

To What Extent Do The Ballads of Robin Hood Reflect The Ideals of Political Justice In The Later Middle Ages?

Abby Cengel

For centuries, the legend of Robin Hood has circulated and evolved, shaping and reforming into what we know as the “classic” Robin Hood tale today. Since the story has had centuries to develop, there are several queries that surface about the original Robin Hood and the original Robin Hood legends. Much speculation surrounds the origins of the legends, and the “real-life” Robin Hood that existed in the Middle Ages.¹ It is virtually impossible to know the “true” significance of the Robin Hood legends as they were originally understood, but by examining the Robin Hood ballads (first printed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries), one may perhaps gain a greater understanding of the legend.² Quite a few ballads remain intact from the Middle Ages, but the main focus of this essay will be of the “Geste of Robin Hood,” which is a wonderfully preserved example of the significance of the man that Robin Hood was (or was not), and the ideals of society that he embodied. However, there is some controversy over the insight that the ballads provide. Some argue that the Robin Hood ballads can be seen as a source of entertainment, but this was not their only function; the ballads held a deeper meaning for the people of the later Middle Ages. The ballads of Robin Hood reflect the peoples’ ideals of political justice through the character of Robin Hood as a yeoman and “noble robber” and through the theme of restorative justice in the ballads, which reflect the peoples’ ideal views of justice in society.

The historiography of Robin Hood is quite extensive, much of which includes speculation about the original meaning of the Robin Hood ballads. Prominent historians, such as J.C. Holt, have argued that, at the time that the ballads were written down, the Robin Hood ballads lacked a deeper meaning of political justice.³ Holt writes, “What is now pure adventure to the young or laudable social protest to the radical was at first a glorification of violence to young and old alike.”⁴ At first glance this

argument seems to be valid, since violence is quite a prominent occurrence in the ballads. In the “Geste of Robin Hood,” Little John, one of Robin Hood’s men, becomes involved in a violent tussle with the keeper of the ale and the cook in the sheriff’s household, just because they will not let him dine until the sheriff has returned.⁵ According to Holt, this shows how violence in the story was accepted with a “casual brutality” because violence occurred quite frequently in the later Middle Ages.⁶ This point falters, though, when one reads further into the ballad and discovers that the cook, deemed a worthy opponent by Little John, is asked to come join Robin Hood in the forest to use his good fighting skills in aiding Robin Hood.⁷ In “Robin Hood and the Monk” as well, the violence used against the sheriff is because he has been deemed a “false felon” and an evil man by Robin Hood; therefore, the violence has purpose.⁸ Thus, the violence is being put to good use, or, as some may argue, serves a higher purpose than violence for its own sake. In order to enforce and promote justice, later medieval society utilized violence, just like in the two ballads shown here.⁹ This seems to be overlooked by Holt, who inaccurately dismisses the violence as only a source of entertainment.

Holt also writes that the Robin Hood ballads lack political significance because Robin Hood does not “seek to overturn social conventions” through his violent actions and presence in the forest; therefore, the stories must only be for violent entertainment purposes.¹⁰ He also argues that there is no evidence to suggest that the ballads were linked to agrarian discontents in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, further emphasising his previous point.¹¹ Once again, this argument holds to a certain degree, since the ballads of Robin Hood probably originated in the North of England and the major sources of the peasant uprisings were in the South. However, the ballads do not necessarily have to be linked to

major social uprisings to be considered a part of the popular culture's ideals on political justice. One does not need to prove the story to be a motivator of rebellion in order to examine the deeper meaning behind the ballads. It is not certain if Robin Hood inspired peasants to revolt in this time period, but the ballads can still be used to explore the peoples' views on political justice and its ideals.

One of the main ways in which the ballads reflect the ideals of political justice in the later Middle Ages is through Robin Hood's character as a yeoman (and through his men's statuses as yeomen as well). At least three ballads from this time ("The Geste of Robin Hood," "Robin Hood and the Monk" and "Robin Hood and the Potter") specifically make Robin and his men out to be yeomen.¹² Yeomen were men (and women) of the "middling sort" who, after the Black Death in the fourteenth century, experienced a rise of living standards, particularly among "those who were skilled labourers in regular employment, tenant farmers, artisans, and craftsmen."¹³ This is seen in the "Geste," in which Robin is identified as "a good yeoman" of whom "much good" has been heard from his activities that require the skills of his particular craft (forestry); this largely defines his identity, especially as a forest yeoman.¹⁴ The forest is the place where outlaws could be found, so Robin Hood, as a yeoman of the forest, was independent and resistant to almost all kinds of authority.¹⁵ This status, as A.J. Pollard argues, "is crucial to the identification of the stories with this particular social world," because yeomen comprised a large part of the audience of the ballads.¹⁶ Thus, Robin Hood, as a yeoman, was a character with whom many people could identify because of the similarities.

One such similarity was that Robin Hood and his men were quite familiar with the workings of the local government (i.e. relations with the sheriff and abbot), like the yeomen of the later Middle Ages were.¹⁷ The yeomen of the later Middle Ages showed their familiarity with the parliamentary process in the manifestos that some substantial villagers drew up in different areas around England, beginning in 1450, which asserted that "the king was not above his laws...and that he could not tax his subjects at will without the consent of parliament."¹⁸ Paul Hyams also writes that those involved in local politics (i.e. yeomen) tried to keep authority and the amount of money paid to the government to a minimum.¹⁹ This is not unlike Robin Hood, who also protested the unjust collection of money in

the "Geste," and was able to help a knight deeply (and wrongly) in debt by giving him four hundred pounds, clothing, a horse, and other goods.²⁰ Thus, the ballads of Robin Hood reflect the political ideals of the later Middle Ages through Robin Hood's status as a yeoman, who corrected the injustices of society as real yeomen attempted to do.

This tendency to act on a basis for the "common weal" (or good) is also a large part of Robin Hood's character, and defines him as a "noble robber."²¹ Eric Hobsbawm describes the noble robber, writing that he or she is the most famous and popular type of bandit because he or she rights wrongs and restores justice.²² As demonstrated previously, the act of seeking justice to "right the wrongs" of society was a large part of the dedications of yeomen to their political involvement. Bernard Lumpkin also writes that the noble robber's community, much like the communities of yeomen that sought justice, "enforces a code of conducts, values, and beliefs which contains his subversive and transgressive power."²³ A code of higher principles and standards guided Robin Hood; he always held to these principles and standards in the ballads, much like the yeomen who also wanted to keep certain standards of justice within their communities. Thus, Robin Hood's identity as a noble robber that seeks restorative justice in the ballads largely reflects the ideals of the society that listened to his story.

In the "Geste of Robin Hood" alone, there are several instances in which Robin Hood provides ways to correct what he sees as injustices of his society. He is able to provide a knight "in a sorrowful state" with enough money to pay back his debt to a cruel abbot, allowing the knight to begin fashioning his livelihood again.²⁴ Robin also provides justice for society by taking money from the cruel monks who held the knight in debt, leaving "but little behind" for them, and giving the money back to the knight, whom he deemed more worthy of possessing the wealth.²⁵ Also, in "Robin Hood and the Butcher," Robin criticises the sheriff of Nottingham for the unfair way in which he would "rob a man of all he hath,/And send him naked home," and threatens to kill him for this behaviour.²⁶ These instances are different from the "classic" version of the Robin Hood story in which Robin robs from the rich to give to the poor – the original ballads seem to have more significance since they show Robin Hood robbing the undeserving to give to the deserving, regardless of social status.

Society in the later Middle Ages also desired

government officials whom they could trust and rely upon to provide them with justice (as expressed from the aforementioned manifestos). It seems that what they could not do to royal officials in reality, they projected onto the story, administering justice as they saw fit. In addition to punishing the corrupt monks, Robin Hood brings an end to the Sheriff of Nottingham in the "Geste," poetically reciting, "Lie there, proud sheriff,/ Evil, meet thy death./ No man could trust you/ While you drew breath."²⁷ He intends to kill the sheriff in other ballads (like in the "Potter" and the "Butcher"), but stays his hand due to the sheriff's wife's hospitality.²⁸ Ideally, to the people of the later Middle Ages, corrupt officials should be removed from their offices so that they could not oppress their subjects any longer, which is expressed in the ballads.²⁹ However, Holt would possibly argue that Robin killed the sheriff in quite a violent (and therefore entertaining) manner (by beheading), which makes the story lack political significance. The characters did use violence, but, it must be remembered that violence was the principal means of dispensing justice in the later Middle Ages. Pollard writes that "Robin Hood celebrates... righteous violence to maintain true justice precisely when the officers of the law failed," showing the significance of his use of violence to maintain justice within his world.³⁰ Even though yeomen at the time

could not administer justice in this way, their ideals of who was deserving of this justice are reflected in the ballads of Robin Hood, in which "Robin Hood's greenwood kingdom [was]...a place where the impossible [could] happen" and presented "a paradigm of society as it should be."³¹

The ballads of Robin Hood are one of the many ways in which the observer may glimpse part of the popular culture of later medieval England. The people who lived then were not simple to define, and doubtless cannot be entirely described through the study of simple ballads, but they seem as good a place as any to begin. One cannot truly claim to know how the ballads were used or what significance they held for the people of the later Middle Ages, but it is quite fascinating to speculate. The ballads hold a unique and special place in the popular culture of this time, and their importance to the people that lived then can still be seen today. In the words of A.J. Pollard, "We cannot know whether those who rose in arms in defence of the common weal shared that dream of an ideal order... It is not inconceivable, however, that they were also sustained by the hope of a better world emerging from their actions; a better world...which was closer to the ideal which found its expression" in the ballads of Robin Hood.³²

Bibliography

- Dobson, R.B. and J. Taylor, eds. *Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Introduction to the English Outlaw*. London: Heinemann, 1976.
- Dobson, R.B. "Robin Hood: The Genesis of a Popular Hero." In *Robin Hood in Popular Culture: Violence, Transgression, and Justice*, edited by Thomas Hahn, 61-100. Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2000.
- Frank, Robert Landis, trans. "The Geste of Robin Hood." California: Painted Arrow Publishing, 1974. <http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~ohlgren/gesttrans.html> (accessed December 7, 2010).
- Hobsbawm, E.J. *Bandits*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969.
- Holt, J.C. "The Origins and Audience of the Ballads of Robin Hood." *Past and Present* 18 (November 1960): 89-110.
- Holt, J.C. *Robin Hood*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1982.
- Hyams, Paul. "What Did Edwardian Villagers Understand by 'Law'?" In *Medieval Society and the Manor Court*, edited by Zvi Razi and Richard Smith, 69-102. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.
- Lumpkin, Bernard. "The Ties that Bind: Outlaw and Community in the Robin Hood Ballads and the Romance of Eustace the Monk." In *Robin Hood in Popular Culture: Violence, Transgression, and Justice*, edited by Thomas Hahn, 141-150. Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2000.
- Pollard, A.J. "Idealising Criminality: Robin Hood in the Fifteenth Century." In *Pragmatic Utopias: Ideals and Communities, 1200-1630*, edited by Rosemary Horrox and Sarah Rees Jones, 156-173. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Pollard, A.J. "Political Ideology in the Early Stories of Robin Hood." In *Outlaws in Medieval and Early Modern England: Crime, Government and Society, c.1066-c.1600*, edited by John C. Appleby and Paul Dalton, 111-128. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009.

Endnotes

- ¹ A.J. Pollard, "Idealising Criminality: Robin Hood in the Fifteenth Century," in *Pragmatic Utopias: Ideals and Communities, 1200-1630*, ed. Rosemary Horrox and Sarah Rees Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 156.
- ² R.B. Dobson, "Robin Hood: The Genesis of a Popular Hero," in *Robin Hood in Popular Culture: Violence, Transgression, and Justice*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 64.
- ³ J.C. Holt, *Robin Hood* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), 10.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Robert Landis Frank, trans., "The Geste of Robin Hood" (California: Painted Arrow Publishing, 1974), <http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~ohlgren/gesttrans.html> (accessed December 7, 2010).
- ⁶ Holt, *Robin Hood*, 11.
- ⁷ Frank, trans., "The Geste of Robin Hood."
- ⁸ R.B. Dobson and J. Taylor, eds., *Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Introduction to the English Outlaw* (London: Heinemann, 1976), 117-8.
- ⁹ Pollard, "Idealising Criminality: Robin Hood in the Fifteenth Century," 161.
- ¹⁰ J.C. Holt, "The Origins and Audience of the Ballads of Robin Hood," *Past and Present* 18 (November 1960): 89.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Dobson and Taylor, eds., *Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Introduction to the English Outlaw*, 115, 125; Frank, trans., "The Geste of Robin Hood."
- ¹³ A.J. Pollard, "Political Ideology in the Early Stories of Robin Hood," in *Outlaws in Medieval and Early Modern England: Crime, Government and Society, c.1066-c.1600*, ed. John C. Appleby and Paul Dalton (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 114.
- ¹⁴ Frank, trans., "The Geste of Robin Hood."
- ¹⁵ Pollard, "Idealising Criminality: Robin Hood in the Fifteenth Century," 168.
- ¹⁶ Pollard, "Political Ideology in the Early Stories of Robin Hood," 115.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 114-6.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 118-9.
- ¹⁹ Paul Hyams, "What Did Edwardian Villagers Understand by 'Law'?" in *Medieval Society and the Manor Court*, ed. Zvi Razi and Richard Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1.
- ²⁰ Frank, trans., "The Geste of Robin Hood."
- ²¹ Pollard, "Political Ideology in the Early Stories of Robin Hood," 122.
- ²² E.J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), 42.
- ²³ Bernard Lumpkin, "The Ties that Bind: Outlaw and Community in the Robin Hood Ballads and the Romance of Eustace the Monk," in *Robin Hood in Popular Culture: Violence, Transgression, and Justice*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 142.
- ²⁴ Frank, trans., "The Geste of Robin Hood."
- ²⁵ Ibid., 21.
- ²⁶ Dobson and Taylor, eds., *Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Introduction to the English Outlaw*, 154.
- ²⁷ Frank, trans., "The Geste of Robin Hood."
- ²⁸ Dobson and Taylor, eds., *Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Introduction to the English Outlaw*, 131, 154.
- ²⁹ Pollard, "Political Ideology in the Early Stories of Robin Hood," 126.
- ³⁰ Pollard, "Idealising Criminality: Robin Hood in the Fifteenth Century," 161.
- ³¹ Pollard, "Political Ideology in the Early Stories of Robin Hood," 126.
- ³² Ibid., 128.