



'The Original Hoods' Late Medieval English Crime Fiction

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Abstract

Early crime fiction is usually linked to the true crime stories that developed into *The Newgate Calendar* by the mid-eighteenth century, but there were late medieval and early modern narratives in popular poetry that described and even celebrated actions by free peasants against the authorities of the church and the then somewhat fragmentary state. Four domains of such narratives – seen here as the ancestors of the crime novel – are described and explored. They are: Robin Hood ballads, focusing on the early major texts, 'Robin Hood and the Monk', 'Robin Hood and the Potter', 'Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne' and 'A Gest of Robyn Hode'. Popular ballads recording family crimes, 'The Twa Sisters', 'The Cruel Brother', 'Edward', or 'Lord Randal' or presenting conflicts with the supernatural, 'Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight' and 'Gil Brenton'. Anglo-Scottish border ballads of politico-military conflict, 'Johnie Armstrong' and 'Tam Lin'. Early modern verse narratives usually called 'King and Subject Narratives', where a free peasant directly challenges the anonymous monarch and finally meets him, awkwardly, at court: 'King Edward the Fourth and a Tanner of Tamworth', 'John the Reeve' and 'King Edward and the Shepherd', with its intriguingly open ending. Across these little known rich popular narratives are transcribed the patterns of early and politically-resistant crime fiction.

Keywords: *Border-Conflict, Crime, Outlaws, Peasants, Politics*

1. Looking Back

The past of the massive genre of crime fiction has attracted different responses. Those seeking high-culture connections have argued that Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* offers the first family crime detection, while others have explored the Old Testament for distant accreditation, as in the false-arrest story of 'Susannah and the Elders' found in The Book of Daniel. However, facts and evidence, as a detective might say, link the genre to the allegedly true crime stories that flourished from the seventeenth century on in Britain, France and America, and even before. In London, in

1591, you might have excitedly read *Sundry strange and inhumaine Murthers, lately committed*, and admired the illustration showing a crazy-eyed man axing three children to death.

That illustration and parallel stories are to be found in Marshburn and Velie's *Blood and Knavery* (1973). The narratives can be dark and disturbing – the axe-murderer was hired by the children's father – or comic and outlaw-like, as with *The Merry Life and Mad Exploits of Captain James Hind*, whose protagonist, arrested in 1651, hated 'the caterpillars of the commonwealth', professional men and officials (1973, 103). But, as in nineteenth-century crime fiction, murder was not then the dominant misdeed – modernity and its individualism have privileged that kind of mystery. Most early crime pamphlets dealt with 'cony-catchers', urban crooks who caught 'conies', human rabbits, by being pickpockets or con-men. Such crime reports, and their often executorial outcomes, would take a more formal pattern in *The Newgate Calendar*, a highly popular series that started in 1728 and overlapped with the rise of clever specialised detectives in the 1840s, the beginning of the crime fiction genre that still flourishes.

But there was more, further back. Most modern genres took their rise in the late medieval period with towns, non-servile workers, social mobility, printing and the beginnings of general literacy: all of these changed social culture massively, and inherently modernly. Then as now, ordinary people made known their thoughts on social challenge and social change, and a series of popular literary forms, first oral, but fortunately also soon literary, emerged as the people disputed the authoritarian practices of the local representatives of the church and the king, and committed crimes that readers sympathised with, as they would do in the crime novel.

2. *Robin Hood, Outlaw Crime Hero*

Most accounts of crime fiction see the crime novel as a modern formation linked to the realist fiction of between-wars America, when writers like W.R. Burnett and J.M. Cain explored the contexts and the minds of focal criminals, rather than merely making mystery out of their crimes. The sub-genre can be more fully analysed – Martin Priestman shrewdly observed a similarity between Burnett's *Little Caesar* and the Newgate Novel of the 1830s-40s, when authors like Bulwer Lytton and Ainsworth treated real major criminals quasi-heroically (1998, 39). The crime novel was also active elsewhere – in 1930s Britain A.B. Cox (writing as 'Francis Iles' and 'Anthony Berkeley') explored the criminal's mind so fully his novels can be seen as early psychothrillers. Further away in time and place, the fact that white Australia started in 1788 with nothing but convicts and warders made heroic police detectives very rare in the national crime fiction, especially by men. Peter Temple's *The Broken Shore* (2005) is the first real success in that mode, but from the mid-nineteenth century to the present there have been many successful Australian crime novels, such as Marcus Clarke's powerful *His Natural Life* (1870-1872), the earlier novels of Arthur Gask in the 1920s and in the present Garry Disher realising and celebrating a master criminal named Wyatt.

Ernest Mandel saw the crime novel as a 'phenomen[on] of social decomposition' (1984, 94), and in each of the contexts just mentioned social changes and strains were strongly evident. But stories about crime told with sympathy for the apparent criminal also appear in Britain from the late medieval period, when the world of feudalism and serfdom was itself decomposing, and large numbers of men were no longer bound to a lord but had skills for which they earned money – and so had personal and social mobility, and also hostility to official and clerical oppression. The earliest preserved and most obviously socio-political of criminal celebrations are the many ballads about Robin Hood and his men, first mentioned in the mid-1370s,

surviving in some cases from the fifteenth century, and thriving as single-sheet printed ballads in seventeenth-century London.

The crime-oriented politics of the Robin Hood cycle are full and varied. The two earliest ballads will be discussed in some detail as they encompass the major themes of the mode, then variant features will be illustrated from other texts. The earliest survivor is ‘Robin Hood and the Monk’, from about 1450, when popular poetry is beginning to be written down. It starts, of course, in the forest:

In somer, when the shawes be sheyne, [groves are bright]
 And leves be large and long,
 Hit is full mery in feyre foreste
 To here the foullys [birds] song. (ll. 1-4)¹

For the forest outlaws it is always summer, and they shelter ‘Under the grene wode tre’ (l. 8) – a line often repeated. This may seem idyllic, but actual outlaws rarely stayed in the forests in winter. More realism occurs: while later Romantic forest celebrations would be in distant, hilly locations, Robin Hood’s forest is always conveniently close next to a town – Sherwood beside Nottingham, especially, but other locations occur, notably Barnsdale near York. The action recurrently engages with people from the nearby town: Richard Tardif has argued (1983) that the prime early audience of the outlaw myth was town-dwelling ‘journeymen’, the lower element of urban tradesmen, and that the outlaw activities project the journeymen’s dissatisfaction with social and church officials. The audience of the printed ballads was clearly primarily urban – they are very early in printed, marketable, single-sheet form. And the hero’s name is meaningful. Robin is a diminutive of Robert, suggesting he is young, or at least not status-claiming. And a hood is a hat worn by a simple man – and also it could make identification difficult. There are hyper-individualists who want to find a ‘real Robin Hood’ – usually amateur historians who live in the outlaw myth areas – but there is no evidence supporting any of their factitious fantasies: if there is an origin, it is the sturdy peasant Robin des Bois [of the Woods] in thirteenth-century French *pastourelle* and *bergerie* poems, who defends his beloved Marian against incursive knights and clerics.

Though the outlaws often attack church officials, they are not pagan. Robin says at the start he is grieved to have not attended ‘“mas nor matyns”’ (l. 24) for more than a fortnight, and today he will go to Nottingham, ‘“With the myght of mylde Marye”’ (l. 28): worship of Mary developed strongly in the fifteenth century, as a more humanly accessible mode of religious feeling.

Much the miller’s son warns Robin to take twelve men for protection, but he replies he only needs Little John, to ‘“beyre my bow”’ (l. 37). John objects, saying he will carry his own bow, and so will Robin: they can ‘“shete [shoot for] a peny”’ (l. 41). Robin says no, he will give him odds, three pennies for one. As Robin assumes a form of mastery, John resists – and when after a while John says he has won five shillings, Robin denies it and ‘smote [struck] hym with his hande’ (l. 56). John is angry, pulls out his sword, then says ‘“Were thou not my maister” ... / “Thou shuldys by hit ful sore”’ (ll. 59-60). Though John recognises Robin’s leadership, that does not allow Robin to dominate.

The danger of such dissent soon becomes evident. They separate, Robin enters Nottingham alone; he is recognised by a ‘gret-hedid munke’ (l. 75) he recently robbed of £100, who hurries

¹ Robin Hood texts (Section 2) are quoted from Knight and Ohlgren 1997, other ballads (Section 3 and elsewhere) from Leach 1955, while ‘King and Commoner’ texts (Section 4) are from Furrow 2013.

to inform the sheriff and his men. They fight, Robin kills twelve and wounds more, then breaks his sword on the sheriff's head and runs into the church, presumably for sanctuary. A leaf of the text is missing here, and the story re-starts with outlaws in the forest swooning at the news of Robin's capture. Only Little John is calm: he and Much will look for the monk, and rescue Robin.

They see the monk on his way to the king with the sheriff's letter about Robin. They pretend also to be Robin's victims, so the monk is off his guard. Then John says "He was my maister" ... / "That thou hase browght in bale [danger]" (ll. 199-200): they kill the monk, and his page, and take the letter to the king. He gives them twenty pounds, makes them yeomen of the crown and sends with John a seal for the sheriff to use to bring Robin to the king. When they reach Nottingham the gates are barred because Robin Hood is in jail and his men's attack is feared. Entering with the seal, they give the sheriff the king's letter: when he asks where the monk is, John wryly says the king has made him Abbot of Westminster. They feast well: when the sheriff is drunk and asleep, John kills the jailer, frees Robin, and the three jump off the lowest point of the city wall.

Back in Sherwood they are all 'As light as lef on lynde' [leaf on tree] (l. 302). John says to Robin "I have done the a gode turne for an ill" (l. 305) in bringing you back "under the grene-wode lyne" (l. 309), and then says simply "Fare wel, and have gode day." (l. 310). But:

"Nay, be my trouth", seid Robyn,
 "So shall hit never be;
 I make the maister," seid Robyn
 "Of alle my men and me." (ll. 311-314)

John rejects this way of resolving their difference, using at first his chosen master's own language:

"Nay, be my trouth," seid Litull John,
 "So shalle hit never be;
 But lat me be a fellow," seid Litull John
 "No noder kepe I be." [No other I care to be] (ll. 315-318)

The outlaws are always 'fellows' and they select Robin as leader of their fellowship. New fellows often appear. A dozen 'Robin Meets His Match' ballads tell about his personal conflict with a stranger to the forest: they either draw or Robin loses, but the stranger joins the band. His title shows he too is a skilled freeman – Robin fights a Tanner, a Butcher, a Ranger, a Pindar (pound-keeper) – and, in what seems a back-dated story, when Little John himself arrives in the forest they fight on a bridge and Robin finally falls in the river.

'Robin Hood and the Monk' offers crime – the past theft from the monk, as well as the killings for rescue: fourteen men and a page-boy die. There is a ready use of pretence to outwit the outlaws' enemies – the monk, the king, the sheriff and the jailer. A crucial sense is that safety lies in numbers, but also it is asserted the fellows are all equals, in some way even including their chosen leader.

Similar criminal-cum-political themes appear in the other early-surviving ballad 'Robin Hood and the Potter', which involves town action, and focuses more closely on the sheriff. The manuscript is dated around 1500, and opens very similarly to its predecessor:

In schomer [summer], when the leves spryng,
 The bloschoms [blossoms] on every bowe,

So merey doyt [doth] the berdys [birds] syng
 Yn wodys merey [very merry] now. (ll. 1-4)

We hear that the ‘god yeman’ (l. 5) Robin Hood is ‘boyt corteys and fre’ [both courteous and generous] (l. 10), and also that ‘For the loffe [love] of owre ladey, / All wemen weschepeyd he’ (ll. 11-12). The worshipping of ‘all women’, rather than just Mary, is unusual for Robin – the early outlaw ballads have no Maid Marian: women did not join their outlawed men in the forests. Later in the ballad it will become clear why ‘women’ are mentioned here.

Robin and his men, in the forest, see coming ‘a pround potter’ (l. 15) – ‘proud’ here and elsewhere is not necessarily negative, but seems to indicate someone with a strong sense of self. Robin comments this potter never pays any toll for passing through the forest; Little John says he is a good fighter, and bets forty shillings he will beat anyone. Robin takes the bet, and asks the potter for a toll. He refuses, and takes his fighting staff from his cart. Robin uses a sword and buckler, but the potter, using well his simpler weapon, hits the buckler out of Robin’s hand and, as he stoops for it, knocks him down with a blow to the neck.

Robin pays John. The potter says it is very rude to hinder a yeoman in this way. Robin comments that he ‘“seys god yemenrey”’ (l. 90) and asks if he would like ‘“A felischepe”’ [fellowship] (l. 94) – then suggests they exchange clothing and Robin take his pots to Nottingham to sell. The potter agrees, saying Robin will ‘“feynde [find] me a felow gode”’ (l. 98). John warns Robin to beware of the sheriff ‘“For he ys leytell [little] howr [our] frende”’, (l. 108), but Robin says ‘“Felowhes, let me alone”’ (l. 110) and hurries off in the cart.

In town Robin sets up his pot-stall ‘agenest the screffeys gate’ (l. 129), suggesting he has mischief in mind. He sells the pots so cheaply that people think – ironically with truth – ‘he had be no potter long’ (l. 136). Urban commercial greed is being mocked by Robin, it seems, and with only five pots left, he sends them to the sheriff’s wife – she is delighted, calls him ‘“sir”’ (l. 146), and invites him to have dinner with them. When they are dining ‘With a nobell chere’ (l. 166) the sheriff’s men speak of an up-coming shooting match for forty shillings – the sum Robin lost to Little John.

The ‘potter’ attends the match, and says if he had a bow he would show them something; the sheriff offers some bows. Like Little John with the king, Robin is infiltrating the world of authority – a very common feature of the crime novel. Robin’s first shot is good, and he wins when, in the final round, ‘He cleffed [cleaved] the preke on thre’ (l. 208) – the ‘prick’ is the peg that holds the target’s centre to its background, and here it is hit like a bull’s-eye. The sheriff is impressed, and the potter, as if casually, mentions he has in his cart a bow he got from Robin Hood. The sheriff says he would rather meet the outlaw than have a hundred pounds. The quasi-potter says come with me and meet him. The trap is sprung: there was a criminal purpose as Robin Hood played one of Tardif’s urban tradesmen.

As they leave, Robin says to the sheriff’s wife ‘“Dam, for mey loffe [for my love] and ye well thys were, / Y geffe [give] yow here a golde ryng.”’ (ll. 240-241) She is very pleased; her husband is too, because they are to head for the forest. But when they reach it, Robin blows his horn and his men run to him: Little John asks ‘“How haffe yow solde yowre ware?”’ (l. 263) and Robin answers ‘“Y haffe browt the screffe of Notynggam, / For all howre chaffare.”’ [For all our business] (ll. 266-267).

They take the sheriff’s horse and ‘“all yowre hother gere”’ [your other gear] (l. 279) – presumably valuables and equipment – and tell him to walk home. Robin says ‘“gret [greet] well they weyffe at home”’ (l. 284) and sends her a fine white palfrey: he tells the sheriff if it were not for her ‘“Off more sorow scholde yow seyng.”’ [sing] (l. 289) This relation with the

wife is part of Robin's manipulation of urban forces. In the early trade context, a tradesman's wife had a major role in the business and often inherited it when her husband died: this too is a theme for Tardif's journeymen. When her husband returns she laughs and says ' "Now haffe yow payed for all the pottys / That Roben gaffe to me." ' (ll. 304-305) The wife motif, like the lack of bloodshed, makes this a more subtle account of outlaw crime than 'Robin Hood and the Monk'.

Back in the forest Robin asks the potter what the pots were worth – two nobles he says (old style, thirteen shillings and fourpence). Robin gives him ten pounds, fifteen times as much, showing noble, but also yeomanly, generosity. Robin and the potter part 'Ondernethe the grene wod tre' (l. 321) – and the poet finally wishes God's mercy 'on Roben Hodys solle [soul] / And saffe [save] all god yemanrey!' (ll. 322-323).

'Yeoman' was originally a term for a person of medial feudal status, between labouring serf and exploitative lord, like Chaucer's Reeve or Miller, themselves both socially challenging figures. The term was also used for such figures once they fully escaped feudalism and set up to earn alone, through a trade. These fictional yeomen, Robin, Little John, the potter and the other 'Meets His Match' new fellows, exercise freedom, courage, cunning and the support of their fellowship to demonstrate new values of liberty and resistance to the containing and conservative forces of church and state.

The first two lengthy ballads provide a broad view of Robin's quasi-criminal actions and values, whether in the forest or under threat or disguise in the town. The force of that hero of a new social formation, speaking for people who felt crimes were being done against them, would both survive and develop. 'Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne' is a somewhat later survival, only preserved in Thomas Percy's famous manuscript of earlier works, written in about 1646 – but there is a short play from c.1475 which uses some of its action. This positive crime story again starts in the beauty of summer as Robin and John go to seek two men Robin thinks, or perhaps has dreamed, attacked him. They see a threatening figure, dressed in horse-hide, but once again they fall out – John wants to attack the man, but Robin will not stand back. They argue and separate; John goes back to the forest, to find the sheriff's men attacking, two of Robin's men dead, and then he is caught.

Without acknowledging his own identity, Robin finds this person – whose name is Guy of Gisborne – who is looking for Robin Hood on behalf of the sheriff. They compete at shooting, Robin wins, and reveals who he is. Now they fight seriously: Robin stumbles on a root, but he thinks on 'Our Lady deere' (l. 159), leaps up and beheads Guy with 'an awkwarde stroke' [backhand] (l. 161). He changes clothes with Guy, cuts his face with a knife to make it unrecognisable, and puts the head on the end of his own bow.

He returns to Barnsdale disguised as Guy, blows Guy's horn and asks the sheriff to be allowed to kill ' "the knave" ' (l. 200), Little John, as he has done to John's ' "master" ' (l. 199). At once he cuts John's bonds and gives him Guy's bow: the sheriff runs away but John 'with an arrow broade, / Did cleave his heart in twinn.' (ll. 233-234). In this ballad we again find a conflict among the outlaws, resolved harmoniously; Robin and John both show courage, while this time Robin defeats the sheriff when in disguise and saves John. The grim ending is only in Percy's manuscript: when he printed the ballad in his *Reliques of English Poetry* (1765), John merely shot the sheriff 'into the backe-syde' (l. 236).

The hero's social and criminal aggression could be real, not just literary – the outlaw figure was at times cited in the context of actual political and criminal resistance. When Sir Piers Venables rescued a prisoner and escaped to the forest in 1439 he was said to have behaved 'like Robyn Hode and his meyne' [band of men] (Knight 1994, 25). In 1441 a group of yeomen

and labourers blocked a road in Norfolk, threatening to kill a local landowner and chanting 'We arn [are] Robynhodesmen war, war, war' [beware] (108).

This sense of justified resistance in the name of Robin Hood, literary and real, was a new and English formation. There are instances from the fourteenth century of what are called 'Robin Hood play-games', which celebrate the hero as something like a lord of the forest – in late May processions might weave from the local woods into the centre of small towns, where there would be celebratory games and collections for civic use. These 'play-games', which had no scripts, just town records, lasted into the seventeenth century, but they initially had no crime or outlaw element. The origin of this genial, local-hero Robin appears to be the thirteenth-century French *pastourelles* and *bergeries* mentioned above: the figure was known for these non-outlaw 'play games' in towns in south-western England and south-eastern Scotland, both linked with the French wine trade. But the benign local hero became darker in the very troubled English fourteenth century, as major social change and official hostility to newly free workers made authority seem to ordinary people increasingly threatening, so stimulating the Robin Hood outlaw ballads in a mode like early crime novels.²

Apparently as a result of Robin's anti-official possibilities, a number of towns banned the Robin Hood 'play-games' as being socially disruptive: famously, when in 1561 Edinburgh banned such a performance, the people refused to accept this, held the event and in addition released the prisoners from the town jail, and put the magistrates in. In response to such challenges, conservative culture began to oppose the ballad-based celebration of the outlaw and his crimes by reworking and effectively gentrifying the myth. This process would change Robin from a yeoman outlaw resisting social and church authority to, eventually, a nobleman only resisting a bad king and corrupt clergy. This process developed slowly: a first instance was 'A Gest of Robyn Hode', from the mid to late fifteenth century. It is in ballad metre but is lengthy, with 1824 lines. Its title claims some social relocation – 'Gest' is not the word 'jest', but from Latin 'Res Gestae', 'things done', and was used as a title for accounts of prestige-claiming gentry heroes.

From the start of the poem, Robin is somewhat upgraded. Before dining, he wants first to meet some 'bolde baron', 'a lord or sire', 'Or some knyght or squyer' (ll. 23, 25 and 27). This is like King Arthur delaying the court's dinner until some promise of exciting adventures arrives. After they say mass, Robin sends John and Will off to find a 'gest' – this time a guest – and a knight appears to them, looking very miserable as he rides slowly along. As they begin to feast, Robin indicates he should pay for the meal – 'It was never the maner, by dere worthi God, / A yoman to pay for a knight' (ll. 147-148). The knight says with shame that he has only ten shillings: John checks his purse, and this is correct. Robin will not take it, and the knight tells him all. He is of high and ancient family; his son has killed another knight and to fund the boy's freedom his father has mortgaged his lands and goods for £400 to the abbot of St Mary's, York.

Robin says they will help him – John counts out £400, which they lend him for a year; they give him new clothing, a fine horse and saddle, even Little John to act as his yeoman. The pair head off to York: the abbot, supported by a 'justice', is rude when the knight asks for more time to pay – so the knight produces the money. He goes home, and in the following year raises the £400 for Robin, but also buys a hundred fine sets of bows and arrows to give Robin, and at Wentbridge on the way to the forest he helps a good yeoman who is alone and in danger: the social positions of knighthood and outlaw yeomanry are coming together. Before the year of the loan elapses, Robin has taken £800 from the St Mary's abbey cellarer, who was travelling

²On the play-games and the outlawing of Robin Hood, see Knight 2008.

to London to pay for gaining the knight's lands permanently for the abbey. With quasi-lordly generosity, Robin not only tells the knight to keep the £400 but splits the £800 evenly with him.

This socially new semi-gentrifying sequence has taken a third of the poem: there will be more innovation to come, but now follows some familiar outlaw behaviour. Little John's shooting skills are admired by the sheriff and the knight passes him on to be the sheriff's yeoman, now named (the disguise role again) 'Reynalde Grenelefe'. With his new friend the sheriff's cook – another journeyman – John steals from the sheriff's 'tresoure hows' [house] (l. 693) gold and silver vessels and more than £300 in coin: they take everything to Robin. John then tricks the sheriff into the forest, where Robin's men take him, and to save his life he vows always to support Robin and his men. Later in the story he breaks this oath by having Little John shot in the leg. The knight, now back at home, looks after John until he is healed, so the sheriff besieges his castle and takes the knight to Nottingham to be executed for harbouring the king's enemies. The knight's wife tells Robin, who walks into Nottingham, shoots the sheriff with an arrow, cuts off his head and frees the knight.

That old-style anti-sheriff sequence converts to more outlaw elevation, this time on a royal level. The king and some of his men seize the knight's lands, but cannot track him or Robin. They enter the forest in disguise as monks, with the king as their abbot, and meet Robin, who demands half their money. The abbot-king splits his £40, and then says ' "Edwarde, our Kyng" ' (l. 1533), invites Robin to Nottingham to dine – and shows him the king's seal. Robin immediately kneels and says ' "I love no man in all the worlde / So well as I do my kyng" ' (ll. 1541-1542). He invites the visitors to dinner in the forest, after which they all enjoy wrestling and shooting. Soon both Robin and the knight recognise the king, and they and all the outlaws kneel. The king asks for mercy, but so does Robin. At peace together, the king invites Robin to come to court ' "And there dwell with me." ' (l. 1658) Robin agrees but does not fully commit himself: ' "But me lyke well your servyse, / I come agayne full soone." ' [If I do not like your service, I will return at once.] (ll. 1665-1666).

Robin will assert that independence. The *Gest* is a compromise with the criminal hero, making him assist the knight, even respect the king, but retain a separate identity. Robin finds it very expensive 'to gete hym grete renowne' at court (l. 1736), and one day when he sees young men shooting bows, he recalls being the finest archer in England and says ' "Yf I dwele lenger with the kyng, / Sorowe wyll me sloo." ' [slay] (ll. 1751-1752). The king gives him leave to go to the forest to visit the chapel Robin devoted to St Mary Magdalene – the good outlaw of the New Testament. Robin only has permission for a seven days' visit, but he has gone for good. In the forest he kills a deer, blows his horn and his men welcome him – with their hoods off, in their freedom. He stays there for twenty-two years, but is eventually betrayed by his cousin, a prioress who loves an enemy knight. When Robin goes to the priory to have blood drawn they betray him – no detail is given, simply a sudden statement of Robin's death, remembering him merely as being a 'good outlawe, / And dyde pore men moch god' [good] (ll. 1823-1824).

In this narrative so much is made of the knight and the king that, along with the title and almost dismissive ending, the *Gest* takes a major step towards depoliticising the resistant social force of the early ballads – often not operating like a crime novel but more like a sub-Arthurian story. The conservative appropriation of the criminal outlaw would go much further by the end of the sixteenth century. Gentrifying the outlaw was fully developed in 1598-1599 in Anthony Munday's two plays *The Downfall of Robert, Earle of Huntingdon* (1601) and *The Death of Robert Earle of Huntington* (1601). Robin Hood is the pseudonym the earl takes when he is outlawed, betrayed by his uncle the Prior of York. Moving to the forest is the 'downfall' of a noble lord, not the means of a yeoman's heroism: in the second play King Richard returns

from the crusades and frees Robin, but his enemies, led by the Prior, manage to poison him. The Catholic church at the time of Reformation is Robin's enemy, but so is 'bad King John', seen throughout the Tudor period as negative, and therefore permitting Robin to show loyalty to true royalty in Richard the Lionheart, as well as to the Protestant church.

In the forest Munday's Lord Robin enacts very few of the yeoman's traditional crimes or challenges – he does help with a gallows rescue, but not nearly as effectively or boldly as yeoman Robin does in a ballad when he rescues a widow's three sons from the sheriff's gallows, and hangs the sheriff. The now noble Robin spends much amorous time with his lady – lords must have one to produce an inheritor. Marian, also from early French, is only her forest name: she is Lady Matilda Fitzwater.

Though lordly Robin was welcomed by the literary gentry, the inevitable removal of his low-life crime excitements made the aristocratised outlaw texts relatively uninteresting and never popular. Through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the directly criminal outlaw ballads thrived, though there were some signs of gentrification: the forest band is at times joined by figures from above the yeoman class like Alan a Dale and, according to one ballad, Will Scarlett. Another one, 'Robin Hood and Maid Marian', accepts him as a lord with a lady – though here, unlike in Munday, he finally just stays in the forest, with Marian. The gentry ballads survive in very small numbers, unlike the outlaw versions. On the stage the hero appeared in the eighteenth century, usually in gentry form, with Marian and song and dance, a mode which became nineteenth-century pantomime, where the crime novel-style core was much reduced – and Robin as 'Principal Boy' was usually played by a tall woman with fine legs.

Romantic medievalism combined social resistance with gentrification. A crucial condensation of lordliness and narrative vigour appeared in 1822 from the lively-minded Thomas Love Peacock. In his innovatively titled short novel *Maid Marian*, he returns to Lord Robin most of the vigorous adventures and fighting skills of the early outlaw. This drew on Joseph Ritson's 1795 outlaw ballad anthology, where a long introduction links Robin strongly to medieval political and resistance, but also gives him Norman heritage. Scott's massively popular *Ivanhoe* (1819) uses Robin as an illiterate tough yeoman outlaw, but he is also involved in gentrification because he supports Lord Ivanhoe, himself exiled by Prince John – so both the earlier Robin Hoods, of different social levels, are in effect present. With major influence on later versions, Robin's toughness is by Scott re-directed into nationalism: he is, for the first time, an anti-French Anglo-Saxon. This re-creation extends to masculinism: here, splitting the peg becomes splitting the arrow. That is how Robin defeats a Norman archer whose grandfather fought at Hastings – a national and phallic triumphant heroism that has remained central to the hero myth.

This less than criminal, highly nationalistic and hyper-male Robin features in a series of nineteenth-century popular novels in heroic adventure mode. The figure turned into the internationally noble, if still liberal, Robin in films, notably Douglas Fairbanks' large-earning 1922 silent and Errol Flynn's very popular 1938 version of Sir Robin of Loxley – technicolour bringing him well-filled green tights, an interesting but surely not trans-gender borrowing from the Principal Boy tradition. The old crime novel mode now only recurs if the writer is a modern radical like Geoffrey Trease in the frankly Marxist *Bows Against the Barons* (1934), linking Robin to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, or Richard Carpenter, author of the British television series *Robin of Sherwood*, starting in 1984, where Michael Praed played Robin as a young peasant, both class-conscious and environmentally sensitive.

Such rare modern versions of the medieval criminal hero dissent from the steady depoliticization of the figure – yet even in the past when Robin killed his enemies in numbers

and shared leadership with his men, he was not a revolutionary. He was never against the king himself, and always firmly faithful to the Virgin Mary. He was only against corrupt officials, the exploiters of ordinary people – and in that respect he basically shares the standpoint of most of the heroes of the twentieth-century crime novel, and even the tough-guy detectives who are only just separated from them.

While they are the most notable late medieval versions of the crime novel, the Robin Hood ballads were not the only examples of the mode. Admired characters who undertook crime and dissent for good reasons were explored in two other late medieval and popular forms, the folk ballad and the ‘King and Commoner’ tradition.

3. *The Popular Ballads of Resistance*

Where the Robin Hood ballads were almost all printed by the seventeenth century, had modern tunes (Bronson 1966, 13-14), and were consumed in the cities and towns by readers, the folk ballad was more rural, communal and oral, some with modally old tunes. They were being gathered and reprinted by the early nineteenth century, and the major scholar of the form, aware of folk ballad traditions across Europe, was the Harvard professor Francis James Child, with his ten volumes of the *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 1882-1898. A more recent edition is *The Ballad Book* (1955), edited by the American scholar MacEdward Leach, who reprinted two-thirds of Child’s 305 Ballads and added 45 America-developed ballads.

Many of the texts celebrate love, war, superstition, children, wisdom and other human and semi-human topics, but about a fifth make a social and personal crime central and either indicate guilt or show the crime to be justified in terms of defending one’s rights and resisting damaging authority, so fitting into the pattern nominated here as the late medieval popular crime novel: these are ordinary people who behave like what we call hoods – and quite often wear them.

Sudden crimes of dark passion are the simplest. The late medieval ‘The Twa Sisters’, with an elaborately repetitive six-line stanza, tells a bleak story. A knight seemed to court the elder of two Edinburgh sisters, with gloves and a ring, but he actually ‘lovd the youngest above a thing’ [all thing] (Leach 1955, A, 2, l. 2). The elder sister, filled with ‘grief an spite’ (A, 5, l. 2) flings her sister into the sea. The youngest begs for life, offering her land, her gold and never to marry – but the killer refuses saying ‘“Your cherry cheeks and yallow hair / Gars me gae maiden for evermair”’ [Make me go maiden evermore] (A, 1, ll. 1-2). The girl drowns, a harper sees her, sighs deeply, strings his harp with her hair and that night plays to the King ‘“Farewell to my father the king”’ then ‘“Farewell to my mother the queen”’ and then ‘“Wae [Woe] to my sister, fair Ellen.”’ (A, 26, l. 2; A, 27, l. 2; A, 28, l. 2).

Different marriage trouble comes in another early folk ballad, ‘The Cruel Brother’. A knight woos three sisters, chooses the youngest; her sisters and parents consent, but he ‘forgot to spiek to her brother John’ (A, 10, l. 2). At the wedding all admire the beauty – ‘and her brother John set her on her horse.’ (A, 15, l. 2) Then, as she leans down to kiss her brother: ‘He has taen [taken] a knife, baith [both] lang and sharp, / And stabbd that bonny bride to the heart’ (A, 17, ll. 1-2).

She is bleeding: the best man says she is pale, she asks to ‘“make my will”’ (A, 20, l. 2). She leaves her father her horse, her mother her dress, to one sister her scarf and fan, to the other her bloody clothes to wash. Finally, to her brother John she leaves ‘“The gallows-tree to hang him on.”’ (A, 25, l. 2); to his brother’s wife she leaves ‘“The wilderness to end her life.”’ (A, 26, l. 2). She is buried and ‘it would have made your heart right sair, / To see the bridegroom

rive his haire’ (A, 28, ll. 1-2). Some commentators think the crime is motivated by brother-sister incest, but male vanity seems a more likely motive for this stark, and yet banal, melodrama.

Different in its sources of malice is a very popular short ballad, with many versions and varying titles. In the best-known example, ‘Lord Randal’, his mother addresses him, and the second line of each quatrain ends with her saying ‘“my handsome young man”’: the second half of each line 3, the first of his reply, is right through the poem ‘“mother, mak my bed soon”’. For the first five stanzas the last line is him saying ‘“For I’m wearied wi hunting and fain wad [desire to] lie down.”’. At stanza six this changes to ‘“For I’m sick at the heart and I fain wad lie down.”’.

His mother asks where he has been – out hunting and with ‘“my true-love”’ (A, 2, l. 3), who gave him food. The mother asks what food, he says ‘“Eels fried in a pan mother, mak my bed soon,”’ (A, 3, l. 3) – different versions of the ballad describe various types of poison-containing food. His mother asks who got his leavings of food, and what happened to them – he gave them to his hawks and hounds and ‘“They stretched their legs out an died, mother, mak my bed soon,”’ (A, 5, l. 3). He agrees he is poisoned; and in the next four stanzas is asked what he leaves to people. To his mother ‘“Four and twenty milk kye”’ [cows] (A, 7, l. 3), to his sister his gold and silver, to his brother ‘“My houses and my lands”’ (A, 9, l. 3) and to his ‘“true-love”’: ‘“I leave her hell and fire, mother, mak my bed soon, / For I’m sick at the heart and I fain wad lie down.”’ (A, 10, ll. 3-4).

The motive for this almost lyrically told tragedy is never indicated, nor any actual penalty suggested, beyond the betrayed lover’s grim last wish.

Other early verse-stories are as dark, if not as poetic, and can have an element of surprise at the end. In ‘Edward’ his mother asks why there is blood on his coat: he replies he has killed ‘“my hauke sae guid”’ [good] (B, 1, l. 5); she says a hawk’s blood was never so red, so he says it was ‘“my reid-roan steid”’ [red-roan steed] (B, 2, l. 5). She replies the horse was old and he has more, so he says ‘“O I hae killed my fadir deir, / Alas, and wae [woe] is mee O!”’ (B, 3, ll. 7-8). She asks what penance he will do – he will sail ‘“ovir the sea O.”’ (B, 4, l. 8). She asks what he will do with ‘“your towris and your ha”’ [hall] (B, 5, l. 1) – he will ‘“let thame stand tul they doun fa”’ [fall down] (B, 5, l. 7). She asks what he will leave to ‘“your bairns and your wife”’ – the answer is ‘“The warldis room, late them beg thrae life”’ [through] (B, 6, ll. 3 and 5). Finally she asks what he will leave ‘“to your ain mither deir”’ [own mother dear] (B, 7, ll. 1 and 3). He replies – and everything changes – ‘“The curse of hell frae me sall ye beir, / Sic [such] counseils ye gave to me O.”’ (B, 7, ll. 7-8).

This memorable ballad adds to the grim crime novel structure a final shocking element of Christie-like in-family guilt-revelation. But woman can also play the hero, as it were. Probably the most popular ballad in Europe was ‘Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight’, ancient and very numerous, a short, potent, female-dominant form of something like the Bluebeard myth, with a woman defeating a would-be seducer bully. Lady Isabel who ‘sits in her bower sewing’ (A, 1, l. 1) hears an ‘elf knight’ (A, 1, l. 3) blowing his horn, on ‘The first morning in May’ (A, 1, l. 4). A woman of some confidence, she thinks she would like to have ‘“yon elf knight to sleep in my bosom.”’ (A, 2, l. 2). He appears, says ‘“ye call on me”’ (A, 4, l. 2), and they ride ‘to the greenwood together’ (A, 6, l. 2). But this is not the outlaw greenwood: when they arrive he tells her ‘“Light down”’ as ‘“We are come to the place where ye are to die.”’ (A, 7, ll. 1 and 2). She asks for mercy and to see her father and mother: he replies he has here killed seven king’s daughters ‘“And ye shall be the eight o them.”’ (A, 9, l. 2) She says he should ‘“O sit down a while, lay your head on my knee / That we may hae some rest before that I die.”’ (A, 10, ll. 1-2) He accepts, and ‘Wi a sma charm she lulld him fast asleep.’ [small] (A, 11, l. 2).

Now she acts: ‘Wi his ain sword belt sae fast as she ban him [bound him], / Wi his ain dag-durk sae sair as she dang him.’ [With his own dagger so sorely she struck him] (A, 12, ll. 1-2). The calm and mistakenly attracted princess dismisses her attacker with royal dignity: ‘“If seven king’s-daughters here ye hae slain, / Lye ye here, a husband to them a’.”’ [all] (A, 13, ll. 1-2). There are longer, more padded versions, but this is about as condensed as a crime-repaid ballad can be, as Lady Isabel first imitates female submission and then switches to resistance through fatal violence.

A more complicated form of resistance emerges in ‘Gil Brenton’ – he may have once been another elf-knight, but here has a more human outcome. In this quite late text we hear that Gil has acquired an overseas wife, brought home to ‘the greenwood tree’ (2, l. 2) by his seven score ships. She regrets leaving her mother, and asks a ‘bonny boy’ (15, l. 1) what are the customs of his country. Brusquely he tells her that their king Gil Brenton has married seven king’s daughters, has ‘“cutted the paps frae [from] their breast-bane [bone]”’ (18, l. 1) and sent them mourning home again. He advises the new queen to be sure she is a virgin before going to bed with Gil, so she asks her ‘bowr woman’ (25, l. 1), for £500, to sleep with him in her place. Gil elvishly asks the blankets and sheets if this woman is a maid and they reply ‘“It’s nae a maid that you ha wedded, / But it’s a maid that you ha [have] bedded.”’ (31, ll. 1-2).

With this information, Gil goes to his mother and complains he wooed a maid but has married ‘“a woman great wi child”’ (35, l. 2). The ‘auld queen’ (38, l. 1) says she will speak to ‘“yon base whore”’ (37, l. 2). She smashes down the new queen’s door and asks roughly who is the father of her child. She calmly replies that she, the youngest of seven princesses, was in the greenwood strewing flowers in her mother’s bower when a ‘“jelly hind greeme”’ [a fine young fellow] (51, l. 2) appeared: he kept her there and gave her specific gifts, a lock of yellow hair, a string of black beads, a gold ring, a little penknife, and, by implication, a baby. She shows the gifts to the old queen, who recognises them – they are in effect clues – and goes to her son demanding to know what he did with those things. He says he gave them to ‘“a lady gay / I met i the greenwood on a day”’ (68, ll. 1-2). He adds he would give everything to have ‘“that bright burd [fine lady] i my bowrs [chambers].”’ (70, l. 2) His mother says that is exactly who he has. Within a month a son is born, and there is inscribed on his ‘breast-bane, ‘“Gil Brenton is my father’s name.”’ (74, l. 2). All ends happily: it seems Gil’s prior crimes are forgotten as a result of him being mastered by his doughty queen.

With impassioned crime, whether directly recounted or subtly implied, with brave resistance, from men and also often from women, the early folk ballads speak directly, dramatically and in varied modes about crime at work in the family. Other late medieval ballads deal with malice of a more political and even national kind, and though they are in a sense more like war-stories, effectively they narrate nationally justified crimes, particularly between the English and Scottish along their border.

A classic border ballad is ‘Johnie Armstrong’ – the leader of his well-named English warrior family, he has three thousand men to follow him. King James V of Scotland sees him as a ‘“bold out-law”’ who has ‘“robbèd all the north country”’ (3, ll. 3 and 4), so he cunningly invites him to the pleasures of court. Johnie and eight-score men arrive, finely dressed, but when they meet, the king announces they will all be hanged tomorrow. Johnie says there is no point in ‘“Asking grace of a graceles face”’ (11, l. 3): he and his men fight hard. When ‘fowerscore and tenn of Ionnès best men / Lay gasping all upon the ground’ (14, ll. 3-4) he is himself stabbed from behind by ‘a falce Scot’ (15, l. 3). Johnie tells his men to fight on – he will bleed for a while and then join them. When the news of his death comes to his young son ‘As he stood by his nurse’s knee,’ he vows ‘“if ere he liv’d for to be a man, / O [On] the treacherous Scots revengd he’d be”’ (17, ll. 2 and 3-4).

Not all the Scottish crime stories are so ferocious. In 'Tam Lin', which was said to be old in 1549, and later recorded by Robert Burns himself, Janet, with her kirtle above her knee and yellow hair down to her eyebrows, goes to a well at Carterhaugh, in southern Scotland, to meet Tam Lin, 'Little Tom', notorious lover of young women. She pulls two roses to suggest her interest: he tells her she should not do that, but she replies "Carterhaugh, it is my ain" [own] (7, l. 1) and she will do what she likes. Back at home she resists criticism, saying her lover is "an elfin grey" (15, l. 2) and his horse is shod with silver in front and "burning gowd [gold] behind" (16, l. 4).

She visits the well again, and pulls two more roses. Tam appears and tells her to stop, or their child might die. She asks who he is: he explains he is a human who was out hunting when he was taken by the Queen of the Fairies. Living in fairy land has been very pleasant, but after seven years "We pay a tiend [tribute] to hell" (24, l. 4) and he thinks this Halloween, this very night, the tribute will be himself. He asks her to save him. He describes his milk-white horse: she must pull him from it and hold him, though the Queen turns him into "an esk [lizard] and adder" (31, l. 2): then, when he has been turned into a "burning gleed" [coal] (34, l. 2) Janet should throw him into the well water – and then she can cover, with her green mantle, her "naked knight" (35, l. 2). That night, at midnight, she does all this, and both of them are 'As blythe's a bird in spring' (39, l. 4).

The Queen of the Fairies admits the woman who has taken Tam Lin "Has gotten a stately groom" (40, l. 4) – he was "the boniest [handsomest] knight / In a' my companie" (41, ll. 5-6). She hopes "an ill deth may she die" (41, l. 4), but all she can offer as her final word is that had she known, she would have taken out Tam's two grey eyes, "and put in twa een of tree." [two eyes of wood] (42, l. 4).

The balladeers of England and Scotland can in this way add noble, potent young women to the tough warriors and outlaws of their troubled lands, so developing in family, gender and nationally political terms the sense of resistance to wrongful authority through justified crime central to the early Robin Hood ballads. There is one more set of late medieval encounters with honourable criminal resistance, the very little-known but richly suggestive genre known as 'King and Commoner' ballads or, as Mark Truesdale prefers to call them in his very recent book on the genre (2018), and Melissa Furrow does in her edition (2013), 'bourdes' – popular and in part humorous narratives.

4. *The Disguised King and the Resistant Yeoman*

In this group of long ballads from the late medieval and early modern period there is a repeating pattern of events. They differ in detail, but have the same narrative trajectory and outcome, showing sympathetically in crime novel mode a lower-class subject meeting the anonymous king and exercising some form of resistance to, even crime against, royal authority. The king, wandering on his own, meets just the sort of person Robin Hood would engage in his band, and presents himself as having some connection to the court. Though he and the yeoman argue, they do not fight: the king is entertained at home by the commoner, who usually wears a hood: he reveals a range of anti-authority attitudes and even past actions. Still concealing his identity, the monarch almost always invites the commoner to court. After some celebrations there, the royal identity will be revealed – and the commoner horrified. The stories end with different details, but in none of them is the commoner punished: the conclusion always in some way leaves the quasi-outlaw position seem apparently justified, even to the king.

Each 'bourde' has new and intriguing elements, but they cover a similar range of situations and sense of resistance. An early example is 'King Edward the Fourth and a Tanner of Tamworth'

– an unnumbered ‘King Edward and a Tanner’ also appear with Robin Hood. A ballad with this title was licensed in 1564 and there are four surviving copies from the seventeenth century on.

It starts ‘In summer time, when leaves grew green, / and birds were singing on every tree’ (Leach 1955, 1, ll. 1-2): into this Robin Hood-like setting rides King Edward, out hunting with many local lords. Seeing ‘a bold tanner’ (2, l. 3) on a good horse, he tells his lords to disappear, rides up and asks him the way to Drayton Bassett, a small town near Tamworth. He provides some instructions, but the king says that is not ‘“the ready way”’ (7, l. 2). The tanner responds crossly to this assumption of authority, telling the stranger he is ‘“out of thy wit”’ (8, l. 2) and he himself is hungry. The king invites him to eat and drink in Drayton Bassett at his cost, but the tanner is again offended ‘“thou shalt pay for no dinner of mine”’ (10, l. 2), and says he has more money than him. The king is polite, but the tanner says he is ‘“weary of thy company”’ (7, l. 4) and that the stranger is suspiciously well-dressed: when the king says he did not steal his clothes – the tanner replies ‘“Thou art some ruffian of the country.”’ (13, l. 3) The tanner is riding on a cow-hide, not a saddle, and the king suggests they change horses – the tanner asks for a gold noble, the king offers the very small sum of twenty groats. They change horses, the tanner throws his cow-hide over the king’s saddle, asks for a leg up, and as the king gives him one, lets out a fart.

The horse is frightened by the cow-hide – which still has horns and a tail on it – and throws the tanner heavily. He requests his own horse back: the king asks a noble, but the tanner gives him back the twenty groats. The king blows his horn, and five hundred lords and knights suddenly appear. The tanner says ‘“Thou art a strong thief,”’ (32, l. 3) and the king says these are the lords of Drayton Bassett – the tanner wishes he was far away. The king calls for ‘“A collar!”’ (35, l. 1), presumably to dress the tanner up, but the tanner thinks he means a halter ‘“and I shall be hanged tomorrow.”’ (36, l. 4) The king says ‘“do not fear”’ and he will give him not a halter but ‘“a fee”’ (37, ll. 1 and 4). He presents him with Plompton Park, worth ‘“three hundred pound a year”’ (38, l. 3) and, perhaps not by accident, the estate where in ‘A Gest of Robyn Hode’ the king finds his deer have been stolen. The tanner maintains his sense of personal equality: while he thanks the king with ‘“Godamercy, Godamercy”’ (‘King Edward the Fourth and a Tanner of Tamworth’, 39, l. 1), the last two lines express a sense of equality, as he says to the king ‘“If ever thou comest to merry Tamworth / thou shalt have clouting-leather for thy shone.”’ [shoes] (39, ll. 3-4).

A more serious challenge to authority is in ‘John the Reeve’, only found in the mid-seventeenth century Percy manuscript, but well-known in Scotland after 1500, being mentioned by three major poets of that time and region, Gavin Douglas, William Dunbar and Sir David Lindsay. This is set back in time as the king is ‘Edward with the long shankes’ (in Furrow 2013, l. 17), who must be Edward I, ruling 1272-1307. When he is out hunting with a bishop and an earl, they meet ‘a carle stout’ [sturdy fellow] (l. 47) and ask him to take them to some town ‘“Amonge lordes and gentlemen”’ (l. 113) – they will requite him. He is annoyed: ‘“Of lordes,” sayeth hee, “speake no moe: [more] / With them I have nothing to doe”’ (ll. 115-116): he would rather ‘“be brought in bale”’ [suffering] (l. 118) than ‘“On them to crouch or crave”’ [cringe or beg] (l. 120).

He tells the king he is a royal bondman, as are his neighbours Hodgkin Long and Hobb of the Lath [of the barn]: he is named ‘John de Reeve’ (l. 196), so presumably is, like Chaucer’s Reeve, a fairly senior organiser of serfs. But though they are all officially bondsmen of the king, they all have ‘freeledge’ (l. 176) – independence. In return, the earl says the king is ‘“Peeres Pay-for-all,”’ (l. 260) the queen’s falconer, the bishop is ‘“a pore chaplaine”’ (l. 272) and he himself is ‘“a sumpter man”’ [packhorse driver] (l. 274).

The earl comments John is ‘“a comly knight”’ (l. 299) but he repeats he is ‘“the kings bondman”’ (l. 302) and shows them his weapons – a pitchfork and a wide-bladed knife. When they arrive at his house for dinner his two daughters join them for ‘Salt bacon, rusted and redd / ... Leane salt beefe of a yeere old, / Ale that was both sower and cold’ (ll. 392-395). The royal guest complains about the poor dinner, and after some argument John says:

‘Swere to me by booke and bell
That thou shalt never John Reeve bettell [inform upon]
Unto Edwarde our kinge.’ (ll. 412-414)

They agree and a very fine dinner is produced – a boar’s head, capons, venison, swans, curlews, red wine and fine ale. Many of these wild animals are protected royal game, so criminal for a bondman to possess or eat. In a kindly, but also ironical, manner the earl says ‘“John, you serve us royallye”’ (l. 477) – and comments that even King Edward if he were here would enjoy the meal. No, John says, he would be angry with me. The guests laugh, and speak in Latin, which annoys the excluded John, but soon they have dancing, with the daughters, and also Hodgkin and Hobb.

Back at Windsor, the king sends for John. He tries to dress up, but cannot pull his sword out of the scabbard. Outside the court knights and porters ask who he is: ‘John bade them kisse the devilles arse’ (l. 673). They are hostile, so he attacks them with his pitchfork, hurts a porter and kills four men. Then he sees one of his house-guests, who welcomes him, and he goes into the court where ‘He vayed [doffed] neither hatt nor hood’ (l. 770). He recognises the king as in charge, though he is disguised as the queen’s falconer, and says, hopefully it would seem, ‘“lord, thy word is honourable”’ (l. 790) and then ‘“spoke to him with sturdye mood”’ (l. 796). The king honours their previous encounter and gives him ‘“Thy manner place”’ (l. 807) – his house and land in his own hands, not in feudal tenancy, as before, and also a hundred pounds. Then the king takes a ‘“coller bright”’ (l. 814) to make John a knight. He thinks ‘“after a coller comes a rope”’ (l. 820), but he does not speak, and resumes his meal.

The porters John attacked come in, one bleeding. John explains what happened and the king says ‘“my porters were to blame / You did nothing but right”’ (ll. 866-867). The four men John killed – itself very briefly mentioned in the text – are not discussed: this may be a technical error, but that crime might have seemed so serious a challenge that it cannot be resolved, and the story wants to end things with complete harmony, and without John backing down in any way. The king re-assures him: he will make one of his sons a knight and the other ‘“a parson of a kirke”’ (l. 895), and will arrange his two daughters’ marriages at court – even Hodgkin and Hobb will be made freemen. So John is fully honoured, and in return behaves nobly: he ‘ever after kept open bord [board] / For gwestes that God him send’ (ll. 905-906).

John’s anger at gentry habits and attitudes is the key feature here, rather than actual crimes by those in authority. Another ballad presentation of the ‘King and Commoner’ genre makes crime from above much more clearly the cause of criminal resistance from below, and also, possibly in response to this added seriousness, fails to offer a resolution of any kind. This is ‘King Edward and the Shepherd’: the story itself is dated about 1350, since the King is Edward III and his son, the Black Prince, born in 1330, is now a drinking young man. Basically, in a northern dialect, it is a unique copy, and appears in the same mid-fifteenth-century manuscript anthology as the single copy of ‘Robin Hood and the Monk’ (Cambridge University Library Manuscript, Ms. Ff. 5.48).

The king is alone, and meets a shepherd named Adam, who does not remove his hat and in response to a question says he was born in Windsor but ‘ “I am so pyllid with [so pillaged by] the kyng / That I most fle fro my wonyng” ’ [from my home] (ll. 31-32). The king says he is ‘Joly Robyn’ (l. 124) – an interesting choice of name. He claims to be a merchant who is often at court, and his son is now with the queen: as a merchant he is himself playing a transitional social figure. They have a lengthy argument, the king saying it is others, not the king who are to blame, but the shepherd insists it was king’s men who robbed him, twice, and the second time ‘ “Be [By] my doghtur thei lay al nyght” ’ (l. 166) – apparently a mass-rape. He and three friends are planning to find that second gang and use their stone-slings against the king’s men’s bows and arrows.

The king encourages him to kill a bird with his sling, but the shepherd says that would be poaching, which would lead to prison because ‘ “the warner” [warrener, warden] is “hardy and fell” ’ [tough and ruthless] (l. 235). They have dinner, and like John the Reeve’s second service, it is rich with wild birds, obviously poached. The pair also play a drinking game: one drains the cup having said ‘Passilodion’, the other does the same, saying ‘Berafrynde’. In her edition, *Ten Bourdes*, Melissa Furrow translates these as ‘raisin wine ... game’ and ‘barley-friend’ (2013, notes to 317 and 320) – though for the latter the Middle English dictionary offers ‘Bottoms up’. After this the shepherd shows the king his secret chamber full of poached animals and fine, presumably stolen, wine. As the king is leaving, the shepherd kills some birds with his sling, showing remarkable, even threatening, skill.

The king invites the shepherd to court, and, dressed up somewhat, he arrives. The king has explained things to the court officials: the shepherd is given a seat of honour and plays the ‘Passilodion’ drinking game with Joly Robyn’s son – actually the Prince of Wales. Half-way through the dinner, the shepherd is brought to the king and suddenly: ‘He clawed his hed, his hare he rent, / He wende wel to have be schent’ [to be ruined] (ll. 1022-1023) and prays to Jesus to ‘ “Bryng me fayre out of this place.” ’ (l. 1030) He has been taken aback by the Latin and French being spoken, but it seems he is seriously frightened when he realises it was the king to whom he revealed all at his house. The king cheers the shepherd up and he finishes his dinner – though he does reflect he should have attacked Joly Robyn with his sling. Finally, he simply puts down his hood – an intriguing moment – and begs for mercy.

The narrative ends abruptly, and the text reads below ‘NON FINIS SED PUNCTUS’, ‘Not an end but a stop’. All other ‘King and Commoner’ texts have endings that deploy substantial royal generosity. Is it because this text has shown such a serious challenge to authority that such an ending seemed improbable – or at least beyond the author’s imagination? If the text was well-known, as seems the case from its anthology-style manuscript source, some form of ending must have been in existence. Perhaps this is a deliberate aperture, to draw attention to the serious, even insoluble nature of the conflict that has been realised: the crimes here may have seemed too assertive to be handled with the sympathetic confidence of the other texts in this genre. When the text of ‘John the Reeve’ seems to overlook his killing four men when he arrived at court would appear to be a response to the same kind of ideological strain.

Truesdale sees this poem as enacting an ‘inversion of medieval hierarchical boundaries’ and making direct reference to medieval complaint literature (2018, 43). More generally he speaks of the ‘King and Commoner’ poems – in terms which also fit the early Robin Hood ballads – as a domain in which ‘[u]sual perceptions are toyed with and turned upside down, as the woods situated on society’s margins become transformed into the centre of justice and life, while the court becomes a strange liminal space imbued with injustice and death’ (51). Truesdale takes a Bakhtinian approach to the genre, highlighting its carnivalesque but also serious dimension

and seeing the threat posed by social reversals in a narrative. In all these 'King and Commoner' ballads, the events may have some comedy in them, but they still imply serious situations. That sense of potential social disorder, both convincingly presented and only technically resolved by the story's formal ending, if it has one, is also to be found in the early Robin Hood ballads, and indeed is implicit in the sudden threats to power, male, royal, fairy, and familial, which are found in the folk ballads. That duality, offering both threat and incomplete resolution is of course also basic to giving a comprehending, even sympathetic, realisation of the self-conscious criminal, as found in the modern crime novel.

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