

Robin Hood “Under the Greenwood Tree”:
Peasants’ Revolt and the Making of a Medieval
Legend

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England in the fourteenth century was in a transitional phase, experiencing social changes as a result of multiple factors, including an outbreak of the plague in 1348, the ongoing Hundred Years War, and challenges to traditional societal organization. The Peasants' Revolt was one of the results of these stresses, when in the summer of 1381 rebels marched to and gained control of London. The chronicles written at the time of the revolt reveal that the rebels expressed many of the same ideals that resonate in the Robin Hood ballads written following the revolt. These revolve around the clergy and religion, social and political power relations, economic disparity between the haves and have-nots, and loyalty to the king. While the revolt ultimately failed, it led to the coalescing of the Robin Hood motifs, and turned a popular folk figure into a representation of the rebels' desired changes. The ballads of Robin Hood allowed the rebels to express their aspirations that became an important contribution to English culture and literature by the lower classes. In the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, Englishmen and women expressed their dissatisfaction with the government as people from different areas and social classes came together and demonstrated their desire for a more egalitarian society, without the governance of corrupt nobles and clergymen. While the 1381 Peasants' Revolt ultimately failed, it led to the inclusion of the peasants' aims into the earliest medieval Robin Hood ballads. Through these ballads and the mythical character of Robin Hood, lower class rebels had an impact on society in medieval and early modern England.

The Peasants' Revolt can best be understood within the context of the tensions of the late Middle Ages. This was a period of evolution and social unrest fueled by changes in warfare, economic and demographic patterns, and increased bureaucratization of church and state.¹ When the plague first arrived in England in the

¹ C. Warren Hollister, *The Making of England: 55 BC to 1399* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1992), 253.

years 1348 to 1349, in addition to killing one third of the population, it contributed to events that echoed through the next hundred years. With peasants decimated by the plague, England began to experience a reduced labor force. As a result, the peasants began to demand higher wages. Nobles viewed the increasing wages as a threat to their long established control and way of life. They pressured Parliament and the king to put a limit on the money paid to peasants for their labor and to limit their use of resources such as forests and mills. As a result, Parliament created the Statute of Labourers in 1351. This limited wages to the level paid in the years 1346 to 1347.² The Statute of Labourers also sought to control the movement of the peasants and to prevent peasants from acquiring jobs that illegally paid higher salaries.³

Another destabilizing factor in late medieval society was a new kind of long-term, large-scale warfare, most dramatically evidenced in the Hundred Years War between France and England.⁴ England won several victories earlier in the war, but that changed by the time Richard II became king in 1377 at the age of eleven. The French began to raid England's coast and peace negotiations fell through.⁵ As England lost ground to France, the government needed more revenues to support the war effort. Parliament dealt with this by charging the poll taxes.⁶ The first poll tax was in 1377, put into place by John of Gaunt, uncle and chancellor to Richard II. Two years later, in 1379, Parliament agreed on a second poll tax. The terms of this tariff were more unusual than in the past because it taxed the English people based on their professions: from the

² "The Statue of Labourers," in *The Peasant's Revolt of 1381*, ed. R.B. Dobson 2nd ed. (London: The Macmillan Press, Ltd, 1986), 64.

³ "The Statue of Labourers," 65.

⁴ The Hundred Years War fought by England and France was a series of conflicts that occurred between 1337 and 1453. The war began as a result of rival claims to the throne of France between Edward III of England and Philip VI of France.

⁵ "Vita Ricardi II," in *The Peasant's Revolt of 1381* 91.

⁶ A poll tax is a head tax.

dukes of Lancaster and Brittany, who each paid 10 marks to the various categories of peasantry who paid 4d.⁷

The taxes collected from the second poll tax fell far short of the amount expected by Parliament, so a third poll tax was enacted in December 1380. This tax was stricter than previous ones. Under it, all men and women over the age of fifteen were required to pay three groats.⁸ Hostile peasants, who believed they had already paid enough, began to band together. The 1381 Peasants' Revolt began in the south of England, where the peasants felt that the previous taxes were improperly collected and the third poll tax was just an excuse for the bureaucracy of England to take and misuse more of their money.⁹ The rebels began to attack nearby manors as they marched to London.¹⁰

The rebels quickly gained access to the city when they arrived in London and sacked many churches and residences. The rebels also demanded to meet young King Richard, with the intention of freeing him from the "evil influences" of his councilors. The king, who had moved into the Tower of London with his council for protection, agreed to a meeting. At the meeting, held outside the city wall at Mile End, the rebels presented their demands to the king. These included allowing the rebels to arrest and try all men whom they considered traitors, as well as demanding the abolition of serfdom.¹¹ Seeing no other choice, the king agreed to grant them a charter.

The rebels continued to hunt down their targets in London, even gaining access to the fortified Tower of London, while they waited for Richard to deliver the charter. A second meeting took place at Smithfield, where the rebel leader, Wat Tyler, parleyed with the king. Accounts of what occurred vary in the chronicles, but in the end, members

⁷ *Anonimale Chronicles* in *The Peasant's Revolt of 1381* 109-110. The symbol *d* stands for pence. Prior to the decimalization of British currency in 1971, 240 pence equaled one pound. A mark was worth 160 pence.

⁸ "Rolls of Parliament," in *The Peasant's Revolt of 1381* 117. One groat was worth four pence.

⁹ *Anonimale Chronicle*, 123-124.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

of the king's retinue killed Tyler. Because the meeting was held in an open field, the rebels saw the murder and began to get restless. King Richard rode to the rebels and pacified them. He convinced the commons to take their charters and return home, which many of them did. With most of the rebels out of London, the nobles began to crack down on those remaining in the capitol. Accused ringleaders such as John Ball were tried, found guilty, and executed.

The sources for the Peasants' Revolt are limited. They largely consist of historical narratives in the form of chronicles, charter evidence, tax records, and pipe rolls, or rolls of Parliament. Because during the medieval period those who had the ability to write records that were to be preserved were either nobles or upper clergy, sources are generally biased towards the ruling classes. Even the author of the *Anonimale Chronicle*, considered to be the most accurate source on the Peasants' Revolt, is believed to have been a member of the king's entourage at court when the events occurred.¹² As a result, these men were often biased against the rebels and inclined to show them and their actions in a negative light. Another distorting factor is that, consistent with the norms of the genre, chroniclers were inclined to enlarge upon events. This is, especially true of Jean Froissart, who wrote his accounts in early 1388, based on interviews of those present at the events.¹³ Thomas Walsingham, a member of the clergy of St. Albans, tended to speculate widely about the ultimate goals of the rebels.¹⁴ The chronicler Henry Knighton, a canon of St. Mary's Abbey in Leicester, is said to have made several mistakes, in both the identification of the rebel leaders and the chronology of events.¹⁵

¹² R.B. Dobson *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1986), 123, 155.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 137, 187.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3, 137, 168.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 135, 180.

The prejudice against the commons is continued in the other sources from the time. Rolls of Parliament were inclined to show the actions enacted by the Houses of Lords and Commons as justified by the current state of England.¹⁶ And the court records of the trials of rebel leaders, which took place following the hysteria of the uprising, were of course biased in favor of those prosecuting the accused.¹⁷ This prejudice is also found in the charters and tax records that date to this period. An exception is King Richard II's charter granting the rebels' demands. This charter was revoked as soon as the nobility had control of the situation, "for the good of [the king] and the realm."¹⁸ Despite the partiality of the sources, and while it is important not to take everything written at face value, the chroniclers were witnesses, so through their writing it is possible to gain an understanding of the events that comprised the uprising. Also, while they may be biased, they provide most of the few extant records.

Historiography of the 1381 Peasants' Revolt in fourteenth-century England has evolved with the development of the social sciences and the field of social history in the twentieth century. Scholarly opinion has gone from a negative view of the peasants daring to rise against the proper established social order, to a recognition that there were people from many social classes representing many aspects of society involved in the revolt, and multiple and often very legitimate agendas. Indeed, the Marxist interpretation of the revolt applauds the class-consciousness of the "peasants." Charles Oman represents the earliest of these trends. He was a positivist historian, believing that historical study must be limited by directly accessible facts, and must not search for causes from an outside source.¹⁹ Because of the limited primary documents from the

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 319.

¹⁸ Rolls of Parliament in *English Historical Documents, Vol. IV, 1327-1485*. eds. David C. Douglas and A.R. Myers, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969) 142.

¹⁹ Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob. *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: W.W.Norton And Company, 1995), 73, 234.

Peasants' Revolt, basically accounts written by aristocrats, Oman portrays the court as reluctant to instate the tax and is unwilling to acknowledge that there might have been justification for the actions of the rebels.²⁰ Oman does not deconstruct the sources, nor does he apply interpretative lenses like later schools of history would. Instead, Oman takes the written sources at face value and accepts their account of the event that occurred in 1381.

More recently, social historians have worked to gain a greater understanding of the motives of the rebels. P.J.P. Goldberg, in his book *Medieval England: A Social History*, aligns himself with other social historians, arguing that the 1381 Peasants' Revolt occurred as a result of the provocation of the third poll tax, but also that the revolt is incorrectly named because it was not just peasants involved. Goldberg notes that this was not a revolt of the landless and impoverished peasants who were seeking a radical, new distribution of wealth, nor was it made up solely of servile peasantry revolting against their legal status.²¹ He recognizes that there was strong involvement of the artisan and urban lower classes. This is an important observation in terms of how the Robin Hood ballads came to reflect the rebels' interests.

Historians have also applied a Marxist interpretation with regards to the Peasants' Revolt. Both Rodney Hilton, and more recently Mark O'Brien, use this hermeneutical lens to the revolt and view the revolt as an example of the dialectic confrontation that developed between classes as a result of the fiscal pressures of the poll tax on the peasant class. This differs from the social scientist view of historians such as Goldberg, because the Marxist interpretation argues that the peasants were aware of themselves as a class and sought to control the means of production, overthrowing all other classes that were oppressing them. These pressures caused

²⁰ Charles Oman, *The Great Revolt of 1381* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969) 22.

²¹ P.J.P Goldberg, *Medieval England: A Social History 1250-1550* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 178

rising tensions between the lords and peasantry that came to a head in June of 1381.²² Marxist interpretations assume that the revolt was not a chance occurrence, unlike the positivist school of thought would have it, but the result of inexorable social processes. Under the Marxist interpretation, the villeins were reacting to economic changes and were beginning to develop class-consciousness and a new notion of their collective power as laborers.²³ Marxists believe this to be evident that the peasants became more class-conscious, when they brought the government of England to a stop in the Peasants' Revolt.

Much of the scholarship written about Robin Hood takes a Marxist approach, focusing on the outlaw robbing the rich to give to the poor. However, scholars tend to focus on different themes that relate to Robin Hood. One of the most common of these is to ascertain the historicity of Robin Hood. Scholars prior to the twentieth century, such as Martin Parker, Joseph Hunter, and Joseph Ritson examine records and take advantage of the appearance of the name Robin Hood to claim there was a historical figure that was the inspiration for the ballads.²⁴ That has changed in the last fifty years however. Now scholars such as Stephen Knight have arrived at the conclusion that Robin Hood is a conglomeration of local myths, instead of being based on one historical figure.²⁵ However, Knight does not specify the levels of society from which the myths emanated. This is a second question commonly examined. Maurice Keen compares the Robin Hood ballads with other late medieval outlaw tales and argues that they were intended for a lower class audience.²⁶ J.C. Holt however, considers the intended

²² Rodney Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 164. Mark O'Brien, *When Adam Delved and Eve Span: A History of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (New York: New Clarion Press, 2004), 81.

²³ Villeins are a class of medieval peasants who were the equivalent of serfs when dealing with their lord, but freemen in all other aspects.

²⁴ Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 23, 22, 17.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁶ Maurice Keen, *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 95.

audience of the ballads to have been the upper classes based on the way certain characteristics are written into the ballads such as descriptions of court, knowledge of the duties of a lord, and an acquaintance with courtly behavior.²⁷ Thomas Ohlgren examines each of the three fourteenth century ballads and argues that, based on the content of each ballad, members of the growing middle class such as merchants commissioned them.²⁸ A.J. Pollard takes a middle path by stating the earliest versions of Robin Hood were presented in multiple ways, appealing to different levels of society while conveying a cynicism about the intentions of those in power to the audiences.²⁹

Many of the scholars who examine the Robin Hood ballads focus on those written following the sixteenth century, when the Robin Hood figure began to develop into the Early of Huntingdon, liege to Richard the Lionhearted, who robbed from the rich to give to the poor. Those works dedicate only a chapter or two to the late medieval version of Robin Hood, in part due to limited amount of sources from late medieval England. Some medieval scholars mention the 1381 Peasants' Revolt, such as Maurice Keen in his examination of medieval outlaw ballads. However, there is little discussion of the ways in which the ballads relate to the revolt. In this paper, I will examine the link between the Peasants' Revolt and the Robin Hood ballads by demonstrating the connection between them. My methodology is to isolate the three ballads written following the revolt and examine the relationship between the uprising in 1381 and the creation of the written Robin Hood ballads by examination of internal evidence. I argue that the Peasants' Revolt brought about the coalescing of fragmentary ideas of Robin Hood found in popular culture before 1381 into the three ballads that were written in the period following the revolt. The chronicles record that the rebels expressed ideals such

²⁷ J.C. Holt, *Robin Hood* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 110.

²⁸ Thomas Ohlgren, *Robin Hood: The Early Poems* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007), 21.

²⁹ A.J. Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood* (New York: Routledge 2004), 211.

as anti-clericalism, critique of nobility, loyalty to the king, and the goal of a more egalitarian society, and the earliest three Robin Hood ballads, which emerged from and circulated among the peasantry and urban artisan rebels, reflect this.

In the late fourteenth century, literacy had become more commonplace than in early medieval times and was found in many different levels of society. The people involved in the uprising were members of a discourse community with access to literary culture. The rebels hailed from of a wide variety of social groups, not just peasants, and this included clerics, artisans and urban dwellers who knew how to read and write.³⁰ It is also likely that some of the peasants knew how to read and write at the basic level, because some village priests taught reading as a way of earning extra cash. With a little training in the letters of the alphabet and pronunciation, it would be possible for the peasants to have a basic understanding of reading the written vernacular.³¹ Further, though literacy is complex and difficult to define, Steven Justice has proposed that it is more than just the ability to read and write a language, but also the knowledge of the functions and types of documentary usage.³² Even those who did not read were exposed to the written works as they were read out in public venues such as church, court, and traveling theatrical performances. The rebels demonstrated that they clearly possessed an understanding of the importance of the written word in their attacks on manorial and church records and their demand for new charters granting them freedoms.

There is limited information about the provenance of the earliest written Robin Hood ballads. Three of the earliest written ballads of Robin Hood have been traced to the time of transition from the late medieval to early modern era in English history.

³⁰ Steven Justice. *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 25, 32.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

³² *Ibid.*, 52.

These ballads are “Robin Hood and the Monk,” “Robin Hood and the Potter,” and “A Gest of Robin Hood,” and the extant copies of “Robin Hood and the Monk” and “Robin Hood and the Potter” are in the archives of Cambridge University.³³ The seven copies of “A Gest of Robin Hood” are also in various university archives around Britain.³⁴ Both the manuscripts of “Robin Hood and the Monk” and “Robin Hood and the Potter” were acquired by Cambridge University when they received libraries from estates. “Robin Hood and the Monk” came from the estate of Richard Holdsworth in 1664 and “Robin Hood and the Potter” was from the estate of John Moore, bishop of Ely, in 1715.³⁵ Thomas Ohlgren speculates that, based on the writing style and dialect, “Robin Hood and the Monk” was copied by a member of the secular clergy named Gilbert Pilkington.³⁶ He also hypothesizes, based on the content of the ballad and a merchant’s mark, that “Robin Hood and the Potter” was owned by a yeoman merchant, who perhaps had aspirations of moving up in society.³⁷ The ballads likely were performed out loud in public, which exposed people from different levels of society to them. Those in the same social class as the rebels in 1381 could have written them down, because the rebels were drawn from different occupations in society and many are believed to have had at least a cursory level of literacy.

Scholars consider “Robin Hood and the Monk” to be the earliest written tale of Robin Hood. It is possible that it might have been composed as early as 1370 but was almost certainly written before 1420.³⁸ It opens with Robin Hood and Little John experiencing a nice summer day in the forest. Robin Hood decides to go to Nottingham

³³ Ohlgren, 20.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 65, 94.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 96. The term yeoman changes meaning over time. However, in the late fourteenth, early fifteenth century it means either a forester (yeoman of the forest) or an intermediate stage in society, a freeman above the level of servant but below that of master. Pollard, 41, 33.

³⁸ Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren, eds., *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University, 2000), 31. Pollard, 7.

and attend mass. In the church, a monk recognizes him and informs the sheriff of Nottingham. After a fight with the sheriffs' men, they capture Robin and throw him in prison. Little John sets out to free Robin. He is given the king's seal and uses it to gain admittance to the sheriff's compound. After a heavy dinner and lots of drinking, Little John sneaks into the prison and frees Robin Hood. They return to the forest and all ends well.

The second ballad, "Robin Hood and the Potter," dates between 1400 and 1440, although some scholars place it as late as 1500.³⁹ It is similar to the first ballad in that it tells just one story and the sheriff, the adversary of Robin Hood, ultimately loses in the end. It opens with Robin Hood and his men attempting to charge a potter a toll for passing through the woods. The potter defeats Robin in battle, and is offered fellowship with the outlaws. Robin also offers to go to Nottingham in the potter's place. In Nottingham, Robin sells all but five of the pots. These he gives to the wife of the sheriff, who in turn invites him to eat with the sheriff and his men. After dinner, the Sheriff of Nottingham and his men practice their archery. Robin joins in and impresses them with his bow, which he claims Robin Hood gave to him. The disguised Robin offers to take the sheriff into the forest the following day, where they might run into Robin Hood. As they enter the forest the next morning, Robin blows his horn. His men recognize the tone, and surround the sheriff. The sheriff of Nottingham realizes that he has been tricked, as Robin takes all of his goods and weapons.

The final ballad from this time period, "A Gest of Robin Hood," was written down between 1400 and 1450, although it likely was composed earlier.⁴⁰ It differs from the other two in that it is longer, and instead of telling just one story, there are several combined. It opens in the forest as well, with Robin Hood telling his men that he will not

³⁹ Ohlgren, 68. Knight and Ohlgren, 58.

⁴⁰ Keen, 100. Knight and Ohlgren, 81. Pollard, 6.

eat until there is a “guest” present (who is, of course, expected to pay for his meal). Little John, Will Scarlet, and Much the Miller’s son go into the forest and find the knight, Sir Richard at the Lee. However, Sir Richard is a poor knight. He borrowed some money and unless he can repay the abbot his lands will be forfeit. Robin Hood, upon hearing this story, offers to give Sir Richard the money. The knight agrees, and settles his debt with the abbot.

After escaping from a trap the sheriff of Nottingham set up, Robin and his men flee to Sir Richard’s estate. He refuses to hand the outlaws over to the sheriff, who is forced to ask the king to intervene. The king is determined to meet Robin Hood, because he has heard so much about him. He and his men disguise themselves as monks and enter the forest, where Robin Hood and his men stop them. The king is impressed with Robin’s actions and offers him a place in his court. Robin goes with the king, but soon misses the forest and returns. One day Robin falls ill. He leaves the forest and goes to a convent to be bled. The ballad ends rather suddenly at this point, when the prioress betrays Robin and kills him.

It is impossible to know the exact circumstances of the writing of the first Robin Hood ballads, and their relationship to the 1381 Peasants’ Revolt, because there are no extant records that explicitly connect the two. However, the three earliest written Robin Hood ballads, written in the years following the 1381 Peasants’ Revolt provide internal evidence of a causal relationship. They often focus on the relationship between Robin Hood and his merry men and the power structure. The outlaws live in an egalitarian society; one that is similar to that the rebels hoped to achieve in England. The king is respected in his role, but others who represent roles of authority are shown as being corrupt and inefficient. These views in the three late medieval Robin Hood ballads are similar to those held by the rebels. As their society was experiencing social challenges, the rebels took the opportunity to change the world in which they lived. They sought to

lower the social status of the clergy and the nobles, making everyone equal under one king. In doing so, the rebels hoped to decrease social divisions and achieve a more egalitarian society. While the revolt ultimately failed, in large part because of faith placed in Richard II, who turned on the rebels, they were able to influence society in the end, by composing ballads of the enigmatic figure of Robin Hood that expressed the same goals the rebels had during the uprising.

While the ballads were not written down until after the Peasants' Revolt, there are fragmentary hints of a Robin Hood in the popular culture prior to 1381. Probably one of the best known of these references is in *The Vision and Creed of Piers Plowman* by William Langland. *The Vision and Creed of Piers Plowman*, written around 1370, is the first part of an allegorical poem that criticizes the fourteenth century ecclesiastical system. Criticism of the ecclesiastical elite was a common theme in late medieval literature. It appears in poems, plays, treatises, and even in ecclesiastical writings. In the poem, a lower class parish priest appears as the personification of sloth. The priest acknowledges to his confessor Repentance, "if I sholde deye bi this day, / Me list nought to loke; / I kan nought pafitly my pater noster, / as the preest it syngeth; / but I kan rymes of Robyn Hood, / and Randolf erl of Chester."⁴¹ The way these "rymes" are spoken of, and their association with sloth, one of the seven deadly sins, indicate that the social elite viewed knowledge of these rhymes as detestable, especially if the rhymes were better known than the *pater noster* or Lord's Prayer. This implies that the rhymes were popular, shared among the common people, a low form of entertainment that distracted the priest from his proper duties. This is an important bit of evidence for the knowledge of Robin Hood, and for his association with the non-noble classes

⁴¹ William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1887), ll 3274-3279. *kan-know*

Other evidence of Robin Hood in popular culture prior to the revolt is more elusive. There are records of the name, or alias, of Robin Hood and common derivatives of the name associated with outlawry. One of the earliest of these is a fugitive from justice named Robert Hood who is listed in the Pipe Roll of 1230.⁴² In the same year, the sheriff of Yorkshire recorded the goods he had seized from a man named Robert Hood.⁴³ A servant of the Abbot of Cirencester, also named Robert Hood, was recorded as killing a man named Ralph at some point between 1213 and 1216.⁴⁴ There began to be an increase in aliases of both “Robehod” and Little John from 1262 onwards.⁴⁵ In 1354 there was a Robin Hood in prison awaiting trial for offenses he had committed in the forest of Rockingham.⁴⁶ The names were not only associated with outlaws; a Robert Hood and his wife Mathilda appear in court rolls of the manor of Wakefield in 1316 to 1317.⁴⁷ Court rolls also mention a Robyn Hood who was porter to the king in 1323 and a Robert Hode who was fined 3*d* for failure to answer his summons to join the army to fight against Scotland in 1316.⁴⁸ It is possible to explain the appearance of these names inasmuch as Hood was a common surname and Robert, and its diminutive Robin, were popular first names. However, while the number of times the names appears is not significant, what is important is the association between the name and outlawry. This indicates that before 1381 there was some sort of cultural connection between the name Robin Hood and the profession of outlaw.

Further evidence of Robin Hood in popular culture before the Peasants’ Revolt can be found in the decorative figure of the “green man” carved into the façade of churches. The term “green man” refers to figures with faces made of leaves or a human

⁴² Keen, 187.

⁴³ Pollard, 15.

⁴⁴ Knight, 27.

⁴⁵ Pollard, 15.

⁴⁶ Holt, 54.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 46, 47.

face with leaves growing from his skin.⁴⁹ Scholars have traced the development of these figures from early, pre-Christian architecture to the great medieval Gothic cathedrals. The architectural figures are among the only primary sources that exist however; there are no written medieval sources about the green man, which can be problematic in determining what the green man figure represented to the lower classes. However, it does demonstrate that popular culture was exposed already to a mythical man connected to the forest.

The historiography of the green man begins with one of the earliest references to him in 1939 by J. Raglan. She views the figures carved in the Gothic facades as a man, not a spirit, and refers to them as green men.⁵⁰ She was also the first to make the connection between the green man figures and Robin Hood.⁵¹ Following the publication of Raglan's article, there was limited focus on the green man until the 1970s when Kathleen Basford set about studying and photographing the architectural green man figures. She arrives at the conclusion that the green man motif was originally a pagan motif that evolved to become part of the symbolic language of the decoration of churches.⁵²

In recent decades, the green man has emerged as a way of emphasizing nature in modern, contemporary culture. As the green movement increased in popular culture in the late twentieth century, historians began to focus on the green man figure, examining his appearance in architecture and the reasons for the motif's occurrences over the centuries. Early scholars who worked on the green man often took a spiritual view, reflecting the increasing modern interest in the pagan traditions of the Celts.⁵³ Of

⁴⁹ see Appendix I for images

⁵⁰ J. Raglan, "The Green Man in Church Architecture." *Folklore* (1939): 45.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁵² Kathleen Basford, *The Green Man* (Suffolk: St. Edmundsbury Press Ltd., 1978), 19, 20.

⁵³ Because the majority of secondary sources are non-scholarly studying the green man is difficult. These works will often take hints of the myth and reinterpret it from a modern context.

the scholarly texts on the subject, such as *Green Man: the Archetype of our Oneness with Nature* and *The Quest for the Green Man*, both authors William Anderson and John Matthews view the green man as a symbol of nature, often of death and renewal.⁵⁴ It is this birth and renewal that connects the pagan origins to the church architecture. This is because in pagan belief systems killing a sacred tree brought about rebirth just as the crucifixion of Jesus led to his resurrection.⁵⁵ As Christianity spread, pagan beliefs were often incorporated into the religion, giving those who converted a familiar framework on which to hang their new beliefs.⁵⁶ Anderson and Matthews' points of view are very similar to the thesis of Gary R. Varner's book, in which he argues that the green man is an ancient symbol molded by humanity to be compatible with the dominant ideology of society at any given time, and as societies change so does the symbol and meaning of the green man.⁵⁷

The green man figures are often located on the facades of churches and cathedrals. Although traditional sacred Christian imagery dominated decorative architectural programs, other types of decorations were present, especially in the outer edges.⁵⁸ The outer edges of architecture were powerful, liminal, places, often associated with the "other" of nature.⁵⁹ The green man figures demonstrate this. These decorative figures appear tucked in corners or above back windows, places that are not obvious. This is because while upper class patrons selected the main images, and high-ranking master craftsmen carved them, the rest of the decorations were completed by

⁵⁴ William Anderson, *Green Man: the Archetype of our Oneness with Nature* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990), 31.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ John Matthews, *The Quest for the Green Man*. (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 2001), 36.

⁵⁷ Gary R. Varner, *The Mythic Forest, the Green Man and the Spirit of Nature* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2006), 7.

⁵⁸ Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 21.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

lower class assistants.⁶⁰ In the margins members of the commons were free to create and incorporate their own artistic comments.⁶¹ What is especially interesting is that the carving of the green man figures in England peaked in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, around the time that the ideas of Robin Hood were being solidified and written in the three earliest ballads.⁶²

These examples all help to establish the fact that there was an amorphous concept of the figure of Robin Hood in popular culture prior to the outbreak of the Peasants' Revolt. The appearance of the name variants of "Robin Hood", and the fact that many are associated with criminals is significant, because it demonstrates a cultural connection between the name "Robin Hood" and outlawry. When Sloth, the priest in *Pier's Plowman's* poem, is confessing his sins, having better knowledge of the Robin Hood rhymes than the Lord's Prayer is listed at the top of the extensive list of sins. And the inclusion of the green man in church architecture attests to this motif as iconic in popular culture, and if Michael Camille is correct, it was the lower classes that perpetuated it. So, although there was some sort of elusive idea of Robin Hood prior to the revolt it was only in the years after the 1381 Peasants' Revolt that this nebulous idea of Robin Hood solidified into the mythical figure that has survived into the present day. After and because of the Peasants' Revolt, the ideas about the figure of Robin Hood, already part of "third order" culture, found voice in the Robin Hood ballads.⁶³

There may have been many influences on the coalescence of the ballads, but as mentioned above, I argue that one of the most important was the Peasants' Revolt.

Robin Hood is often presented as struggling against the corrupt authority of the elites in

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁶² Lorraine Kochanske Stock, "Lords of the Wildwood: The Wild Man, the Green Man, and Robin Hood" in *Robin Hood in Popular Culture: Violence, Transgressions, and Justice*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 248.

⁶³ Hollister, 118. The third order culture refers to the lowest division of society, those who fight, those who prey, and those who work.

the ballads. The ballads and the rebels treated authority figures in a similar fashion. The clergy in the ballads are antagonists. This attitude was not unique to the ballads however; it is found in *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, Geoffrey Chaucer's writings, and literature from the continent. Anti-clericalism was not exclusive to late medieval England. There were regular objections to the corruption of clergy across Europe and through the centuries.⁶⁴ Often this occurred because priests succumbed to worldly pleasures such as fornication and luxurious lifestyles. The priests' roles also gave them a certain degree of power. They were the ones who could forgive sins in the name of God and who performed the sacrament of communion. This often led to priests using this power as a means of social control.⁶⁵ The members of the congregation had expectations of the clergy who served them, and when these demands were not met, they complained about the anticlerical behavior they witnessed.

One of the best examples of the negative view towards the clergy in the ballads is the treatment of the abbot to whom Sir Richard at the Lee owes the four hundred pounds. When the knight arrives, the abbot and his followers go to "put on their simple wedes."⁶⁶ This indicates that they had been dressed in more elegant clothes than was appropriate to their position as clergy. There are other indications that the abbot and his men enjoyed a life more luxurious than a simple churchman should according to the rebels. While Sir Richard is present before the abbot, he is eating a meal of "ryall fare," or royal food.⁶⁷ While this offends the peasants and lower classes, there is an aspect of the abbot's behavior that is even worse, his greed and complete lack of charity.

⁶⁴ R.N. Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe, c.1215-c.1515* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 250.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁶⁶ "A Gest of Robin Hood," in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, ed. Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University, 2000), line 388. *wedes-clothes*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, line 486.

When the abbot first appears in the ballads, he is gloating to members of his clergy “this day twelfe moneth came there a knight / and borrowed foure hondred pounde. / He borrowed foure hondred pounde, / upon all his land fre; / but he comes this ylke day / dyssheryte shall he be.”⁶⁸ While others remind him that the knight has the remainder of the day to deliver payment, the abbot is already anticipating his increased wealth.

When Sir Richard arrives to repay his debt, the abbot reveals how great his greed is. The knight pretends that he has not brought the payment. When the abbot asks why he bothered to show up then, the knight replies “For God...to pray of a longer daye.”⁶⁹ The justice and the sheriff who are present to witness the exchange both agree the knight is not to receive any leniency with his debt. The knight appeals to the abbot as well, saying that if he is allowed an extension, “I wyll be thy true servaunte, / and trewely serve the, / tyl ye have foure hondred pounde / of money good and free.’ / The abbot sware a full grete othe, / ‘by God that dyed on a tree, / Get the londe where thou may, / for thou getest none of me.”⁷⁰ Sir Richard then proceeds to repay his debt. Sir Richard tells the abbot “had thou ben curtes at my comynge, / rewarded shuldest thou have be.”⁷¹ While his reason for the subterfuge is to reward the abbot if he shows charity, the actions of the abbot reflect the way the secular society often viewed the clergy in positions of power. This view of the clergy found in the Robin Hood ballads is also reflected in the Peasants’ Revolt, because the outlaws held anticlerical prejudices. They expressed this in their desire for a less socially structured society, by attacking members of the clergy whom they perceived to be living above their position.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, ll 341-348.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, ll 419-420.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, ll 433-440.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, ll 483-484. *ben curtes*-shown courtesy

Because of the anticlericalism prevalent in the late middle ages, the clergy were among the first targets of the rebels in the Peasants' Revolt. Congregations often complained about the abuses because they wanted their clergymen to "behave like churchmen, rather than officious, interfering, lordly bureaucrats."⁷² The anti-clericalism was not a cry for the destruction of the religious hierarchy, but instead a call for its reform.⁷³ The rebels in 1381 expressed the goal of reforming the clergy when Wat Tyler demanded that there be one archbishop for England. By removing the social status and power of the other high-ranking clergy, the rebels hoped to reduce corruption and restore the clergy to what the rebels considered their proper roles in society.

In the early days of the revolt, a group of the rebels went to Canterbury. Their target was the archbishop of Canterbury, Simon Sudbury. At the urging of John Ball, who was at one point a member of the clergy, the rebels had been advised to

get rid of all the lords, archbishops, bishops, abbots and priors as well as most of the monks and canons so that there should be no bishop in England except for one archbishop...no religious house should hold more than two monks or canons and their possessions should be divided among the laity.⁷⁴

The rebels entered the main church of St. Thomas, where monks were gathered to pray. The rebels, "after kneeling, all cried to the monks with one voice asking them to elect a monk to be archbishop of Canterbury, 'for he who is archbishop now is a traitor and will be beheaded for his iniquity.'"⁷⁵ The archbishop of Canterbury was not in Canterbury but in London, but that did not stop the rebels from destroying his possessions. In the process, the rebels discovered what they considered to be further evidence of the archbishop being a traitor, when they entered his chambers. There they found many luxurious items, including elegant clothes similar to those the abbot in "A Gest of Robin

⁷² Swanson, 253.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Anonimale Chronicle*, 128.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

Hood" wore. Seeing these, they are said to have remarked "ah, this chancellor of England hath had a good market to get together all this riches: he shall give us now account of the revenues of England and of the great profits that he hath gathered since the king's coronation."⁷⁶ This to the rebels was evidence of the treacheries of the clergy, and justification for removal from their position in society.

After entering London, the rebels continued to track down clergy whom they considered traitors to England and the king; "neither fearing God nor revering the honor of mother church, they pursued and executed all those against whom they raised their noisy cry."⁷⁷ The chronicles all note this almost animalistic behavior of the rebels against the clergy. The language they use is that of shock and disbelief that the rebels dared to treat men of God in this way. This shows that the aristocratic writers of the chronicles did not agree with the rebels' treatment of the clergy; it was a lower class behavior. The rebels did not pay attention to social rank, much to the shock of the nobles. They forced entrance to the Tower of London, where the king and several high officials had fled for protection. The rebels once again sought out the archbishop of Canterbury, shouting, "where is that traitor to the kingdom? Where is the despoiler of the common people?"⁷⁸ What is significant here is that the author of the chronicle clearly identifies these actions with the commons; it is not a generally accepted position among the upper class Englishmen and women. Once the rebels found Sudbury in the chapel, they brought him out to be executed. They did not acknowledge his attempts to convince them that killing him damned their souls. While the archbishop desperately tried to convince them

⁷⁶ *Froissart Chronicles* in *The Peasant's Revolt of 1381*, 140. It is possible that Froissart repeating this charge in his chronicle may be evidence of his own anti-clericalism.

⁷⁷ *Chronicon Henrici Knighton* in *The Peasant's Revolt of 1381*, 185.

⁷⁸ *Historia Anglicana* in *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, 173.

otherwise the rebels asserted that “as a man false to the community and treasonable to the realm [he] was to submit his neck to the executioner’s swords.”⁷⁹

The anticlericalism characteristic of the Revolt, continues in the ballads as Robin Hood and his men encounter yet another monk with the despised characteristics. The outlaws are waiting for the knight to repay the four hundred pounds he borrowed. Robin sends his men into the forest to look, because the payment might be delivered to him in some other form, because Sir Richard swore by the Virgin Mary that he would repay the loan. The outlaws come across a monk with a retinue of “two and fifty [men] / and seven somers full stronge; / there rydeth no bysshop in this londe / so ryally.”⁸⁰ They bring the monk to Robin Hood, who takes off his hood when they arrive, although the monk does not return the courtesy. When Robin finds out the monk is from St. Mary’s Abbey, he is convinced that this is the repayment, because the knight swore by the Virgin Mary that the loan would be repaid.⁸¹ Robin asks the monk how much money he is carrying. The monk lies and says he has only twenty marks. Robin sends Little John to look, and finds out that the monk has over eight hundred pounds. Because the monk lies to Robin, Robin and his men will keep the money.⁸² The text makes references to the wealth the monk possesses. Later in the ballad, Robin Hood calls on one of the monks (who is really the king in disguise) and says “ye have chyrches and rentes both, / and gold full grete plenté; / gyve us some of your spendyng, / for saynt charyté.”⁸³ Both of these examples from the ballads show that it was a common belief that members of the clergy had access to inordinate wealth in the late middle ages. This same attitude towards the clergy in the Peasants’ Revolt provided justification, to the rebels, to kill those who were corrupt and abusing their power. The fact that the clergymen had plenty of money also

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁸⁰ “A Gest of Robin Hood,” ll 861-864 *somers*-sumpters (pack horses).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, line 944.

⁸² *Ibid.*, ll 973-980.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, ll 1509-1512.

allowed the rebels to voice their cries that the possessions and land should be divided among the people, bringing about a more egalitarian society.

Just as both the ballads and the documents on the Peasants' Revolt express disapproval of the excesses of the clergy, both sets of documents also critique the nobility. The rebels in 1381 considered the council ruling in the name of Richard II, led by John of Gaunt, corrupt. They wanted to meet with the king and "shew him how all that they have done or will do is for him and his honour, and how the realm of England hath not been wel governed a great space for the honour of the realm nor for the common profit by his uncles and by the clergy, and specially by the archbishop of Canterbury."⁸⁴ It was not just the nobles and high clergy whom the rebels were against, it was also the bureaucracy running the kingdom. While it is unlikely that the rebels just sought out personal enemies and beheaded them, the way Knighton suggests, the rebels did target those against whom they believed they had genuine grievances.⁸⁵ They sought out the commissioners who had collected the taxes. They also targeted bureaucratic officials who had lifted young girls and felt their vaginas to determine whether they had had intercourse or not, assuming that if they had they were over fifteen and eligible to pay the Third Poll Tax.⁸⁶ Incidents such as this made these officials targets for the violence of the Peasants' Revolt.

On the way to and within London, the rebels sacked and burned the houses of nobles they felt contributed to the traitorous reign of the country. This was especially the motive at the Savoy Palace, the residence of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster and chancellor to his nephew, the king. At the Savoy Palace, the author of the *Anonimalle Chronicle*, likely a member of the king's retinue, wrote that the rebels "broke open the gates...they took al the torches they could find, and lighted them...all the napery and

⁸⁴ *Froissart Chronicles*, 141-142.

⁸⁵ *Chronicon Henrici Knighton*, 183.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

other goods they could discover they carried into the hall and set on fire...they burnt the hall and chambers as well as all the apartments within the gates of the said palace.”⁸⁷ The houses of jurors and professional informers were not spared either.⁸⁸ However, the *Anonimale Chronicle* notes that the violence was selective, because the rebels made their way through the city “doing no harm or injury until they came to Fleet Street,” where they broke into the prison and freed the prisoners.⁸⁹ The prisoners were then invited to join the rebels in their cause, demonstrating a sense of solidarity that was felt among the lower classes against those in positions of power.

Many of the targets selected by the rebels were deliberate, because of records that were kept at the vandalized sites. At the London residence of the archbishop of Canterbury the rebels “entered into its buildings, destroyed a great number of the archbishop’s goods and burnt all the register books and chancery remembrancers’ rolls they found there.”⁹⁰ This was because the rebels believed that by destroying the records there would be no further evidence of their social status.⁹¹ The rebels also sought to kill all the lawyers because the land could not be fully free until then, perhaps because they considered lawyers to be an essential element of the force misgoverning England and keeping them in serfdom.⁹² In these actions, the rebels targeted the power of the nobility, especially those such as John of Gaunt and Simon of Sudbury who were highly ranked government officials. This class hostility was not common in the late middle ages except among the lower classes, and the written Robin Hood ballads echo this attitude. In the three late medieval Robin Hood ballads, animosity towards the nobles and bureaucracy is reflected in the treatment of the sheriff of Nottingham.

⁸⁷ *Anonimale Chronicle*, 157.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Martha Rampton, “The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 and the Written Word,” *Comitatus* 24 (1993): 51.

⁹² *Historia Anglicana*, 133.

The sheriff was one of the main authoritarian sources with which the rebels were familiar. This is because this official was the representation of the power of the government at the local level, who performed all the administrative functions, especially concerning court issues.⁹³ The sheriff in the ballads of Robin Hood is depicted in a negative light, similar to the way the rebels perceived the bureaucracy and lower nobles involved in implementing the poll taxes. One example of the sheriff's odious characteristics is seen when Little John arrives at his compound bearing the king's seal in "Robin Hood and the Monk." Upon his arrival, the sheriff greets Little John cheerfully and gives him the best wine.⁹⁴ Little John is not the only one who enjoys the wine however. "When the scheref was on slepe, / drunken of wyne and ale," Little John is able to get into the jail and free Robin Hood.⁹⁵ It is clearly a weakness of the sheriff and his men that they overindulge and are too drunk on wine to notice the prize prisoner escaping.

The sheriff of Nottingham is weak compared to Robin Hood and the other outlaws. In "A Gest of Robin Hood," the men in the forest have captured the sheriff. He is made to lie under the trees overnight, until "his sides gan to smerte."⁹⁶ Robin Hood tells the sheriff that this is their life, under the greenwood trees. He says that if the sheriff is willing to remain with them for the year, "I shall the teche, proude sheriff, / and outlawe for to be."⁹⁷ The sheriff turns down the offer, saying that "or I be here another nyght...Robyn, nowe pray I the, / smythe of mijn hede rather to-morowe, / and I forgive it the."⁹⁸ He instead asks Robin Hood to let him go, swearing that he will be Robin's best

⁹³ Rodney Hilton, "The Origins of Robin Hood." In *Peasants, Knights, and Heretics: Studies in Medieval English Social History*, ed. R.H. Hilton (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 233.

⁹⁴ "Robin Hood and the Monk," in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* II 263-264.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, II 267-268.

⁹⁶ "A Gest of Robin Hood," II 781-784. *gan to smerte*-began to hurt

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, II 795-796. *the teche*-teach you

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, II 797-799. *or-before smythe of mijn hede*-strike off my head

friend and will help the outlaws in whatever way he can, although he promptly forgets this vow and sets up an archery contest to capture Robin Hood and his men. Compared to Robin Hood, a yeoman, and his outlaws, the sheriff of Nottingham is immoral and weak. The ballads present the sheriff as improperly completing his job and taking advantage of his social position, a viewpoint held by the rebels in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

Robin Hood and his men are also aware of the monetary struggles that the lower classes face. When he sends Little John and the rest of the outlaws into the woods to find a guest for dinner, he tells them

Loke ye do no husbonde harme,
That tilleth with his ploughe.
No more ye shall no gode yeman
That walketh by grene wode shawe,
Ne no knyght ne no squyer
That wol be a gode felawe.
These bisshoppes and these archbisshoppes,
Ye shall them bete and bynde;
The hye sherif of Notyngham,
Hym holde ye in your mynde.⁹⁹

Instead he proposes they “invite” to dinner and “tax” only those who are wealthy enough to afford it. Here he recognizes that the clergy and nobles are more likely to have a lot of money than the poor. While Robin Hood is not giving to the poor after he robs from the rich, by targeting the wealthy passing through his forest he is in a way redistributing the wealth. This social critique is similar to the rhetoric of the rebels during the 1381 Peasants' Revolt. The rebels were aware of how unfairly the power of society was divided, just as Robin Hood was aware of the differences in the potential “guests.” Like the undermining of social and economic divisions in Robin Hood's forest, one of the results the rebels sought during the uprising was for the nobles to lose their social and economic status, becoming equal with the commons under the king of England.

⁹⁹ “A Gest of Robin Hood,” ll 51-60.

While the rebels were fighting, attacking and killing many of the nobles and upper clergy, one who was spared their hatred was the king. Throughout the revolt, the rebels were loyal to him. They viewed the king as someone who was able to dispense even handed justice, who was above the conflicts of individuals and classes and could therefore protect them.¹⁰⁰ Just as they believed the king could protect them, the rebels considered it their duty to look out for the young king who was under the influence of his “corrupt advisors.” One of the reasons for the beginning of the revolt was the presence of commissioners in the field to make sure the Third Poll Tax was properly collected. When this occurred, “it seemed [to the rebels]...that these subsidies had not been properly or honestly collected but had been raised from the poor people and not the rich, to the great profit and advantage of the collectors and the deception of the king and commons.”¹⁰¹ The rebels were determined to meet with the king while in London. They wanted to “shew him how all they have done or will do is for him and his honour, and how the realm of England hath not been well governed a great space for the honour of the realm nor for the common profit by his uncles and by the clergy.”¹⁰² It was this faith in the king, faith that he would listen to them and be able to solve their problems, that united the rebels.

During the revolt, the rebels tried to ensure loyalty to the king. On the roads around Canterbury, they stopped pilgrims and forced them to swear their allegiance to King Richard.¹⁰³ They asked pilgrims on the road to Canterbury “with thom haldes yow?”¹⁰⁴ The proper reply to that question was “wyth kynge Richarde and with the trew

¹⁰⁰ Justice, 59. Rodney Hilton, “The Origins of Robin Hood,” In *Peasants, Knights, and Heretics: Studies in Medieval English Social History*, 234.

¹⁰¹ *Anonimale Chronicle*, 123-124.

¹⁰² *Froissart Chronicles*, 141-142.

¹⁰³ *Historia Anglicana*, 133. The rebels also forced the pilgrims to swear that they would not accept anybody named John as their king. While this refers to Richard II's uncle, John of Gaunt, the names of Richard and John were later linked to Robin Hood as Richard the Lion-Hearted and his brother John Lackland in the sixteenth century.

¹⁰⁴ *Anonimale Chronicle*, 130.

communes.” Those who did not answer properly were often put to death.¹⁰⁵ What is important, in addition to loyalty to the king, was loyalty to the true commons. This egalitarian view was specific to the rebels in 1381, and does not reflect views that were held by the social elites of England. They are lower and middling class attitudes that fomented in the Peasants’ Revolt and found their way from the Revolt to the pages of the Robin Hood ballads.

When they were in the presence of the king, the rebels treated him respectfully. They greeted him, saying “welcome our Lord King Richard, if it pleases you, and we will not have any king but you.”¹⁰⁶ The rebels felt that there “were more kings than one and that they would neither suffer nor have any king except King Richard.”¹⁰⁷ Their respect for Richard was such that he was able to calm them down following the death of Wat Tyler. When they saw Tyler fall, the commons began to grow restless. But the king “spurred his horse towards the commons and rode among them, saying, ‘what is this my men? What are you doing? Surely you do not wish to fire on your own king? Do not attack me and don not regret the death of that traitor and ruffian. For I will be your king, your captain and your leader.’”¹⁰⁸

In the Robin Hood ballads, this loyalty to the king is present as well, found among both the outlaws and the common people, reflecting the rebels’ beliefs. While Robin and the rest of his outlaw band “lyve by our kynges dere, / under the grene wode tre,” he is excited to receive an invitation to dine with the king.¹⁰⁹ He takes the king’s seal and says, “I love no man in all the worlde / so well as I do my kyng.”¹¹⁰ He even invites the abbot (who is actually the king in disguise) to “dyne with me, / for love of my kyng /

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁰⁸ *Historia Anglicana*, 179.

¹⁰⁹ “A Gest of Robin Hood,” ll 1507-1508.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, ll 1541-1542.

under my trystell-tre.”¹¹¹ When Robin Hood and the outlaws finally behold the king in his real identity, they “kneeled down in that place,” showing him respect.¹¹²

Loyalty to the king is not limited to Robin Hood and his men in the ballads. At one point in “A Gest of Robin Hood,” when Robin and the king are riding together, the people of Nottingham see them. However, because all they see is “nothyng but mantels of grene / that covered all the felde. / Than every man to other gan say, ‘I drede our kyng be slone”” and they gather to attack Robin Hood in vengeance.¹¹³ In an action similar to Richard II at the field during the Peasants’ Revolt, the king in the ballad rides towards the people where “the kyng loughe full fast, / and commauded theym agayne; / when they se our comly kyng, / I wys they were full fayne” because he has not been killed by the outlaws.¹¹⁴ This is very similar to the events that occurred following the death of Wat Tyler. Then young King Richard rode to the rebels and calmed them down, reminding them that “I am your king, your leader, and your chief, and those of you who are loyal to me should go immediately into the field.”¹¹⁵

Both the ballads of Robin Hood and the chronicles show loyalty to the king as the rightful leader, demonstrating that the commons do not question the basic institution of royalty. However, the ballads do point to a more democratic and free society than existed in fourteenth century England. As many historians have noted, the rebels in the Peasants’ Revolt wanted to be free, and gave indication that they wanted to establish a virtually classless society. One of their main demands throughout the revolt was to cast off the status of bondsmen and women or serfs.¹¹⁶ According to Walsingham, the peasants actually wanted to take their revolt even further and “sought to better

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, ll 1546-1548.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, line 1640.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, ll 1707-1710.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, ll 1717-1720. *loughe full fast*-laughed very much *communded theym agayne*-gave them orders *comely*-handsom, *fayne*-pleased

¹¹⁵ Ranulf Hidgen *Polychronicon* in *The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381*, 203.

¹¹⁶ *Froissart Chronicles*, 139.

themselves by force and hoped to subject all things to their own stupidity...planning to become the equals of their lords and no longer be bound by servitude to any master."¹¹⁷ The rebels are also said to have demanded a decrease in the levels of social hierarchy. Wat Tyler said "that no lord should have lordship in future, but it should be divided among all men, except for the king's own lordship."¹¹⁸ John Ball's calls for a decrease in the number of clergy say that clerics' possessions should be divided among the laity. However, what is also implied is that, because there would only be one archbishop and a limited number of monks at monasteries, the other former clergy would lose their social status, and become part of the commons. This idea of a more equal society served as a reason behind many of their actions against both the clergy and other targets of the uprising, but was not shared by the nobility. This brings up one of the most important elements of the 1381 Peasants' Revolt, the goal of an egalitarian society under the leadership of the king. Unlike anti-clericalism and the assumption that the king was innocent and under the influence of "evil councilors," the notion of eliminating class distinctions was not shared by the upper levels of society. This sense of equality for all was widespread among the rebels, and its appearance in the Robin Hood ballads came specifically from the rebel classes.

In addition to ending bondage, the rebels wanted the laws changed to reflect a more free and open society. When Wat Tyler met with King Richard, he asked that the only law be the law of Winchester, where mutilation and blinding replaced hanging as a punishment for serious felonies.¹¹⁹ Tyler is also reported to have wanted all the lawyers killed because then "all things would henceforward be regulated by decrees of the common people; there would be no more law at all, or, if so, it would be determined by

¹¹⁷ *Historia Anglicana*, 132.

¹¹⁸ *Anonimale Chronicle*, 164.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

his own judgment.”¹²⁰ The rebels also sought an equitable division of property. The clergy should be allowed to keep enough to live on, and the rest of their goods, including their lands, should be divided among the common people.¹²¹

The ideal of egalitarianism is also present in the relationship between Robin Hood and Little John. While Robin Hood is the leader of the outlaws, they do not automatically have to obey him. When Robin takes Little John with him to Nottingham, he says Little John can carry his bow, to which Little John replies Robin can carry his own bow. As Robin Hood and Little John walk through the forest, they begin to fight over the money Robin owes Little John. Robin calls Little John a liar—insulting his honor—and hits him. Little John draws his sword, but notes “were thou not my maister...thou shuldis by hit ful sore; / get the a man wher thou wille, / for thou gettis me no more” and stalks off.¹²² Little John is willing to get Robin out of prison, perhaps feeling guilty because he left when he was supposed to be his bodyguard. He admits to Robin that he failed in his duty by leaving him alone on the way to Nottingham. To make up for his actions, he rescues Robin and brings him back to the forest, where he now expects to be dismissed for failing to obey Robin.¹²³ The relationship between the two outlaws suggests that Little John, while loyal to Robin, freely chooses to be in his band. This reflects another of the demands of the rebels. Part of the freedom the rebels wanted was the freedom to choose for whom they worked. At the meeting at Mile End when presenting their demands to the king, “they asked...that no one should serve any man except at his own will and by means of regular covenant.”¹²⁴ This demand attempted to give the lower classes back freedoms that had been limited by the 1351 Statute of Labourers.

¹²⁰ *Historia Anglicana*, 177.

¹²¹ *Anonimale Chronicle* 165.

¹²² “Robin Hood and the Monk,” ll 59-62.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, ll 305-310.

¹²⁴ *Anonimale Chronicles*, 161.

The rebels' desire for economic mobility is reflected in the ballads of Robin Hood, such as when Little John temporarily enters the service of the sheriff of Nottingham. The sheriff is impressed with the Little John's archery, swearing "by Hym that dyede on a tre, / this man is the best arschere / that ever yet sawe I me."¹²⁵ He offers "Reynolde Grenelefe" (Little John's alias) a position for twelve months in his service. One day, when the sheriff is out hunting, it is after noon and Little John asks "god sir stuarde, I pray to the, / gyve me my dynere."¹²⁶ The steward refuses, saying that he is not allowed to eat or drink until their lord (the sheriff) returns. Little John leaves, after convincing the cook to return with him to the forest. Little John explains that as a man in the service of Robin, "two times in the yere thy clothinge / chaunged shulde be / and every yere of Robyn Hode / twenty marks to thy fee."¹²⁷ Later, when Little John is confronted by the sheriff in the forest, Little John notes "I was mysserved of my dynere / whan I was with you at home."¹²⁸ This ability to leave Robin Hood's service to work for the sheriff then return to Robin Hood when it is the better job is the very thing the nobles feared when they pushed for the Statute of Labourers. It is also what the rebels wanted when they asked that people be allowed to choose for whom to work.

While it might appear that Robin's being an outlaw could make it difficult for the lower class audiences of the ballads to accept him as the standard bearer of their objectives, the rebels in the Peasants' Revolt did not ostracize outlaws and criminals.¹²⁹ In fact, the rebels often invited them to join in the march on London. One of the targets of the rebels were prisons. They broke into Marshalsea prison and liberated all those

¹²⁵ "A Gest of Robin Hood," ll 586-588.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, ll 623-624. In the ballads, god can mean either good or God, depending on the context where the word is used and whether or not there is a capital G.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, ll 679-682.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, ll 759-760.

¹²⁹ The origin of the term outlaw is to literally be outside of the law. People who were declared as such lost all their property and rights, and could be killed without punishment.

who were incarcerated for debt and felony.¹³⁰ The same action was repeated at Maidstone and Fleet prisons.¹³¹ The *Anonimale Chronicle* also notes that at Newgate Prison all the prisoners were released “regardless of the reason for which they had been imprisoned.”¹³² Henry Knighton took a skeptical, and most likely incorrect, view of these actions though, and claimed that the prisoners were freed because of the kindness of the rebels but to increase their numbers as former prisoners were then forced to join them in their march.¹³³

In making the rebels’ demands to the king, Wat Tyler said, “henceforward there should be no outlawry” and asked that the commons be pardoned for any offenses that had been committed up to and including the revolt.¹³⁴ This demand is not part of the common rhetoric of late medieval England. Because the nobility did not ask for such indulgences, it represents a clear rebel class demand. The king met these conditions in the same charter that freed the bondmen. He pardoned “our said liegemen and subjects for all felons, acts of treason, transgressions and extortions performed by them.”¹³⁵ The inclusion of the outlaws and other criminals in the demands of the peasants is significant. Had the rebels just freed the prisoners, it could be argued that they considered them to be unjustly imprisoned by a traitorous government. However, Wat Tyler made sure to include them in his demands. This seems to indicate that the lower classes did not look view the outlaws and criminals as repulsive, the way the upper classes did. The fact that the rebels invited the freed prisoners to join them in the uprising indicates that they felt a brotherhood with the criminals; once again this is not an

¹³⁰ *Anonimale Chronicle*, 155

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 156

¹³² *Ibid.*, 158.

¹³³ *Chronicon Henrici Knighton*, 182.

¹³⁴ *Anonimale Chronicle*, 164, *Polychronicon*, 201.

¹³⁵ *Historia Anglicana*, 180-181.

upper class point of view, which is important because this paper is tracing attitudes common to the rebels and the early Robin Hood ballads.

This favorable opinion towards criminals is also reflected in the ballads of Robin Hood. The ballads often begin and end noting what a good man Robin Hood is. According to “Robin Hood and the Potter,” which calls on yeomen “comely, corteys and god” to listen, Robin is a yeoman who was “boyt corteys and fre.”¹³⁶ The ballad ends with a plea for “God haffe mersey on Roben Hodys sole, / and saffe all god yemanrey!”¹³⁷ “A Gest of Robin Hood” has the longest description, telling of a good yeoman who was “a prude outlaw, / whyles he walked on ground: / so curteyse an outlawe as he was one / was never non founde.”¹³⁸ Following his death at the end of the ballad, the composer asks that “Cryst have mercy on his soule, / that dyded on the Rode! / For he was a good outlawe, / and dyde pore men moch god.”¹³⁹ In the ballads, despite the fact Robin Hood is an outlaw, he is heroic. He resists the corrupt authority of the sheriff, a bureaucrat, and corrupt members of the clergy. Similarly, the rebels also resisted “illegitimate” noble authority and saw outlaws as worthy comrades at arms,

Men like Sir Richard, the knight to whom Robin loans four hundred pounds in “A Gest of Robin Hood” also have a positive view of the outlaw. When Little John and the other men surround Sir Richard in the forest and “invite” him to dinner, the knight notes “[Robin Hood] is a gode yoman...of hym I have herde moche gode.”¹⁴⁰ Sir Richard explains to his wife the reason why Robin has such a good reputation, because Robin helped him out of trouble and “ne hd be hus kyndnesse, / beggars had we bene.”¹⁴¹ However, the clergy and those who are corrupt often have a different perspective of

¹³⁶ “Robin Hood and the Potter” in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, ll 6, 10 *corteys*-*courteous*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, ll 322-323.

¹³⁸ “A Gest of Robin Hood,” ll 5-8. *prude*-*proud*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, ll 1821-1824. *Cryst*-*Christ* *Rode*-*cross*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, ll 103-104.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, ll 511-512.

Robin Hood. The titular monk in “Robin Hood and the Monk” refers to Robin Hood as a king’s felon and a traitor who once robbed him of one hundred pounds.¹⁴² The sheriff of Nottingham considers Robin to be an outlaw as well.¹⁴³ One of the monks in “A Gest of Robin Hood” says that Robin Hood is “a stronge thefe...of hym herd I never good.”¹⁴⁴ Outlaws, especially in the forest, were a problem throughout much of the middle ages. The outlaws often selected victims who were wealthy, and crouched down behind the undergrowth before attacking. Even clearing the land to two hundred feet had little effect.¹⁴⁵ In the middle ages the woods were not well policed, and as a result were full of fugitives from justice.¹⁴⁶ This contributed to the linking of nature with outlaws, with the medieval peasants sympathetically imagining the free life of the outlaws in the green rustling forest.¹⁴⁷

Robin Hood in the ballads is linked to the forest; and is hence linked to noble outlawry. The phrase “grene wode” is often employed to establish the setting. At one point, Robin is even described as being an animal in the forest. The sheriff of Nottingham is out hunting in the forest, and comes across Little John, whom the sheriff believes to be a man in his service named Reynold Greenleaf. When the sheriff asks what he has been doing, Little John replies he has seen a fair sight. Little John then goes on to describe how “yonder I sawe I right fayre harte, / his coloure is of a grene; / seven score of dere upon a herde / be with hym all bydene. / Their tyndes are so sharpe, maister, / of sixty, and well mo.”¹⁴⁸ Little John is actually describing Robin Hood as the hart, and the other outlaws as the deer in the herd with him. When the sheriff asks to be

¹⁴² “Robin Hood and the Monk,” ll 85, 92, 94.

¹⁴³ “Robin Hood and the Potter,” ll 225.

¹⁴⁴ “A Gest of Robin Hood,” ll 883-884.

¹⁴⁵ J.J. Jusserand, *English Wayfaring Life in the Middle Ages*, trans. Lucy Toulmin Smith (New York: University Paperbacks, 1961), 74, 76-77.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ “A Gest of Robin Hood,” ll 735-744. *harte*-hart (male deer) *bydene*-together *tyndes*-antlers

led to this herd, Little John takes him to Robin, the “mayster-herte.”¹⁴⁹ It is at this point when the trickster Robin Hood emerges in the ballads. He jokes around with the sheriff before relieving him of some of his gear.

Robin appears to be in his element in the woods, it gives him strength. In the forest, Robin Hood is able to “invite guests” to come dine with him, willingly or not. When Sir Richard’s lands are offered as a reward to whomever captures Robin Hood, “there is no man in this countré / may have the knyghtes londes, / whyle Robyn Hode may ryde or gone, / and bere a bowe in his hondes.”¹⁵⁰ Robin, the trickster, is more successful in endeavors undertaken within the forest. Robin Hood has a special, almost symbiotic relationship with the forest.

This relationship is further demonstrated when Robin Hood joins the king at his court. After a year away from the woods, it even appears that Robin Hood has lost his skill in archery. While watching archers shoot, Robin laments “somtyme I was an archere good, / a styffe and eke a strong; / I was comted the best archere / that was in mery Englonde.”¹⁵¹ Robin also notes that being away from the forest will kill him, that “yf I dwele lenger with the kyng, / sorowe wyll me sloo.”¹⁵² When Robin leaves the service of the king he “dwelled in grene wode, / twenty yere and two” and he refused to return to court and the king.¹⁵³ It could even be interpreted that the prioress who bled Robin Hood and killed him represented civilization away from the woods, and Robin Hood ultimately died because of this dislocation.

The idea of the forest had special significance to the rebels. Throughout medieval times, the forest was imagined as being a wilderness, populated by outlaws.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, line 752.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, ll 1449-1452.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, ll 1745-1748. *styffe-hardy comted*-considered to be

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, ll 1751-1752.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, ll 1797-1798.

¹⁵⁴ Pollard, 58.

The setting of the ballads in shires farther north of England than where the authors lived continued this literary stereotype. By setting the ballads in the north, the authors of the ballads, most of whom were primarily from the southern areas of Essex and Kent, could use the long standing stereotype of the north as wild, uncivilized and lawless.¹⁵⁵ The reality of the forest was of course, different. Instead of a vast, unknown wilderness, the forest was an integral part of medieval society, as an administrative system and a managed resource.¹⁵⁶ Food as an important concern in the countryside, especially given the harsh climate in the late middle ages, and the animals in the forest provided a food resource.¹⁵⁷ The nobility who controlled the forests were concerned with the poaching of these resources by the commons, and often imposed heavy fines on those caught.¹⁵⁸ The woods provide sustenance for Robin and his men in this way. In the ballads they “always slewe the kynges dere, / and welt then at [their] wyll.”¹⁵⁹ Just as the outlaws hunted the king’s deer, the rebels wanted rights to do the same, decreasing the privileges of the nobles in that area. The nobles had limited the commons’ access to the forest in the 1351 Statute of Labourers. According to Henry Knighton, “the rebels petitioned the king that all preserves of water, parks and woods should be made common to all: so that throughout the kingdom the poor as well as the rich should be free to take game in water, fish ponds, woods and forests as well as to hunt hares in the fields—and to do these and many other things without impediment.”¹⁶⁰ The rebels also sought to remove the aristocracy’s privileged access to the lands when they burned the manorial records, making fourteenth century English society less repressive.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁵⁷ Justice, 155, 152.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 153, 152.

¹⁵⁹ “A Gest of Robin Hood,” ll 1464-1465. *welt*-used

¹⁶⁰ *Chronicon Henrici Knighton*, 186.

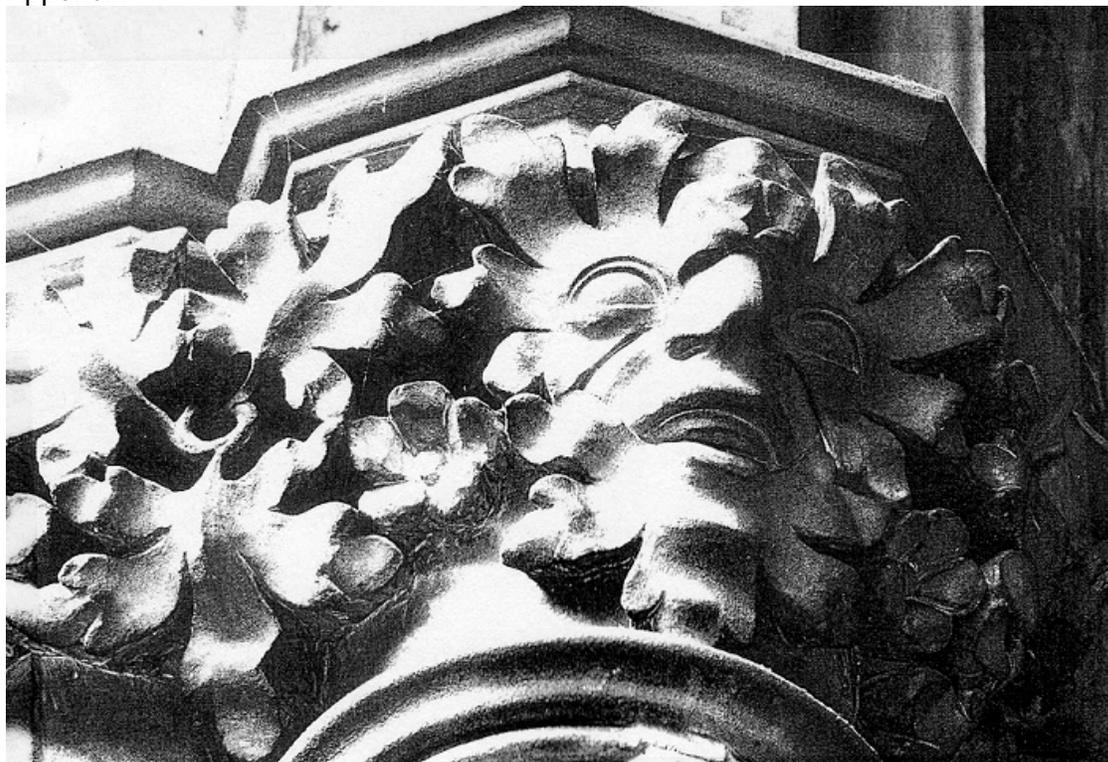
¹⁶¹ Justice, 155.

The rebels who initiated the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 set out to accomplish several different goals. They believed that the kingdom was being mismanaged, and intended to free the young king from the influence of his "corrupt advisors." They wanted to put an end to serfdom. Their intention was to make all men and women, including the clergy and nobles legally (if not socially) equal under the king. They also sought King Richard's pardon for any criminal acts the rebels committed during the revolt. The rebels placed their faith in the king and the expectation that he would support them and make the changes a permanent part of fourteenth-century English life. Their faith in the king was misplaced however, and the revolt quietly sputtered to a stop and faded away, leaving the rebels with nothing concrete to show for their actions.

The 1381 Peasants' Revolt did leave an impact on British society in another way, in the legend of Robin Hood. The concept of a Robin Hood had existed prior to the revolt, in subversive rhymes, a pseudonym for outlaws and the mythical green man figure carved into the decorations of Gothic architecture. But the Peasants' Revolt was an important factor in the coalescing of the Robin Hood motifs into the earliest medieval ballads. Themes that were found in the actions of the rebels are common to the ballads. Anti-clericalism is evident with the abbot who loaned the knight money and in the other, lower ranking members of the clergy who appear in the ballads. These characters are greedy, possessing luxurious goods and unwilling to show charity. The clergy in the ballads are presented in the same light as the clergy the rebels sought to expunge from the realm. The sheriff of Nottingham, representing the bureaucracy of the kingdom, is weak and dishonorable. The king is, similar to Richard II, placed on a pedestal and presented as a good ruler. Under Robin, his outlaws represent a more egalitarian society, with the possibility of economic mobility. The forest that appears throughout all of the ballads, symbolizes both the green man and the noble outlaw, wronged by an unfair system.

While these themes are present in both the Robin Hood ballads and the Peasants' Revolt, the question does arise whether common themes really prove a cause and effect relationship. I argue that in this case, they do. By examining the text of the chronicles, written by upper class eyewitnesses to the revolt, it becomes clear that the ideals and goals expressed by the rebels were not universally found in late fourteenth-century society. This is apparent in four major points: anticlericalism, critique of nobility, loyalty to the king, and the goal of an egalitarian society. Some of these beliefs were found throughout all levels of society, however the rebels in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 acted to effect change, often shocking the nobles by their actions. In my reading the ballads of Robin Hood, the agenda of the peasants is loud and clear. So in a sense the rebels did win. Their demands are encoded in the Robin Hood myths, allowing the rebels' voices to be heard and continue to affect society long after the uprising was put down. While there are no written sources that tie the three late medieval Robin Hood ballads to Peasants' Revolt of 1381, my analysis has shown that there is strong likelihood that the Peasants' Revolt had a direct influence on the ballads. It is impossible to say exactly what led to these particular Robin Hood ballads being written when they were, but the Peasants' Revolt appears to have been a major cause. The Robin Hood ballads and the rebels sought to legitimize the "other," the outcasts living beyond the pale in the forests. The marginal becomes normative, both in the rebels' unrealized dreams, and in the ballads of Robin Hood. These ballads came to be written down as a result of themes articulated in the popular movement in the 1381 Peasants' Revolt, giving British society one of its most enduring mythical figures: Robin Hood.

Appendix 1



top image: Lichfield, Staffordshire, England 1340



bottom image: Sutton Berger, Wiltshire, England early 14th century

Images from *The Green Man* by Kathleen Basford

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