

MISSING THE TREES FOR THE FOREST: THE
ARBOREAL “MAGIC” OF ROBIN HOOD

by

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ABSTRACT

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In the outlaw ballad tradition as well as in tales of chivalric romance, the greenwood often plays a crucial part and is integral to the Robin Hood legend. This thesis explores the narrative reverence of and meditation on the greenwood of early Robin Hood ballads, a reverence that hearkens back to ancient pagan tree worship. In spite of the Christian influence of the early Robin Hood poets, the very setting of the greenwood in the ballads preserves an eradicable trace of the legend’s pagan roots. The outlaws are enmeshed within a framework that medieval and early Modern subjects would have identified with superstition, mysticism, and the spirit(s) of the wood, and thus, Robin Hood’s literary incarnation in early ballads casts him as a representative of repressed paganism, through his proximity to and relationship with the greenwood.

INTRODUCTION

Like the Middle English love lyrics that employ imagery of the vernal greenwood to establish a vibrant setting and tone, the early ballads of Robin Hood consistently begin with detailed descriptions of the “feyre foreste” (*Robin Hood and the Monk*¹, line 3). The subject of these ballads is rarely love, though, and the setting of the greenwood has important functions and implications that go beyond the typical birds-and-the-bees motif of lyrical poetry. In the larger context of the outlaw ballad tradition as well as in tales of chivalric romance, the greenwood often plays a crucial part. But, as Maurice Keen informs us, Robin Hood and his merry men “belonged to the forest *in a special sense*. . . . it was an asylum from the tyranny of evil lords and a corrupt law” (Keen 2, emphasis added). More than an interesting setting for adventure to take place, the greenwood is integral to the Robin Hood legend.

In fact, sometimes Sherwood and Barnsdale seem more like characters themselves rather than topographical reference points; a narrative reverence of and meditation on the woodland permeate the early Robin Hood ballads and hearken back to

¹ All references in this thesis to Robin Hood ballads (*Robin Hood and the Monk*, *Robin Hood and the Potter*, *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*, and the *Gest of Robin Hood*) are cited from Knight and Ohlgren’s anthology *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000).

something common among the Celts before the advent of Christianity: tree worship.² In general, the Germanic peoples of Europe lived in a relationship of tenuous harmony with the greenwood, a source of pleasure, fear, and frustration. Brian Bates discusses the impact of forests on European life in the first millennium: “Because people lived in them, depended on them for shelter, fuel, weapons, building and carpentry, hunting areas, and much more, they were intimately attached to the forest . . . the forest was treated like a place of magic and power . . . like a great spirit which had to be befriended” (44). Stephen Knight’s description of the later medieval greenwood shows a similar situation: “The woods and forests that surrounded the villages and towns . . . in many ways supplied people’s everyday living, with wood for building and fires, nuts and berries for the table, grazing for their animals, and space for sports and other pleasures” (9). The outlaw heroes and the literary forest they inhabit share an ambivalent relationship, wherein the outlaws find freedom in the greenwood, revering and respecting it, but also begrudging and resentful of the forest at times as well. In *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*, for example, we see Little John bending “a good yeiwe bow . . . made of a tender boughe,” (Line 59, 61) only to curse it in the next stanza when it misfires: “‘Woe worth thee, wicked wood,’ said Litle John, / ‘That ere thou grew on a tree!’” (63-64). This counterpoint highlights the ambivalence of the outlaws’ relationship to the forest, as well as the agency that Little John credits to trees, even in the severed form of his bow.

² See Sir James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: MacMillan, 1951), especially Chapter IX, “The Worship of Trees” and Chapter X, “Relics of Tree-Worship in Modern Europe.”

Thus far, the main body of scholarship devoted to establishing a pagan origin of the Robin Hood legend relies on the legend's association, outside of the literary tradition, with May festivals, games, rituals, and place-names.³ In this thesis, I will argue that in spite of the Christian influence of the early Robin Hood poets, the very setting of the greenwood in the ballads preserves an eradicable trace of the legend's pagan roots. The outlaws in the story are enmeshed within a framework that medieval and early Modern subjects would have identified with superstition, mysticism, and the spirit(s) of the wood. This thesis takes as a starting point that Robin Hood is a mythic figure,⁴ focusing on the way in which his literary incarnation in early ballads casts him not as an archetypal fertility god, or "Green Man," as some have claimed, but as a representative of repressed paganism, through his proximity to and relationship with the greenwood.

³ Many natural land features, such as barrows and stones, are named in Robin's honor, a possible connection with earlier pagan roots. J.W. Walker, in his description of Barnsdale and Sherwood, discusses and describes many of these natural features, such as Robin Hood's Chair, Robin Hood's Stable, and Robin Hood's Well. Little John also has a well named after him (Chapter 3 of *The True History of Robin Hood*, East Ardsley, Wakefield: EP Publishing Limited, 1973).

⁴ This type of treatment is exemplified in Stephen Knight's *Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003). Knight's study looks at Robin Hood as a transhistorical figure, a "potent mythic figure," comparable to other mythic figures like Santa Claus. However, Knight insists that Robin Hood "is always represented as fully human, is always located in a certain form of earthly, and indeed earthy, life" (xii). The plays and games of the common people of Medieval Europe (which Knight collapses into "play game") undoubtedly helped to establish a more mystical identity for Robin Hood, connected to pagan fertility rites.

CHAPTER I

THE FOREST

As scholarly interest in locating the real, “historical” Robin Hood has diminished, recent studies have focused on the cultural history of the myth’s development. Robin Hood scholarship now looks introspectively at itself as a cultural artifact that has developed over the years (Phillips 12). Seeing Robin Hood as a mythic figure, some have gone as far as to call Robin Hood “the Green Man,”⁵ while others claim Robin Hood is a symbol of liminality.⁶ Still others insist on the historicity of Robin Hood (or at least the historicity of the outlaw figure), downplaying mythical or folkloric connections.⁷ A direct connection to a pagan Green Man certainly remains unconvincing to many; however, the coincidence of Robin Hood culture and May Day festivals is undisputed.⁸ Furthermore, although Robin Hood himself is depicted as a devout Christian (though seemingly more devoted to Mary than to Christ), the forest in

⁵ Following Lord Raglan, John Matthews takes this approach in *Robin Hood: Green Lord of the Wildwood* (Glastonbury, England: Gothic Images, 1993). The Green Man is an archetypal representative of springtime vitality.

⁶ See Douglas Gray, “Everybody’s Robin Hood” in Helen Phillips’ *Robin Hood: Medieval and Post-Medieval* (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 2005), and Joseph Falaky Nagy, “The Paradoxes of Robin Hood” in *Folklore* 91.2 (1980): 198-210.

⁷ See Maurice Keen, *The Outlaws of Medieval England* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁸ Lorraine Stock explains, “In the May games of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Robin Hood substituted for the May king and Maid Marian took the role of May queen. These then became the early Robin Hood games or plays, the earliest of which was recorded in 1427 in Exeter, ten years after their first documented May game” (Stock 239).

which he and his outlaws dwell connects the outlaws to pagan roots and traditions. The forest is the natural setting for bandits and outlaws of the period, clearly associated with rebellion against authority in general, but in Robin Hood's legend in particular, the forest also represents the site of a *specific* confrontation against the religious institutionalism of Christianity. Robin Hood's enemies are often hypocritical religious figures; and his close association with the natural greenwood, bound as it was to the surviving rituals of paganism, suggests a critique of the church beyond that of corruption alone.

Reading the Greenwood

The ballad form in early Robin Hood stories is understandably lean, omitting superfluous detail; however, its scant characterization of the characters does not prevent a thorough description of the forest setting. Robin Hood tales date back at least as far as the 1370's, and modern readers perhaps miss what might be the most important character of the all: the greenwood itself, which the poets take considerable time and care to describe. Douglas Gray argues that the lack of physical description, background, and development of characters in early Robin Hood stories likely contributed to the stories' widespread appeal and the dissemination of the myth, because of their adaptability to suit various audiences: "The figures, though starkly differentiated, are not analyzed or given much in the way of explicit characterization or even physical description," so storytellers of later plays and renditions were able to use that ambiguity as a means for improvisation and continual development (Gray 34-35). The unfilled background of the characters is certainly important for the myth's development, but the lack of character development also has the effect, in the ballads, of highlighting the

greenwood's importance over any individual character's. This effect yields two potential implications: the ballads contain a sense of anarchy, or fate, as if the events and characters' actions are transpiring with little direction or purpose; or the perhaps even more subversive alternative, the ballads suggest there *is* a providential hand at work, but the traces of the divine, located in prayers to Mary and in scattered oaths, are overshadowed by the narrative attention given to the greenwood, which hints at the poems' greater allegiance to Nature herself.

The fact that early Robin Hood material opens with springtime imagery seems to align it with certain Middle English lyrical traditions, but the association of Robin Hood with nature furthers an innate—and celebrated—connection between the outlaws and nature rather than a sorrowful (imposed and external) contemplation of exile, such as that in many lyrics. One jilted lover laments, “I must go walke⁹ the wood so wild / And wander here and there / . . . / My bed schall be under the grenwod tree, / A tuft of brakes under my hed / . . . / The running stremes shall be my drinke, / Acorns schall be my fode” (Luria and Hoffman 39, lines 1-2, 11-12, 16-17). This poet uses the greenwood as a symbol of banishment from his lover, but the Robin Hood ballads rather establish a type of love relationship *between* the forest and the outlaws. Both *Robin Hood and the Monk* and *Robin Hood and the Potter*, two of the oldest Robin Hood manuscripts in existence, begin in a very similar way to describe the beauty and serenity of the greenwood setting. *Robin Hood and the Monk*'s description follows:

In somer, when the shawes be sheyne,

⁹ The word “walk” evokes the tradition of forestry and foresters, figures associated intimately with the greenwood. According to A.J. Pollard, “A walk was the division of a forest in the charge of a forester; walking was the act of patrolling that division” (167).

And leves be large and long,

Hit is full mery in feyre foreste

To here the foulys song, (1-4)

As compared to *Robin Hood and the Potter*:

In schomer, when the leves spryng,

The bloschoms on every bowe,

So merey doyt the berdys syng

Yn wodys merey now. (1-4)

An important distinction in the second text is that the “wodys” themselves are described as “mercy,” though the first text suggests only that “hit [it] is full mercy” to hear the birdsong in the woods. We get the sense in the first text that the woods are merry because its components—trees, leaves, blossoms, birds, deer, men—are all merry; but in the second text, the descriptor “mercy” after “wodys” gives a certain agency to the entity (“spirit”?) of the woods, beyond the sum of its living parts. Both texts, however, clearly describe the greenwood in much the same way, undoubtedly variations of the same oral tradition, but their duplication of the exact imagery also implies a consistent characterization of the greenwood, a consistency not nearly as common in the characterization of the actual yeomen of the stories.¹⁰

In addition to giving prominence to the merry forest, these early ballads further diminish the actions of the yeomen by deferring and obscuring their entrance. In both

¹⁰ The status and heroism of even Robin Hood himself is not fully developed at this point. Knight explains, “Arguments with [Little] John and the unsuccessful fighting [against the potter] indicate that Robin in the early ballads is represented as being in some way vulnerable, even fallible. Although he remains leader, this is not by birth or right; it is more like a consensual position” (18). And in *Robin Hood and the Monk*, it is Little John who must come to the rescue of an imprisoned Robin.

texts, the introduction of Robin Hood and Little John does not occur for several lines into the poems. *Robin Hood and the Monk* prolongs this delay through the third stanza, moving beyond description of the birds and trees to include the deer leaving the hills to seek the safety of the shadows “under the grene wode tre” (Line 8). The poet skillfully opens with the description of the deer to imply that Robin Hood and his men are exactly like the deer, seeking safety in shadow among the trees. When the characters are finally introduced, it is not through description but through dialogue. Little John pronounces, “This is a mery morning,” to start a new stanza, following the previous line “And the briddis mery can sing,” as if to suggest that the dialogue itself is the singing of a merry bird, as if Little John is no different from the birds and the deer just described. One can assert that Robin Hood and Little John are flat characters, but the opening stanzas of these poems show that the description is not focused on the men, but on the forest and *its* features. The introduction of the characters is seamless with that of the “natural” descriptions, and the merry men of the forest belong in the greenwood, just as much as anything else there. This sense of belonging, and even passive acquiescence, to the forest highlights the dependency of the outlaws on the provisions of the natural world, and at the same time, their jubilated proclamations illustrate what would best be described as worship—of nature—exalting its goodness and abundance.

The Medieval subject would have understood the forest as a place of mystery and danger as well as being an integral factor in everyday existence and survival¹¹; such

¹¹ Corinne J. Saunders explains that the literary forest “draws at the same time upon the contemporary reality of the actual forest and upon the universal and archetypal” (xii) and that “the narrative manipulation of the different traditions associated with the forest, and of the interplay between real and symbolic, creates a many-layered, often ambiguous romance landscape” (132).

a perception would manifest a paradoxical culture of both fear of and reliance on the forest. Robin Hood and his merry men, who live in this “liminal” space, become mythical representatives of a providential yet unfathomable nature. “At the edge of the *ordinary* world” (Gray 39, emphasis added), the forest of Robin Hood disrupts orthodox ideas of hierarchy and order. Douglas Gray identifies the ordinary Robin Hood in everybody, claiming “he can become all things to all men” (22), but complicates his claim with the suggestion that the forest itself also has a mythic quality, a complication that warrants further exploration. Gray’s suggestion does more than imply that Robin Hood’s forest can also “become all things to all men” because the myth of Robin Hood is inseparable from the greenwood. In the ballads, there is an intimate connection between Robin Hood and location (forest), an intertwining of man and nature. Blurring nature and culture has been recognized as an essential element in the Robin Hood myth.¹² However, this conflation of nature and culture, clearly in evidence in the early ballads, can be best seen as an indication of the retention of elements of paganism and animism within a monotheistic Christian worldview.

Orality and Political Allegory

In addition to the predominant forest setting, the form of early Robin Hood tales—orally memorized and transmitted—may have helped to preserve pagan traditions that resisted a rising culture of literacy and the ecclesiastical notion of “authentic” texts. While the earliest extant Robin Hood texts have been dated to the late

¹² Nagy notes of the outlaws’ established meeting place in the *Gest of Robin Hood*: “The ‘trystell tree’ is a symbol of both the natural environment in which the outlaws live and also of the agreements with exist among them or between Robin and others – it is paradoxically a symbol of both nature and social order” (204).

fifteenth century, oral narratives were in popular circulation as early as 1377.¹³ R.B. Dobson claims that “the Robin Hood legend as we know it was primarily the outcome of a process of slow and largely improvised evolution and accretion” (66), and Nancy M. Bradbury explains that “nearly all surviving English romances either reflect or imitate the conditions of performance before a listening audience: either way, oral performance, real or fictionally evoked, is an aspect of their narrative art” (3). So although the “original” content of the Robin Hood stories may be lost as a result of their transmission from the oral to the written form, the extant texts still contain and showcase elements of their oral beginnings, products of a folk culture that accepted Christianity but nonetheless retained and reinvented many aspects of pre-Christian customs. As Richard Cavendish explains, “Medieval folk magic mingled Christianity with survivals from the older pagan world” (52), not the least of which were the Morris dances¹⁴ and other springtime rituals associated with the Robin Hood tradition.

Additionally, the conditions of orality itself, often necessitating simple rhymes to facilitate both memorization and audience reception, helped provide a medium that further reinforces the natural greenwood setting through repetition. The many “tree” words, handy for end rhymes, densely populate the landscape of the poetry, and the characterization of the outlaws is all but lost in the immensity of Sherwood and

¹³ Referenced in William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*. In the context of the poem, the secular Robin Hood “rhymes” are an obvious disruption, if not a threat, to the somber mission of the clergy.

¹⁴ John Matthews claims, “The Morris Dances and the Robin Hood plays developed along quite different lines, having begun more or less in the same way (and at the same time). Both grew out of folk-memories of older, ritual acts, preserved in this way against the encroachment of Christianity ... to such an extent were the two traditions married that many of the Mumming Plays began to be plays solely about Robin Hood and are even referred to as such in contemporary records” (Matthews 117).

Barnsdale, sacrificed, as it were, to the greenwood. The poet of *Robin Hood and the Monk* painted the forest with lines like “Under the grene wode tre,” (Line 8) “Under the levys smale,” (Line 144) and many other variants, constantly reinforcing the greenwood setting around the characters’ actions and the movement of the plot. Ballads’ plots move forward haltingly, among these marker words, just as the outlaws themselves might have moved stealthily among the trees. Literary scholars refer to such formal devices as “incantatory repetition” and “employment of a so-called ‘leaping and lingering’ technique” (Dobson 67), rhetorical strategies frequently used in delivering texts orally. Being able to read these structures of repetition in the early ballads as “incantatory” is suggestive. The outlaw ballads or “talkings,”¹⁵ in their oral delivery, may have functioned like the casting of a spell over an audience, what could be considered a folk ritual alternative to the many repetitious clerical rituals enforced on the people via the institutions of the church. Cavendish notes, “The Roman Catholic priest, as a specialist in the sacred, acquired a magical mystique . . . A major factor in creating the mystique of the priesthood was the Mass, which over the centuries gained the most formidable magical reputation of all Christian ceremonies” (50-51). As much as Robin Hood and similar stories were censured by church officials,¹⁶ such condemnation may have arisen as a result of more than simply their secular or vulgar content. The oral form of Robin Hood texts has the potential to invoke a litany of its own, to reinforce through its vernal repetitions not a meditation on God but on nature.

¹⁵ *Robin Hood and the Monk*’s final stanza begins, “Thus endys the talking of the munke / And Robin Hood . . .” (Lines 355-56), implying the oral nature of the ballad.

¹⁶ For example, in 1549, Bishop Hugh Latimer complained of a lack of church attendance in Worcester as a result of “Robyn hoodes day” (Knight 4), clearly competing with officially sanctioned Christian rituals.

Robin Hood texts may also have been condemned by some in the church because of their egalitarian appeal and potential for inspiring insurrection. Lively debates surround the possibility that Robin Hood's literary resistance symbolized actual events in the late medieval period,¹⁷ but whether or not historians can identify a direct political parallel, the concept of political allegory is relevant to the argument that Robin Hood texts contain a subtle critique of organized religion, enmeshed as religion was within medieval European politics. Ann Astell explains, regarding the so-called Peasant's Revolt of 1381: "We must conclude that rebels such as John Ball hoped that their cryptic messages would be understood by their collaborators and misunderstood by their enemies" (21). Regardless of well-founded speculations and enlightening studies, there is no clear evidence for a connection between Robin Hood stories and any specific historical event; however, in a general sense, the literary Robin Hood is not so different from John Ball and his pseudonymic rebels (including a reference to "Hob" the Robber), whose literary existence coincide with a historical one. Like the names of "Peres Ploughman" or "John Trewman" in the John Ball letters, the name of Robin Hood, regardless of origin, came to signify a popular stereotype. R.B. Dobson posits, regarding the origin of Robin Hood legend:

¹⁷ In *Peasants, Knights, and Heretics* (Cambridge University Press, 1976), edited by R.H. Hilton, several essays are presented in tandem to illustrate the ongoing debate concerning the relevance of the Robin Hood ballads to the uprising of 1381. Maurice Keen represents the view that Robin Hood was a hero of the common people and that the ballads depict the conditions that led to the revolt. Keen, however, recants much of this position in the introduction to his book *The Outlaws of Medieval England*, as a result of persuasive arguments made to the contrary by J.C. Holt, who demonstrates that, while Robin Hood ballads took on many forms and had various audiences, they probably did not incite the peasant revolts of 1381 and that "the Robin Hood ballads were originally the literature, not of a discontented peasantry, but of the gentry" (237).

How should one react to the proposition that before the 1260's the name "Robin Hood" or "Robehod" was in common use as a nickname for a fugitive or outlaw? . . . a popular nickname within a medieval context rarely needs to imply a developed legend, but more often an eye – or an ear – for its possible symbolism as well as its emotional appeal and resonance. (76)

Whether or not one accepts the idea that the name "Robin Hood" could have developed independently of the legend recorded in the ballads, this theory corroborates that it is the *interplay* of oral and literate culture that produces a common mythic figure. In the case of early Robin Hood stories, this common figure represents cunning and trickery, values more or less antithetical to church doctrine; and in belonging to the greenwood setting, Robin Hood would have been established not only as *outlaw* in the minds of the audience but also as liminal, wild, and connected with lingering spiritual forces still inhabiting that domain. And while the Robin Hood poets may not have consciously hidden subversive messages between the lines and stanzas, they may have been close enough to the folk traditions perpetuating the legend that did contain such a meaning and significance for the greenwood, a meaning that has survived in part in the written Robin Hood texts. Knight reminds us of the importance of the greenwood to the early folk culture of the Robin Hood tradition: "[There are] about two hundred references to Robin Hood up to 1600; well over one hundred were to some form of a Robin Hood play-game . . . The *play game Robin Hood* and the bold *outlaw story* share a strong connection to nature . . . associated with the woods and forests that surrounded the villages and towns" (9, emphasis added). The unifying factor between the earliest recorded Robin Hood tales and the preexisting oral culture appears to be, indeed, the

greenwood. This link points to the concept of a shared popular culture. In Bradbury's words, "Because they are stories, not direct statements about social abuses, the outlaw tales rely for their impact on humor, parodic reversal, and other carnivalesque strategies¹⁸ characteristic of folk culture's response to the official culture of medieval institutions" (30, emphasis added), a large part of which, of course, being ecclesiastical. Bradbury emphasizes the stories' social reach in a *general* sense, indicating their ambivalent value as resistant texts that nonetheless reached across classes of people to form a popular narrative.

Thus, the Robin Hood texts inhabit yet another liminal space in a cross-section of allegory and oral folk culture, insofar as both require that the "audience share a set of generic expectations, based on their familiarity with authoritative models. It [composing allegory] implies the allegorist's knowledge of the cultural memory of his audience(s)—that is to say, their power to recall narratives, to recite ordered lists of things, to recognize iconographic images and ritual actions, and so on" (Astell 23). These prerequisites for allegory are equally applicable to oral storytelling. Ultimately, the argument that the early Robin Hood stories carry an element of paganism rests on an assumption that the poets shared certain expectations with their audiences and assumed they would "recognize iconographic images and ritual actions" as embodied in the "image" of the greenwood and the "ritual actions" of the yeomen, which were

¹⁸ Bradbury follows Bakhtin's conceptions of the carnivalesque in her analysis of late medieval outlaw stories, focusing on the *The Tale of Gamelyn*. She defines "popular" tales as belonging "like common proverbs and other folkloric items, to the shared portion of the culture, the portion that required for access no specialized education" (28).

repeatedly acted out during the plays and games in the literal greenwood, as they were reflected in the literary greenwood of written text.

CHAPTER II

THE TREES

Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne, another early ballad, begins with the familiar spring forest motif, mirroring almost perfectly *Robin Hood and the Monk*:

When shawes beene sheene and shradds full fayre,
And leeves both large and longe,
Itt is merry, walking in the fayre forrest,
To heare the small birds singe. (1-4)

As in *Robin Hood and the Monk*, this ballad forgoes formal introduction of characters and opens into dialogue, this time by Robin, who awakens out of a dream that two yeomen had beaten him and taken away his bow. The dream motif¹⁹ – reminiscent of Piers Plowman's allegorical vision, which also takes place on a spring morning – strengthens the possibility of reading the ballads both mythically and allegorically. Although, as Gray rightly indicates (22-23), the Robin Hood ballads differ from romances in that they are largely devoid of magic and mysticism, *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne* in particular gives us the indication that we should not always read the ballads in a literal or straightforward fashion.

¹⁹ Knight and Ohlgren note the prevalence of dream lore as a theme in Middle English poetry (181), but its appearance in *Guy of Gisborne* is atypical for early Robin Hood texts.

The “Psychology” of the Greenwood

The poet juxtaposes the uncharacteristic dream opening against scenes of irrational vengeance and murder, expressed through graphic images. It could be argued that this particular ballad makes use of violence in order to “contain” it under the figurative boughs and within the literal leaves of the text. When Robin vows revenge against his imaginary perpetrators, Little John warns him, “Sweavens [dreams] are swift master . . . / As the wind that blowes ore a hill, / For if itt be never soe lowde this night, / To-morrow it may be still” (Lines 13-16). The action that follows is quick-paced, visceral, and descriptively violent, but Robin’s dream and John’s warning at the beginning of the poem frame the poem’s subsequent action, suggesting that John’s advice to Robin not to take the dream literally should apply to what follows: the unnecessarily violent – at times certainly dreamlike – events composing the ballad’s plot. Knight and Ohlgren claim that “the whole encounter has elements of natural myth about it, suggested rather than expressed” (171), evidenced perhaps in Little John’s analogy comparing dreams to the coming and going of wind over the hillside. And like other ballads, the beginning of *Guy of Gisborne* immerses the characters and their actions in the natural setting of the greenwood. But even more than *Robin Hood and the Monk*, this ballad seems to tell the greenwood’s story, using the characters as additional props for an already profuse forest. Little John’s description of the swift wind complements the fast pace of the ballad, but furthermore, it underscores the ephemeral lives and actions of the merry men: they come and go like wind in the boughs of the greenwood.

The visceral violence of this ballad humanizes it, grounding it with a sense of the harshness of reality, but it simultaneously levels the exploits of the various yeomen into a general sense of temporal, debased humanity, insignificant in respect to an eternal greenwood. Keen claims that the violent tone of outlaw ballads “reveals their authors as realists: their forests are peopled with brigands who really did exist, not imaginary goblins and enchanters” (6). While it is true that outlaws did make use of the forests, the literary legacy of Robin Hood reflects this “real” history only so far. The absence of “goblins and enchanters” does not necessarily make the poets of the early ballads “realists.” Violence was an undeniably real threat associated with the greenwood, especially certain infamous areas. However, the hyperbolic violence of *Guy of Gisborne* parodies that threat, creating a literary greenwood that allows and contains the extreme violence, simultaneously creating a kind of equality among its characters as it levels them all under the greenwood trees. In this early ballad, Robin Hood has not clearly been established as a “good” outlaw who robs from the rich and gives to the poor. Robin Hood kills Guy of Gisborne, another yeoman, who lives in basically the same manner as the “hero” outlaws. Guy’s only apparent crime, which results in his demise, seems to be choosing not to side with Robin. One implication of this leveling of characters is that the lives of the yeomen are miniscule in comparison to the broad scope and forces of nature; but furthermore, the way the opening dream frames the rest of the text, it could be said that their actions are even less significant. Little John’s association of dreams with nature suggests that the deeds of the yeomen are nothing more than dreams of the forest. The extremity of the yeomen’s nightmarish violence against one another is, like Little John’s description of Robin’s dream, “lowde this

night,” but “tomorrow it may be still”; whatever effect of realism the violence might achieve is subsumed by the message that these bloody actions are only a tremor on the greenwood’s dreamscape.

Nightmare and Irony

The ballad also ends with a gruesome image, that of Little John’s arrow through the Sheriff of Nottingham’s heart, but the black humor and irony of these violent episodes come out in Robin’s speech to the slain Guy: “Lye there, lye there, good Sir Guye, / And with me be not wrothe; / If thou have had the worse stroakes at my hand, / Thou shalt have the better cloathe” (Lines 171-174). Robin exchanges clothes with Sir Guy to advance the ballad’s plot, in order to deceive the Sheriff, but there are some important details to take note of here. The term “good” as applied to Guy seems ironic, yet Robin refers to him as “good fellow” several times before he kills him (perhaps out of courtesy or perhaps to reinforce the dramatic suspense before Robin and Guy reveal their identities to one another) but tellingly, the poet himself refers to “Good Sir Guy” (Line 162). “Good” more likely implies the equal standing and similarity of these two figures. There is a sort of camaraderie between the two when Guy pronounces, “Gods blessing on thy heart! . . . / Goode fellow, thy shooting is goode” (127-128), and the parrying of the word “good” between the two outlaws is reminiscent of the common phrase “Good even, good Robin Hood” (Knight 7), an obligatory phrase of politeness, uttered by travelers wary of being robbed. On common footing, the yeomen constantly hail each other as “good sir,” and, in a practical sense, they *are* “good” insofar as one does not kill the other. Robin hails Guy as “good” after his death because Guy still has some purpose to serve in deceiving the Sheriff. Robin’s ironic phrase that “Thou shalt

have the better cloathe” further substantiates the substitutability of the outlaws in this early ballad. Robin takes on Guy’s trappings, “clad in his capull-hyde” (Line 194), even as he bestows his “gowne of greene” (175) upon the slain yeoman. Additionally, both Robin and Guy bear horns for calling out to nearby friends, and Robin is able to lure in the Sheriff by blowing Guy’s horn. But the ultimate irony of the escapade is not that the deceased Guy will have no use for Robin’s “better cloathe,” but that the villains and the heroes are truly interchangeable, the only difference being who dies in the end. Unlike the *Gest*, which claims, “he was a good outlawe, And dyde pore men moch god” (1822-23), this ballad aspires to no such lofty ideals. Robin’s faith sets him apart, but only scantily, and the death of the Sheriff does not elicit a clear liberation of the oppressed, as later texts do. The deaths in the ballad, by today’s standards, might be called gratuitous or pointless, violent for violence’ sake, but not so in the context of seeing human actions as secondary to the broader message that the forest is supreme, taking and giving life as it may.

The poet’s embedding of the ballad’s action into the natural greenwood setting does not appear only in the context of the dream/violence motif, but in fact, it overflows throughout the narrative textually. Even more than *Robin Hood and the Monk*, this ballad seems to cast the greenwood as its principal actor. The green trees and even the color green appear as prominently as, if not more than, the characters: “For Ille goe seeke yond wight yeomen / In greenwood where the bee / The cast on their gowne of greene, / A shooting gone are they, / Until they came to the merry greenwood, / Where they had gladdest bee / There were the ware of wight yeoman / His body leaned to a tree” (Lines 19 – 26). A few lines later, John urges his master to stand “under this trusty

tree,” and the subsequent scenes of action and fighting are interrupted with the poet’s acknowledgement that bows derive originally from trees. Little John speaks to the bow and curses it when it fails him. In *The Golden Bough*, Frazer describes several instances of tribal people talking to trees (or tree-spirits) in various ritualistic circumstances. Little John’s expression of anger toward his uncooperative bow fits the following description in *The Golden Bough*:

The spirits of vegetation are not always treated with deference and respect. If fair words and kind treatment do not move them, stronger measures are sometimes resorted to . . . one of the local sorcerers would take a hatchet and deliver several shrewd blows on the trunk of the most barren of the trees, saying, “Will you now bear fruit or not? If you do not, I shall fell you.” (Frazer 131)

The fact that John talks to his bow as if it were still a living tree is consistent with certain folk beliefs as well: “Even when a tree has been felled, sawn into planks, and used to build a house, it is possible the woodland spirit may still be lurking in the timber” (Frazer 135). Ironically, John is later bound to a tree, perhaps the forest’s punishment for him because of his earlier curses. Finally, Robin’s proclamation “My dwelling is in the wood” (139) highlights his allegiance to the greenwood,²⁰ a greater allegiance than to Little John, whom he abandons after an argument.

²⁰ Also seen at the end of the *Gest* when Robin Hood leaves his position in the king’s court to return to the greenwood.

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

While Enlightenment ideals and a clumsy aristocratic slant find their way into later renditions of Robin Hood, the oldest texts present a chaotic world of outlaws, filled with both humor and violence, in which the highest “good” is the plunder that Robin and his men can bring back to the greenwood. Though not explicit, the ballads present a pre-Christian world of fate, encoded within institutions of Christendom. But in the midst of this anarchy, the ballads offer too a glimpse of utopian brotherhood. Gray notes that social relationships of the outlaws are “opposed to structure, preferring an unmediated relationship between person and person; the greenwood band is a kind of ‘order’ or fraternity” (38). The relationships of the outlaws to one another, as well as to the greenwood, are immediate even if they are ambivalent. Oral culture, preserved as it is to an extent in the ballads, also expresses a philosophy of immediacy that challenged the layers of mediation in hierarchical Catholicism and the preeminence of written texts. The move to a first-person narrator, begun with the compilation of Robin Hood texts in the *Gest*, illustrates the focus shifting not only toward early Modern concerns of authorship and authenticity but also away from the idea that the greenwood is a place of relative permanence in contrast to the passing souls of the hapless yeomen as seen in the *Guy of Gisborne*, where “The woodweele sange, and wold not cease” (Line 5) and

where yeomen “cast on their gowne of greene” (Line 21) to become a part of the forest for only a short time.

The early ballads carry an element of nostalgia for conditions of previous eras, but they also hold the potential for future transformations and reincarnations of the myth, demonstrating another dimension of Robin Hood’s liminal quality. Pollard argues, “While the world of Robin Hood the forester was familiar, paradoxically the conflict in which the legendary figure was involved [hunting rights] was, when the ballads were first set down, both a thing of the past and of the future” (168). In other words, the importance of hunting rights was not pivotal at the time the Robin Hood ballads addressed them; however, the Robin Hood stories helped people to remember there was such an issue, one that would surface again at a later point in time. Nostalgia for liberal hunting regulations would have existed in tandem with a nostalgia for erstwhile pagan traditions transmitted by folk culture and embedded within compromises made by the church involving holiday practices. Furthermore, Knight identifies the Robin Hood myth as being most active during periods of oppressive governments, acting “as a safety valve, as the reflex of genuine political resistance to oppression” (209), suggesting that the “true” Robin Hood, the actual spirit of dissidence, is best glimpsed as an encoded figure within official representations of him that seek to contain and restrain that force.

It is difficult to say whether or not the myth of Robin Hood, in any of its incarnations, will get us back to the idea of a living forest to be respected and revered. Regarding Robin Hood’s present status, Michael Eaton claims that “he is no longer a secular hero for political radicals but a pagan supernatural spirit of the Wild Wood”

(86). Eaton suggests that a “New Age” persona best fits Robin Hood in our current, environmentally conscious era. But the liminal figure of Robin Hood continually presents us with a mystery. With the liminal action of the myth, perhaps he can be a “secular” figure of popular resistance, even as he represents a return to a kind of nature worship, or at least eco-consciousness. Robin Hood’s liminality makes him a hybrid figure, challenging and transcending strict binary oppositions. Although Robin Hood is openly hostile to corrupt abbots and clergymen, his desire to go to mass and his allegiance to Mary show that he is not strictly anti-religious. “Green Man” arguments cast Robin Hood as an archetypal nature deity who renews life in the spring, yet his stories are unequivocally human, if not downright vulgar. While the early ballads of Robin Hood do not incite an explicit return to ancient tree worship, they do advocate a kind of authentic, unmediated humanity that coexists with nature, resisting hierarchical institutional structures that fabricate a superficial separation between people and their environment.

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In another article called *Missing the trees for the forest*, Yvain says "when people consider an idea in isolation, they tend to make good decisions. When they consider an idea a symbol of a vast overarching narrative, they tend to make very bad decisions." A more complete analysis appears in another article called "Missing the trees for the forest: a construal level account of the illusion of explanatory depth". The authors write: "An illusion of explanatory depth (IOED) occurs when people believe they understand a concept more deeply than they actually do. Robin's urgent call shattered the more or less peaceful camaraderie of a quiet afternoon. As Robin burst into view, Allan looked up from across the camp where he had been pretending to help Will fletch arrows. Will had been alternately smirking and scowling at his friend's antics as various tools went missing only to reappear in unexpected and increasingly ridiculous places." Allan's attention wandered while Robin described a wound to the head and possible broken bones. His understanding of herbs and healing and the setting of bones was minimal, his interest limited to his own happily infrequent requirements in these areas. Robin Hood was born near the end of the 12th century. His real name was Robert. He was the son of the Earl of Huntingdon. Robin Hood became the best archer in the region. In the forest, Robin and his men practised with their bows and arrows. Robin cut a long branch from a tree and made a staff. Then he began to fight on the bridge. Robin was fast and light. Learn More about miss the forest for the trees. Share miss the forest for the trees. Post the Definition of miss the forest for the trees to Facebook Share the Definition of miss the forest for the trees on Twitter. Dictionary Entries near miss the forest for the trees. misspent youth. misstate. misstep. miss the forest for the trees. misstrike. misstruck. missus. See More Nearby Entries. Statistics for miss the forest for the trees. Look-up Popularity. What made you want to look up miss the forest for the trees? Please tell us where you read or heard it (including the quote, if possible). Show Comments Hide Comments. Word of the day. devious. See Definitions and Examples ». Get Word of the Day daily email! Test Your Vocabulary. Name that Thing: Toys and Games Edition.