Knight, Cambridge 1999, pp. 99-122.

<sup>28</sup> In 1521, John Major attributed the Robin Hood legend to the time of Richard I. This was the first time, in-so-far as the evidence allows us to see, that Robin was transported to the 1190s. There he could become an English patriot and stayed in (unspecified) woods where he 'spoiled of their goods those only that were wealthy'. Major gave Robin the accolade of being 'the humanest and the chief', which reminds us of the *Gest's* portrayal of Robin as holding court in the Greenwood.



saves the world using wit, not violence, above all else; she will inexplicably like human beings, even though we are self-destructive and child-like in our actions; and there will be a human assistant (in Whittaker's case, three assistants have been named: Bradley Walsh, Mandip Gill and Tosin Cole). The Doctor makes the difference in the struggle between good and evil: without the Doctor, evil would prevail.

The similarities between Robin Hood and Doctor Who don't end there, as one of my brightest students from last year noticed. Because Doctor Who is an outlaw, too, on the run from the authorities of Gallifrey, the Doctor's home planet, s/he is like Robin Hood. But for my purposes today, the real importance of the Doctor Who comparison is that the stories change as the character of the Doctor changes: s/he is a character on which to hang a whole variety of stories and in which to invest a whole variety of personalities, all of which are recognisably Doctor Who, but all of whom are different from one another.

The Medieval Robin Hood, like the Modern Doctor Who, was a work of fiction, created by people who wanted a character who answered fundamental needs for medieval men, women, and children. One of those needs was entertainment. It is very clear that the May-games were moments of celebration which, when the religious climate changed, brought down the opprobrium of the zealots of the age. The impact of the Reformation on the Robin Hood May-games was profound, in part because the Reformation 'broke the traditional cycles of the ritualistic year'.<sup>29</sup> That half of the year which stretched from Christmas to Midsummer was expunged from the calendar or so altered as to make it unrecognisable. The ceremonies that had marked St George's Day, Hock Tuesday (the second Tuesday after Easter Sunday), Ascension Day, Whitsunday (Robin Hood plays), Corpus Christi (60 days after Easter, so the first Thursday after Trinity Sunday), and Midsummer were strongly discouraged by the authorities. 'The matrix of everyday life was eroded and [in the end] perished' because of the change in the times.

Robin also answered a need we all have within us to believe in the triumph of good over evil even if evil holds most of the trump cards. We need to feel like we are participating in a just world, and it seems to me that the medieval Robin Hood texts show that our forebears were no different. They, too, needed to feel that their world was just, even if the people who wielded power in their world - the abbot, the sheriff, the monastic official - held most of the trump cards.

Humour was absolutely central to the medieval Robin Hood tales, too. Even when the action gets bloody and people get killed, the humour of the events comes through strongly. We are supposed to laugh a great deal when we encounter the medieval Robin Hood. Because for us he is a safe outlaw, one who isn't going to attack us, the ordinary man or woman in the street. He is not the real, threatening outlaw, but one who we can meet and who will not take from us our hard-earned money. There was never a back story to the medieval Robin Hood: he just *is*, he never *becomes*. He lives in the Forest (Barnsdale, mostly, or, perhaps, Sherwood), where he is happy to carry on the life of the outlaw. We are invited to laugh at people who are more stupid than ourselves, and we are invited to enjoy the slap-stick humour which is usually directed at people in power using their offices corruptly.

There never was a 'real Robin Hood' in the sense that a man existed who embodied even some of the characteristics of the eponymous hero. The real Robin Hood is a character of the medieval imagination and engaging with the medieval texts of his exploits allows us a window into the imaginative world of ordinary men and woman (and schoolboys!) of late medieval England (and Scotland).

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<sup>29</sup> Phythian-Adams, 'Ceremony and the citizen', p. 79.