

*Splitting Time's Arrow:
Cultural History
and the Robin Hood Myth*

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In a recently published book I have attempted to describe the many formations in the Robin Hood tradition, and to give some account of their interrelationship, both with themselves and with the social contexts that produced and consumed them.¹ As a result of that work there are two residual and interrelated issues I want to pursue separately. One is methodological, one is thematic. In methodological terms I want to reflect on the appropriate ways to conduct an analysis of this kind in cultural history, especially what type of history or historicising is most appropriate. And secondly, and as a result of settling on an answer to that question, I want to give some overall account of the main formative forces in the Robin Hood tradition, how they have changed over time, and in particular how they were re-formed at the start of the nineteenth century, and so reshaped the myth into its lively modern form.

My title refers to both of those two areas. In thematic terms, the moment when Robin splits the arrow is a compulsive motif in the tradition, and also a key instance of the re-formation of the myth in acceptable terms for a new context. But in addition, methodologically speaking, I refer in that title to what I see as a need to split up the simple progress of ongoing chronography, that line of time which is so commonly taken as an unconsidered basis in literary as well as historical writing. To understand the elements and the operations of this myth it is necessary to perceive something more than a steady plod from ancient forest laws to modern television, and to do that various elements of co-temporal and contra-temporal movements

will need to be focused upon, various overlaps, gaps and recurrences. There are two ways of splitting an arrow: longitudinally into strips as Robin does in his improbable moment of heroic archery; and latitudinally, into many separate short pieces, that is into separate periods and contexts. I will do the latter in the process of seeking historical meaning in the complex and often contradictory structures of the Robin Hood tradition.

The actual (that is, imaginary) arrow splitting is a good place to start. We all know the scene. The Sheriff's brutish chief archer has shot in the final for the golden arrow. His shaft stands quivering in the centre of the target. The heavily disguised opponent steps quietly forward. His friends look anxious. Prince John, or perhaps the Sheriff, smiles meanly. But our incognito hero draws, pauses, and lets fly. His arrow sweeps through the sky and, with a crack, lands on the very tip of his opponent's shaft, splits it into waving fronds, and plunges right into the heart of the target, through the point of the other arrow.

The crowd goes wild; the heroic archer smiles, just a little. Robin Hood has won the archery contest.

But why did he win? Why wasn't it a draw? When I used to play darts, you would occasionally stick one dart in the plastic or wooden tip of the other, but you would always get the same score as the original dart. Did Robin win for hitting dead centre when it was obscured? Or did he actually win for splitting his enemy's arrow?

A date may help. This compulsive motif is not in fact medieval, or even renaissance, like some major re-formations of the Robin Hood tradition. It comes from the hands of Sir Walter Scott, that deadly narratological marksman. It is in *Ivanhoe* Chapter 13 that the arrow splitting first occurs as far as I am aware and Scott's main source, here as elsewhere, is none other than himself; there is a scene in *The Lady of the Lake* (V.22) where the Douglas splits his own arrow in this kind of way. The origin is presumably in a misinterpretation of the phrase 'to split the peg' or 'to split the wand', different mechanisms of archery perfection from an earlier period, which are mentioned in early ballads that Scott would certainly have known, including *The Gest of Robin Hood* and 'Adam Bell, Clim of the Clough and William of Cloudesly'.² The meaning of the incident is not hard to find, in competitive masculine self-consciousness: Robin apparently is represented as being more powerful in phallic terms than his enemy,

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and the compulsive nature of the motif is parallel to the popularity of Arthur's capacity to withdraw the sword from the stone, or as mythographers would have it, withdraw the phallus erect.

The wider significance of the arrow-splitting moment is that it suddenly appears and then becomes a compelling motif, as the myth that is renovated in the early nineteenth century is mediated in many popular sources, through to modern film and television. I will return to the period and the elements of that renovation towards the end of this paper. The point about opening with this incident is to stress methodologically that historicising the Robin Hood myth does not necessarily start with year one in the tradition; it starts by studying the relation between elements of the tradition and the contexts in which they appear or are fully developed. Time's arrow, that is, should not be simply followed, but neither should it in this case be simply reversed, as Martin Amis masterfully did in his novel of that name, in order to suggest that the holocaust was not in fact a historical necessity, but a wilful creation by people in their own fragment of time. In the case of this study, time's arrow needs to be split laterally into fragments, because the myth itself has never been simple or single, but has always had multiple interpretations, often of quite contradictory political character; by splitting the tradition into notionally disconnected moments an analysis can comprehend how each interpretation has presented the hero's inherent resistance to authority as being of a specific kind and with a specific purpose.

2

One major attempt to assert, and ideologise, linear time in the tradition, which I wish to controvert for several reasons, has occurred in our time, namely the attempt to read Robin Hood as a historical character. In referring to the tradition as a myth I am evidently rejecting this notion by denying it the name of legend, and before elaborating on the contradictory and complex character of the myth, I should specify my reasons for rejecting the historical simplicity of a notionally real Robin Hood whose legend has been exfoliated in various ways, with ideological purposes.

Most of the Robin Hood bibliography items in recent years have been in this mode of biographical historicism; it is a main, though by

no means only, interest in the long introduction to *Rymes of Robin Hood* by the historians R. Dobson and J. Taylor.³ It is the only focus of the book by John C. Bellamy and a major emphasis of J. C. Holt's book.⁴ Several recent articles have returned to the question of who was the original Robin Hood. The premises are both empiricist and individualist, of course, and in that way they replicate two of our culture's basic concerns. Ironically, this mode of historicism is itself located inside history—whereas most of its practitioners would feel they are outside the myth and its processes, and so feel they can speak on behalf of history itself, rather than their own self-constructive practice.

This 'real Robin Hood' industry, or ideology, goes back some way. We can perhaps overlook the early attempts to find a biography for the hero as being less (or perhaps more) than empirical—Stukeley's famous genealogy, for example, which connected the outlaw with the conqueror's own family, as Robert Fitz Ooth.⁵ The first true hero of empiricism was Joseph Hunter, a Yorkshire archivist, who in 1852 published the remarkable fact that Edward II had in 1321–22 employed a valet of the chamber called Robin Hood.⁶ Hunter connected this with the story in the *Gest* of Robin serving, for a while, an unnumbered King Edward. But intriguing as the detail is, this Robin was never an outlaw or a fugitive.

Equally incomplete are other contenders—the fugitive found by Crook in the Reading court rolls from 1261–62 can with some strain be seen as a reference to an earlier figure:⁷ he may, the historicists argue, have been connected with the outlaw just because he was a fugitive named Robert and so the quest goes back earlier, to the man found by L. V. D. Owen in York in 1226 called 'Robert Hood, a fugitive'.⁸

The implication has been that a careful enough empirical search will find the real figure from whom the legend spreads, and Holt is satisfied that Owen's man is the source.⁹ But to construct a pleasingly historico-individualist stemma of this kind involves excluding evidence. For example, why pass over the slightly earlier and evidently different Robert Hood, an abbot's servant who killed a man in Cirencester in 1213. He is regarded by Holt as a 'less likely possibility'¹⁰—but why? The West can be quite fertile Robin Hood territory, at least for plays and place names, and there are early instances of the outlaw defending the church against its enemies, as in Walter Bower's continuation of John of Fordun's *Scotichronicon* from the 1440s.¹¹ More tellingly, why

does Holt also name as 'less likely' the certainly historical Robin Hood who was arrested for breach of a royal forest at Rockingham in 1354?¹² This is an area quite rich in Robin Hood associations, apart from being only a long day's walk south-east from Sherwood.

It is the linear nature of this concept of history and the individualised basis of the implied ontology that are central to the problem. The empiricist historians have their own version of time's arrow, which privileges themselves as capable of knowing that one other person of importance: here stand proudly, side by side, the true Robin Hood and his true historian.

On the contrary, the records imply that the name Robin Hood is a *nom de guerrilla*: it is taken up by people who are fulfilling the role of anti-authoritarian activities, whether in game or criminal earnest. It is a name like Santa Claus, which people bear when they are fulfilling an appropriate role. The reality of Robin Hood, that is, lies in his mythic function. Where that function and that name came from is obscure, but it certainly seems that the youthfulness implied by the diminutive 'Robin' and the elusive mystery implied by 'Hood' as a cognomen are central. Some scholars, such as Robert Graves and Margaret Murray, have taken 'mystery' much further, wanting to see Robin Hood as fully connected with magic, witchcraft, the old religion.

That mantic reading of the hero is not strongly supported in the surviving evidence, but it is clear enough that some elements of a natural force are part of the myth, as is strongly realised in recent film versions, especially the television series 'Robin of Sherwood' made for Harlech television, starting in 1984. But the myth is more specifically centred on a notion of resistance to wrongful authority, and it is in those circumstances that most of the 'real' people appear to have taken up the name, or to have been given it. The impact of Robin Hood's mythic functions in history becomes clear if attention is paid to the genre in which the early tradition is both most widespread, and also most obscure.

3

The Robin Hood plays and games belong to a genre which I would like to bring to the fore in the tradition, both past and present, namely performance. This is partly because it appears that drama is the genre central to the tradition, through to modern television and film versions,

but also because of the remarkable popularity of performance in the early period. In the appendix to my book, there appear some 260 references to the hero by 1600. A few are texts, others are proverbs, topographical connections and general comments about the hero. But the largest single group by far, more than half of the 260, are specific references to the staging of the Robin Hood play-game, a title I use to indicate how this is at once a semi-formal play and a communal game or ritual activity. The usual term 'plays and games' is too vague and suggests they are separate, rather than a continuum of kinds of socialised performance. None of the play-game texts survive, presumably because they were never written down or, more likely, had no fixed verbal form. Some descriptions of the activities are recorded, and quite a few accounts for costumes, props, entertainments and so on. This is because these play-games were very often semi-official, supported by the town authorities, and so their accounts at least were written down. In keeping with that status, the play-game is often a communal celebration, where Robin Hood both represents natural forces and brings them to the advantage of the local community.

A typical Robin Hood activity is when he and supporters will walk through the woods to a nearby village or small town and collect money. Robin Hood of Finchamstead arrived in Reading in 1505 and collected for the village. A few weeks later Robin Hood of Henley arrived for the same purpose. The natural connections are sometimes symbolic—Robin might ride in a cart decorated with blossomy boughs, and he often wears green. The natural connections are not only topographic and symbolic: the season is crucial. One of the recurrent mistakes about the Robin Hood play-game is that it takes place on May Day. It is clear from the evidence, and clearly stated by David Wiles (whose book, brief though it is, is the best authority on the topic) that the date of the Robin Hood play-game is late May or early June, and Whitsunday is the focus.¹³ As anyone living in the English countryside will know, by the end of May the hedgerows and woods are white with blossom, showing full early summer, not the more uncertain promise of late spring. Robin Hood is associated with functioning nature, not with fertility rites towards that function.

But the natural symbolism and the money collected were directed towards the local community (not toward the poor—that comes in another part of the mythical forest, as we shall see). The churchwardens

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often controlled the play-game income, though it might be spent on civic not spiritual matters, like improving the roads. But the play-game was not always so communally coherent. The ritual can be a force for conflict in two possible connections. One is when there is rivalry between communities. There was a serious riot in the West Midlands in 1498 when the men of Wednesbury came to Walsall on Robin Hood's day in spite of legal prohibitions;¹⁴ they came for mischief, not just merriment, and we know about this because of legal intervention to keep the peace.

Other violent versions of the Robin Hood play-game occurred when the local authorities, particularly in Scotland, sought to contain the carnival whose values they now disavowed; new religious attitudes rejected older forms of ritual, and other conflicts occurred when the size and complexity of a town meant that the space of natural communality had become a site for class dissension, as in Edinburgh in 1561 when the tradesmen, their apprentices as usual acting as shock troops, clashed with the legal authorities over Robin Hood activities.¹⁵

The play-game, however, only briefly suggests a version of the conflicts which are elsewhere more fully realised through the authority-resisting figure of Robin Hood in the ballads. This pattern does, though, appear more clearly in a few early written plays which are close in narrative to the more widely available early ballads. In these genres, which appear related to rapidly developing craft towns, particularly Nottingham, there is a central strain between a sense of local authority, itself seen as natural in some way, and the threat of external governmental forces, seen as foreign and constricting. Poacher versus royal forester is an obvious version of this, as is free local figure versus the force of the king, as mediated by the sheriff. Resistance to a distant authority, whether it is clerical in the person of monk or abbot, or secular in the role of sheriff or forester, is the central mechanism of the early Robin Hood myth, especially in the ballads: clearly a historical and social conflict being played out here.

The notion of local, quasi-natural value represented by the hero appears to be always associated with a specific place. Robin Hood it is striking to notice, is always strongly localised in the early period. He is Robin Hood of Sherwood, or Barnsdale, of Inglewood or even Richmond Park. And he is equally strongly connected—often negatively—to the small towns growing up beside these attractive

open spaces of liberty and imaginedly natural life. The ultimate authority, whether King or St Mary, is regarded with respect; but the officers who imposed authority in their names are far from admired. Much of the thrust of the early ballads and the surviving early plays is exactly of this kind, acting out a conflict between local community and wider, national forces of legislation.

4

In the previous section I have been referring to early plays, a few of which still exist, and early ballads, quite a number of which survive. They essentially tell the story of Robin Hood the social bandit, this figure who is essentially local and natural in his values, and who is more or less resistant to authority, depending on the context. However, this pattern should not be read as simple. In its sense of resistance to distant authorities this material can have quite different political implications in the same period. Around 1450 two narratives are preserved. One is told by Walter Bower, a Scottish chronicler who adds to Fordun's *Scotichronicon* an example of Robin Hood's outlaw activities; he dates the events in 1266, just after the time of Simon de Montfort, whom Robin supported, according to this account.¹⁶ For Bower, what is memorable is that Robin, though knowing the sheriff was in the forest looking for him, refused to interrupt mass before sallying out to defeat this representative of an external, and in this case anticlerical authority. But at just the same time is also recorded the long ballad of 'Robin Hood and the Monk',¹⁷ in which Robin goes alone to Nottingham to worship Mary, is betrayed by a 'great-headed monk' and imprisoned by the sheriff. In revenge Little John and Much behead the monk and humiliate the sheriff: both church and state are punished for their anti-natural and anti-local activities.

If the early Robin Hood is, within his social bandit range, quite varied, greater variety was to come. This is not a simple process of historical change—the radical local figure remains in story and especially song, and can be traced in many ways through to the present—including in Michael Tippett's Marxist ballad opera from 1933.¹⁸ But that figure of early resistance was overlain with another of more conservative character, as new social and cultural formations reconstructed Robin Hood: more fragments broken from the shaft

of time's arrow needed to be scrutinised to historicise further patterns in the myth.

It was the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which saw the development of the gentrified version of the myth of Robin Hood. Only now was the hero dated in the chaotic time of King Richard I, turned into a lord, provided with a lady, and made a hero of charity who steals from the rich to give to the poor: such condescension did not belong to the social bandit, who stole to give to his own class fraction only. All these new formations come together in the figure of the dispossessed Earl of Huntingdon. Once the authority he resists is itself wrongful, the outlaw can clearly represent good rule focused on royalty and aristocracy: he has become a figure of hierarchical conservatism, where before, and sometimes after, he has been a figure for variously radical local authority. This is a major change in the thrust of the myth, a conservative incorporation of considerable impact that is still to a large extent present in modern versions. In this formation, it is usually bad royal officials and corrupt Catholic churchmen who are resisted (not yet bad King John), and Robin has an automatic right to lead the outlaw band because of his birth, where in the social bandit version the leadership is a difficult matter, sometimes negotiated in the stories, and all non-local authority was suspect.

The agencies of this gentrification seem multiple. They certainly include renaissance historians anxious to be thought well of by the powerful, the first of whom has the not inappropriate name of John Major. In his *History of Greater Britain*, published in 1521, he set Robin firmly in the days of bad King John and stressed the outlaw's humane and chief-like character, so appropriating his power for the nobility. On the basis of this remodelling of the hero, in his *Chronicle at Large* (1569) Richard Grafton speculated that he might have been an earl, and by 1592 John Stow's *The Annales of England* gave the full story of dispossession in the days of Richard. A dramatist joined in when in 1598–99 Anthony Munday, in two five-act plays (*The Downfall* and *The Death of Robert Earle of Huntington*), fleshed out the story, matching Robin the Lady Matilda Fitzwater to provide the lineage that such a lord would expect.¹⁹

But the gentrification was not immediate, complete or even artistically potent. The memorable conflicts of the early plays and ballads, already well known by the 1590s, are almost completely absent

from the gentrified tradition. What followed in that lofty mode was aesthetically enfeebled in many ways as a result of ignoring this theatrical vivid material. Robin Hood masques, playlets, harlequinades and ballad operas through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought little life to the story of the genteel outlaw. Ennobled in rank but largely bereft of interesting narrative incident, Lord Robin struggled on in various half-effective, action-starved modes, until another major change, itself relating to a new fragment of history, came over the tradition after 1800 and shaped it for modern interests.

5

Without the rejuvenating imagination of Scott, Keats and Peacock early in the nineteenth century, it seems likely that the myth of Robin Hood would be as lost as are the stories of Guy of Warwick, Bevis of Hampton, Johnnie Armstrong or other late medieval heroes who have not engaged the modern imagination. The ancient notion of a natural force resistant to wrongful authority is reconstructed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century period of revolutions, social, industrial and poetic, and the force of the outlaw figure becomes a focus of modern concepts of the self and state. In part, the energy is derived from the fact that the old ballad materials were linked with the gentrified tradition through the anthology of Joseph Ritson, who in 1795 gathered almost all the early stories, recognised their radical force strongly and favourably, but also celebrated Robin as a displaced Earl. However, the old material also had its vigour directed in fresh ways. New history made new forms in the old myth.

Scott, in splitting the arrow, made Robin a competitive male. But the arrow he split was fired by a certain Hubert, whose grandfather shot at Hastings. Scott also inscribed in the myth a structure that is usually called nationalist, though it is, in fact, basically racist. Much has been written on Scott's success in creating a national image for both Scots and English in his historical fictions, and the nationalist potential of the Robin Hood material has been crucial in its power over the last two centuries—indeed it was as a part of the materials for the distinctly nationalist new curriculum of English that Robin Hood ballads, plays and anthologies were published in large numbers from 1910 to 1930, in both England and America; many of the film and television forms

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derived directly from those materials.²⁰

But that nationalist appeal is itself bound up with another element that is new in the romantic period. Keats and his friend John Reynolds exchanged Robin Hood poems, and Leigh Hunt in particular developed stories in verse. These set the tone for the later treatment of the myth by Tennyson in *The Foresters* (1892) and by most of the minor Georgian poets, as well as many forgotten authors of bulky Victorian novels. Throughout these texts, a major element of Robin Hood's power is summed up in the word 'greenwood', which is a site alternative to the modern city: the thrust of the myth has become that of heritage. The forest, that natural place of old, has special new consoling power now that distant authority is not that of sheriff or abbot, but plainly that of mercantile capitalism and its unpalatable urban consequences. Poem after poem, novel after novel, rather thin plays, often for schoolchildren, all celebrate Robin and Marian as the spirits of a freer, cleaner, more natural England. There is a strong nationalist false consciousness in this heritage idea, a view of a truer nation in the past, in the greenwood.

To Scott's nationalist and masculinist renovation is added a political nostalgia which Keats presents most sharply, but is widely disseminated—most extensively, to give credit where it is due and rarely given, from the work of Thomas Love Peacock. His *Maid Marian* (1822) may be the least reprinted of his prose, but in the stage version by J. R. Planche, it was extremely well known, much imitated (and in pantomime, pastiched) throughout the nineteenth century. Here Scott's story was combined for the first time with the idea of greenwood heritage, creating a mixture of national self-satisfaction, nature-focused false consciousness and aristocratic individualism.

This particular arrow has a long flight and considerable penetrative power. It was a potent ideological weapon both to entertain our period and also project its most conservative features. But that conservative development has not silenced earlier and more radical modes: the myth is never simple or single. It remains historically and politically multiple, and can include moments of modern leftism that recall original aspects of resistance. Errol Flynn's Robin of 1938 is evidently the enemy of Normans cast in the mould of Nazis. Michael Praed in the 1984 TV series is a telling combination of Robin the working class student radical and also the new age visionary. Kevin Costner in 1991 brought

international liberalism to the myth, having as assistant a literal Black Muslim.

Like Hubert's arrow, the Robin Hood myth splits into many elements, and they can be read for their immediate significance in terms of the politics and history of their time of production and consumption. Some remain strange, unique, and even less than heroic: in the remarkable Nottingham playlet *Robin Hood and his Crew of Souldiers* (1661)²¹ Robin yielded readily to the messenger of the newly crowned king. In the 1990s we can watch *Maid Marian* on BBC television: the genre is feminist farce and Robin is no more than a 'go-for-it boutique owner', who has designed the costumes: all real leadership is, for once, found in Marian. We will hear more from feminism yet, as at least one novel in that mode is now being written.

No doubt we will hear more too from the limited voice of biographical historicism, but however much that mode may retain an empiricist self-confidence, it is in reality just a part of the ongoing pattern of finding in Robin Hood a figure of what is in any period felt to be appealingly natural and liberatingly heroic—a process which may include a mapping of the whole forest of outlaw tradition, like the one I have just completed.

But I would claim for my study a methodological self-awareness. Whether they know it or not, all who study the outlaw hero also operate across the multiplicities of both myth and history, as I hope to have elucidated them—or at least some of them. To think of capturing all the features would be an ambitious folly worthy of the Sheriff. Whether it is a simple matter of defending late medieval local rights, or of re-shaping the modern hero of heritage, or the more elusive matter of writing a book about the whole myth and its significances, Robin Hood remains a moving target.

Notes

- 1 *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw*, Oxford, 1994.
- 2 To be found in F. J. Child, ed., *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 5 Vols, reprint edn, New York, 1965; see Vol.3.
- 3 London, 1976.
- 4 Bellamy, *Robin Hood: An Historical Inquiry*, London, 1985; Holt, *Robin Hood*, revised edn, London, 1990.
- 5 *Paleographica Britannica*, Stamford, 1746, Vol.2, p.115.

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- 6 'The Great Hero of the Ancient Minstrelsy of England: Robin Hood, his Period, Real Character, etc., Investigated', *Critical and Historical Tracts* 4 (1852): 28–38.
- 7 'Some Further Evidence Concerning the Dating of the Origins of the Legend of Robin Hood', *English Historical Review* IC (1984): 530–4.
- 8 'Robin Hood in the Light of Research', *The Times: Trade and Engineering Supplement* 38, No.864, p.xxix.
- 9 Holt, 1990, pp.48–9.
- 10 Holt, 1990, p.54.
- 11 See Knight, 1994, pp.33–5 for a translation and discussion.
- 12 See Dobson and Taylor, 1976, pp.12–13.
- 13 *The Early Plays of Robin Hood*, Cambridge, 1981, p.4.
- 14 Holt, pp.148–9.
- 15 Knight, p.109.
- 16 Knight, pp.33–6.
- 17 Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, No.119, pp.94–101.
- 18 Knight, p.214.
- 19 Munday's Robin Hood plays are discussed in detail by M. A. Nelson, *The Robin Hood Tradition in the English Renaissance*. Salzburg Studies in English Literature, Salzburg, 1973, pp.124–88.
- 20 See Knight, Chapter 6, 'We Saxons Aren't Going to Put Up with these Oppressions Much Longer', pp.218–27.
- 21 See Stephen Knight, 'Robin Hood and the Royal Restoration', *Critical Survey* 5 (1993): 298–312.

