

## THE STORIED MATTER OF THE GREENWOOD IN THE MORE-THAN-HUMAN WORLD

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### INTRODUCTION

The Robin Hood story would not really *be* the Robin Hood story, as we know it, without its well-known forest setting: the merry greenwood of medieval England, where Robin and his outlaw band dwell and thrive. And although Robin Hood is an adaptable, flexible character, a king of chameleons as well as of outlaws, texts that temporarily relocate the forest bandit into non-silvan settings only highlight the absence of the forest and serve to reinforce how entangled this hero is with his home. The missing greenwood is particularly glaring in the seventeenth-century ballad *Robin Hood's Fishing*, in which a forestless Robin flounders in his unlikely new trade as a fisherman, an ironic fish out of water, yearning to return to his forest environs.<sup>1</sup> In the *Gest*, he famously abandons his service to the king in order to return to the flora, fauna, and freedom of the greenwood. Sarah Harlan-Haughey notes in her ecocritical study of medieval outlaw literature that Robin Hood “is not only equated with the Greenwood; like an animal outside his natural habitat, he cannot survive long away from it.”<sup>2</sup> Other scholars have also explored this close connection between Robin Hood and his forest habitat,<sup>3</sup> but they tend to focus on what this connection says about the relationship of humans to the forest environment, consequently overlooking the nonhuman beings of the greenwood: the animals and trees whose presence in Robin Hood texts warrants further examination, in light of recent ecomaterialist and posthumanist theories. In this essay, therefore, I analyze the physical descriptions of the creatures and features of the greenwood

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<sup>1</sup> Also titled *The Noble Fisherman, or, Robin Hood's Preferment* (Child Ballad No. 148), this ballad appears in Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren, ed., *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. TEAMS Middle English Texts Series (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), 581-91. Entered into the Stationers' Register in 1631, this “later” ballad reflects a trend in Robin Hood stories that attempted to incorporate the forest outlaw into commercial, urban settings. The tradesman/town ballad finds a model, however, in the “early” ballad *Robin Hood and the Potter*.

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Harlan-Haughey, *The Ecology of the English Outlaw in Medieval Literature: From Fen to Greenwood*, *Outlaws in Literature, History, and Culture* 1 (London: Routledge, 2016), 190. This book is a landmark study of the intersection of ecocriticism and outlaw studies. Harlan-Haughey capitalizes the word “Greenwood” in her book; however, I have found the majority of scholars do not capitalize it, and thus I follow the lowercase convention.

<sup>3</sup> Two important studies that explore the significance of the greenwood in the Robin Hood tradition are essays by Helen Phillips, “Forest, Town and Road: The Significance of Places and Names in Some Robin Hood Texts,” in *Robin Hood in Popular Culture*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 197-214; and “‘Merry’ and ‘Greenwood’: A History of Some Meanings,” in *Images of Robin Hood: Medieval to Modern*, ed. Lois Potter and Joshua Calhoun (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2008), 83-101. See also A. J. Pollard, “A Greenwood Far Away,” in his *Imagining Robin Hood: The Late-Medieval Stories in Historical Context* (London: Routledge, 2004), and Maurice Keen, “The Matter of the Greenwood,” in his *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend*, rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000). The title of my essay plays on Keen's chapter title, with an emphasis on the physical matter of the greenwood. More recently, Stephen Knight has written “Robin Hood and the Forest Laws,” in *The Bulletin of the International Association for Robin Hood Studies* 1 (2017): 1-14.

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in early Robin Hood “rymes.”<sup>4</sup> Focusing on the late medieval poem *Robin Hood and the Monk*, with supplementary examples from *A Lytell Gest of Robyn Hode* and *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*, I argue that the early ballads’ portrayal of the medieval forest as a “storied place” constructs a setting filled with nonhuman agents who contribute to the telling of an ostensibly human story.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, the greenwood of these early poems challenges the popular notion (then and now) that humans are superior to all other forms of life on earth.

I take the term “storied place” from Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, who elaborate on this concept as follows: “the world’s phenomena are knots in a vast network of agencies, which can be ‘read’ and interpreted as forming narratives, stories. Developing in bodily forms and in discursive formulations, and arising in coevolutionary landscapes of natures and signs, the stories of matter are everywhere . . . All matter, in other words, is a ‘storied matter.’”<sup>6</sup> As such, the matter of Robin Hood’s greenwood—that is, the representation of all its physical material, including plants, animals, and outlaws—is indeed a “storied matter,” not simply a “talkyng of þe Munke” made for and by humans, but a network of narrative agencies, both human and more-than-human.<sup>7</sup> I adopt ecophilosopher David Abram’s term “more-than-human” as a means to resist the persistent nature-culture divide in our thinking, a binary opposition which texts such as the Robin Hood ballads complicate and question.<sup>8</sup> Like Abram, I am positing the human world as part of—despite being increasingly opposed to—the material, more-than-human world, a world that contains humans as well as other beings and materialities whose subjectivities and modes of being are not necessarily dependent on or inferior to us. Reading the ballads through this lens identifies the possibility of non-anthropocentric strains of thought via elements of nonhuman storytelling that are present within these admittedly anthropocentric medieval narratives. That the egalitarianism of the Robin Hood tradition sometimes extends to plants and animals in these texts thus reveals, paradoxically, a prescient posthumanism in a pre-humanist society, popularly associated with perpetuating the ideology of a “Great Chain of Being” in which “man,” while lower than God and the angels, has dominion over nature.<sup>9</sup> With this type of reading, then, I hope to complicate our

<sup>4</sup> The B-text of *Piers Plowman* (ca. 1379) contains the earliest literary reference to Robin Hood, in the context of a slothful priest who knows the “rymes of Robyn hood” better than the Paternoster.

<sup>5</sup> Citations for *Robin Hood and the Monk* and *A Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode* (Wynkyn de Worde’s edition) are from Thomas H. Ohlgren and Lister M. Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robin Hood: An Edition of the Texts, ca. 1425 to ca. 1600, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies* 428 (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2013). *Robin Hood and the Monk* is preserved on 128v-135v on Cambridge University MS. Ff.5.48, and has been dated by Ohlgren and Matheson most recently between 1463 and 1465, Ohlgren and Matheson, *Early Rymes*, 3. *A Geste* dates to approximately 1450; the Wynkyn de Worde edition I cite in this essay has an estimated print date of 1506, Ohlgren and Matheson, *Early Rymes*, 89-90. Citations for the last poem in this list, *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*, are from Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren, ed., *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. TEAMS Middle English Texts Series (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000). *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne* exists only in a single manuscript (London, British Library Add MSS. 27879) that has been dated to the mid-seventeenth century, and many scholars view it as being derived from older material and consider it among the “medieval” Robin Hood stories. See, for example, Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 169-71.

<sup>6</sup> Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, *Material Ecocriticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Ohlgren and Matheson, 17: *Robin Hood and the Monk*, Cambridge, University Library MS. Ff.5.48, folio 135v, line 354.

<sup>8</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> A platonic worldview that was further developed during the Middle Ages, the “Great Chain of Being,” both as a

understanding of how the authors and audiences of the early Robin Hood tales may have perceived their relationship to the more-than-human world, as well as how they might contribute to current posthumanist thinking.

## MATERIAL ECOCRITICISM AND POSTHUMANISM

This essay contributes to ecocritical discussion of Robin Hood's greenwood by shifting the emphasis on the constructed or ideological nature of the forest "space" to the physical material of the forest setting, following the concept of "storied matter," while still recognizing the powerful ability of discourse and ideology to shape the material world. Some ecocritical work on Robin Hood's greenwood has touched on its material aspects, opening the way toward my argument. In "Ecomedievalism: Applying Ecotheory to Medievalism and Neomedievalism," for example, Valerie B. Johnson discusses the ways in which "nature" is produced or constructed in the form of a greenwood fantasy in modern Robin Hood texts such as films.<sup>10</sup> Harlan-Haughey, on the other hand, analyzes the greenwood of medieval texts, but her approach is similar to Johnson's in that she understands "nature," in reference to a literary "greenwood," as something produced by different cultures through textual representation and therefore an unstable entity.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, my ecomaterialist approach emphasizes the solid material world in order to avoid the potential pitfall of reinstating, in one's interpretation of the greenwood, a nature-culture binary, which usually elevates the textual and semiotic world of social/cultural construction over the material beings that inhabit, influence, and depend on the physical world. In an ecomaterialist vein, Johnson acknowledges that relationships in the material world intersect with and affect our narrative constructions in texts: she asserts that ecomedievalism "can encourage recognition of fantasy and offer a means to understand how fantasy within fiction impacts *life outside a story*. Ecomedievalism allows us to see that *these networks and relations exist*, that they are not 'natural,' and that the facts of our environments are as much a narrative as our own stories."<sup>12</sup> While Johnson's point is that signifiers like "nature" and "wilderness" are social constructions, or "fantasies," the claim that environmental "facts" also form narratives edges toward ecomaterialism, which would push a step further to assert that fiction/story is deeply interconnected with the "realities" of the material world, with what Johnson calls "life outside of story." From an ecomaterialist perspective, stories are inseparable from the physical media through which stories are shared in "networks and relations," whether the medium is orally communicating human bodies, ink applied to animal and plant bodies in the form of manuscripts or paper, or pixelated plasma screens, all of which involve material components in addition to discursive or

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concept and a phrase, was popularized by Arthur Lovejoy's lectures (1933) and subsequent book of the same title (1936).

<sup>10</sup> Valerie B. Johnson, "Ecomedievalism: Applying Ecotheory to Medievalism and Neomedievalism," in *Studies in Medievalism XXIV: Medievalism on the Margins*, ed. Karl Fugelso, Vincent Ferre, and Alicia C. Montoya (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015), 31-8.

<sup>11</sup> Harlan-Haughey devotes two chapters of *The Ecology of the English Outlaw* to the greenwood depicted in early Robin Hood rymes, interrogating "fictional representations of the bestial outlaw," in order to show how different writers in medieval England understood nature and how that understanding has changed through time. See Harlan-Haughey *The Ecology of the English Outlaw*, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Johnson, "Ecomedievalism," 37, my emphases.

semiotic ones. The medieval greenwood does not exist apart from its various material-discursive networks, past and present, which include the human *and* nonhuman bodies and entities represented in its stories, their respective presences signaling a type of co-authorship in the greenwood's formation.

Thus, in addition to focusing on a material-semiotic interweaving of textual representation in early Robin Hood stories, my ecomaterialist perspective lends itself to a posthumanist methodology, one that interprets the more-than-human bodies entangled in the storytelling both non-metaphorically and non-instrumentally, not merely passive or symbolic objects of representation but indeed active agents. To read in such a way, I will enlist some interpretative questions formulated by Gillian Rudd. Her approach to medieval texts, though not explicitly ecomaterialist, seeks to avoid the trap of missing the material tree for the metaphorical forest by paying close attention to the *non-figurative* animals and trees in texts, those that are seemingly unimportant and seen only in glimpses, in order to pose questions that address the place of humans in relation to the rest of the world.<sup>13</sup> Rudd's method of reading resonates with the approach of Iovino and Oppermann, who indicate that "a *material* ecocriticism examines matter both *in* texts and *as* a text, trying to shed light on the way bodily natures and discursive forces *express* their interaction whether in representations or in their concrete reality."<sup>14</sup> Thus, the material turn in ecocriticism prompts us to approach the "matter of the greenwood" in Robin Hood texts not simply as a literary setting that reflects or reinforces human attitudes about nature, forest space, or the specific settings of Sherwood or Barnsdale. Beyond and alongside human narrative construction, the forest itself is and has always been telling stories; the literary greenwood is not only a human construction but also, in the schema of Iovino and Oppermann, a "material-discursive encounter," a story-setting that emerges "from the intra-action of human creativity and the narrative agency of matter."<sup>15</sup> While thoroughly interwoven with the human, the greenwood also exists for its own sake, expressing its own interests, even when it is overtly depicted as background space, foregrounding human activities.

Ultimately, then, a posthumanist ecomaterialism works to trouble our ability to decisively define "the human," a category that is often set up in opposition to "the animal" with the effect of privileging beings who count as human over those who do not.<sup>16</sup> This viewpoint—the idea that

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<sup>13</sup> Gillian Rudd, *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature*, Manchester Medieval Literature (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007). Rudd is critical of studies that focus on allegorical readings of the forest, "all of which have something to offer, but all of which contribute to making the trees themselves increasingly difficult to see," 50. She attempts to move beyond the useful work on literary medieval forests by Corinne Saunders, whose study on the "real" forest and its interactions with the symbolic forest "ends up focusing primarily on the symbolic," 88. See Corinne J. Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance: Avernus, Broceliande, Arden* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> Iovino and Oppermann, *Material Ecocriticism*, 2, original emphases.

<sup>15</sup> Iovino and Oppermann, *Material Ecocriticism*, 8. "Intra-action" is a term they borrow from Karen Barad in *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007). Barad uses "intra-action" rather than "interaction" to emphasize the inseparability of supposedly discrete beings; in other words, she does not assume a distinct individual subject prior to the encounters of beings who relate to one another in various ways.

<sup>16</sup> For a concise overview of posthumanist and critical animal studies theories and their potential application to medieval scholarship, see Karl Steel, "Introduction: Human Limits," in *How to Make a Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages*, Interventions: New Studies in Medieval Culture (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011), 1-27.

humans are better or more advanced than all other species, that human life and happiness are inherently the highest priorities—is represented by critics variously with terms such as “human exceptionalism,” “speciesism,” or “anthropocentrism.” Both the sciences and the humanities have challenged this perspective, and the ongoing critique of human exceptionalism is an important focus of environmentalist activism as well as ecocritical study. Although posthumanism is sometimes associated with cyborgs and artificial intelligence, more critical modes and branches of posthumanism, particularly critical animal and plant studies, align with ecocriticism’s aim to dethrone the human as the self-evident pinnacle of evolutionary achievement.<sup>17</sup> “Posthumanism” is still a contested and at times confusing term, but Karen Barad provides a workable definition: “*posthumanism* marks the practice of accounting for the boundary-making practices by which the ‘human’ and its others are differentially delineated and defined ... it is about taking issue with human exceptionalism while being accountable for the role we play in the differential constitution and differential positioning of the human among other creatures (both living and nonliving).”<sup>18</sup> In tracing the positioning of the human characters in *Robin Hood and the Monk* among its animate and inanimate beings, I hope to shed light on the more-than-human storytelling that emerges from the matter of the greenwood, which blurs nature and culture to the extent that ultimately we must also reevaluate the matter of the human.

### THE MATTER OF *MONK*: ANIMALS, PLANTS, AND OTHER MATTER(S)

Combining Rudd’s prompt to pay attention to the landscape and animals in texts *as* landscape and *as* animals with the ecomaterialist emphasis on “storied matter,” I now turn to the poem *Robin Hood and the Monk* to consider the material beings it portrays in relation to the greenwood landscape. This poem, like other medieval Robin Hood rymes, opens with a conventional scene of pleasant, early summer forest imagery, filled with sunshine, birdsong, and verdant growth all around. The opening for this particular poem, however, dwells on the greenwood imagery somewhat longer than other early rymes do, deferring the entrance of the outlaws until the fourth stanza of the poem (indicated in bold):

In somer, when þe shawes be sheyn  
 And leves be large and long  
 Hit is full mery *in feyre foreste*  
 To here þe foulys song  
 To se þe dere draw to þe dale  
 And leve þe hilles hee,  
 And shadow hem in þe leves grene  
 vndur the grene wode tre.  
 hit befel on Whitson  
 Erly in a may mornyng

<sup>17</sup> On critical animal studies in general, see, for example, Atsuko Matsuoka and John Sorenson, *Critical Animal Studies: Toward Trans-species Social Justice*, Rowman and Littlefield International – Intersections (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018). On critical plant studies, see especially Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 136.

the son vp feyre can shyne  
 And the briddis mery can syng  
**this is a mery mornynge seid litull John**  
 be hym þat dyed on tre  
 A more mery man þen I am one  
 [l]yves not in cristiante<sup>19</sup>

Like the poet of *Robin Hood and the Monk*, I will dwell on the more-than-human scenery for some time before moving on to the human characters because this passage offers a good example of the rich canvas of “storied matter” that the medieval greenwood showcases. Following Rudd, we can consider the description of this scenery as potentially operating in ways other than providing local color, touches of realism, or setting up the conventional Robin Hood story. Is nature, in the form of the greenwood, represented as a hierarchical structure or as “made up of a vast array of different things each equally worthy”?<sup>20</sup> If *Robin Hood and the Monk* does establish nature as a hierarchy, it seems to do so in a way that inverts the “Great Chain of Being,” almost irreverently, beginning at the top of the poem with plants, moving to birds, then to nonhuman mammals, then humans, and finally ending with God, who appears only in the diminished form of Little John’s oath (“be hym þat dyed on tre”). That nature might be seen here as “being made up of a vast array of different things equally worthy” is also plausible, which would support an ecomaterialist interpretation of the poem.

The ecological perspective implied by the passage is complicated, especially when we try to answer Rudd’s question “of exactly what such non-iconographic, descriptive elements are being true to: of whose ‘real’ is operating at any given time and what undercurrents may be at work in those apparently insignificant ‘other details.’”<sup>21</sup> To a certain extent, we must admit that the greenwood, a perpetual idyllic May forest, is a total fantasy space. That anybody could happily live in the forest environs, avoiding cold and hunger indefinitely, defies belief, and to suggest that the outlaws live in harmony with the forest animals is inconsistent with the outlaws’ own hunting practices and extravagant feasting habits. However, an interplay of the more-than-human world and the human does appear in this passage, a back-and-forth that suggests an ecological relationship between the material bodies. To be sure, an anthropocentric point of view or bias in the passage is evident, despite the focus on natural surroundings. We are to understand that it is “full mery in feyre forest to **here** þe foulys song.”<sup>22</sup> The poet’s implicit emphasis is on the ability of *humans* to take in the scenery sensorily through hearing. The audience of the poem would certainly have understood the poet-narrator to mean that hearing birds sing in May makes the forest merry *for a person*.<sup>23</sup> This sensory justification for merriment that seems to privilege the observing

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<sup>19</sup> Ohlgren and Matheson, 7: *Robin Hood and the Monk*, Cambridge, University Library MS. Ff.5.48, fol. 128v, lines 1-16, emphasis in bold added to line 13. I emphasize in bold to differentiate from the italicized letters that Ohlgren and Matheson’s edition include.

<sup>20</sup> Rudd, *Greenery*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Rudd, *Greenery*, 11.

<sup>22</sup> Ohlgren and Matheson, 7: *Robin Hood and the Monk*, Cambridge, University Library MS. Ff.5.48, fol. 128v, lines 3-4, emphasis added (in bold).

<sup>23</sup> Levi Bryant, a posthumanist theorist, problematizes the notion of human subjectivity that is disconnected from material reality: “For the anti-realist, truth thus becomes inter-subjective agreement, consensus, or shared representation, rather than a correspondence between representation and reality. Indeed, the very concept of reality

human subject continues visually with the image of the descending deer: “To se þe dere draw to þe dale.”<sup>24</sup> One can safely assume this declaration is not meant for nonhuman animals who might also be looking on. However, this distinction of human merriment loses some of its anthropocentric force when we consider the nearby line, “And the briddis mery can syng.” We could allow that this might be an *anthropomorphic* gesture, attributing human emotion and ability to nonhuman animal, but it also tends to bring the humans in the picture closer to their nonhuman counterparts: we can identify this affinity between birdsong and human voice as one of the undercurrents at work behind the apparent representation of the forest setting as something beneficial or appreciable only in terms of human merriment. Unlike the debating birds of Chaucer and other medieval poets, the birds in Robin Hood’s greenwood seem to be merry *with* the human characters, not *for* them. Moreover, the definitive auxiliary and action verbs “can syng” in the third stanza attribute a strong sense of agency to the birds, who are not simply heard but also actively sing, on their own, telling their version of this story.

The link between humans and birds in the poem challenges human exceptionalism by blurring the human and animal and emphasizing their affinities, reinforced by the poem’s structure. The human characters are not introduced through description but through dialogue. Little John pronounces, “this is a mery morning,” to start a new stanza, following the previous line “And the briddis mery can sing,” as if to suggest that the dialogue itself is the singing of a merry bird, as though Little John is no different from the birds or the deer just described, insofar as they all partake in the merriness afforded by and in this landscape. Little John’s proclamation about the merry morning thus functions less like an inspired epiphany and more like an echo or affirmation of the merriness and activity that inheres the bodies and forces moving in and through the forest—humans included, though not necessarily central. Additionally, the inclusion of the birds and their singing in both the first and the third stanza (all before the humans of the poem arrive) emphasizes their continuous presence in the greenwood, their voices infusing the narrative, as the poem opens and then again, between the arrival of the deer and the humans, to situate birdsong as a thoroughgoing sonic material within the greenwood, not only an ambient background noise but an active force that transfers a feeling of merriment across more-than-human bodies, from deer to outlaw to audience, all enmeshed in the storied matter of birdsong. Elizabeth Eva Leach reminds us, “For Augustine, birdsong cannot be music because a bird is incapable of attaining or exercising *scientia*. As the production of an irrational animal, spurred only by natural instinct, however beautiful and melodious it might be, birdsong is not music.”<sup>25</sup> Despite this dominant medieval view, however, even at this time there were currents of heterodox thinking that praised “the good singer’s voice by likening it to birdsong conceived positively as natural music,” a dynamic of affinity between birds and humans that emerges in *Robin Hood and the Monk*.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, whether it was sung or recited in its original context, *Monk* unquestionably contains elements of

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is transformed into reality *for-us* or the manner in which we experience and represent the world” in *The Democracy of Objects* (Open Humanities Press, 2011), 16, original emphasis. It is a “shared representation” that is “for-us” that I suggest is implicit in the greenwood opening.

<sup>24</sup> Ohlgren and Matheson, *7: Robin Hood and the Monk*, Cambridge, University Library MS. Ff.5.48, fol. 128v, line 5, emphasis added (in bold).

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Eva Leach, *Sung Birds: Music, Nature, and Poetry in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 11, original emphasis.

<sup>26</sup> Leach, *Sung Birds*, 55.

orality. As Nancy M. Bradbury explains, “nearly all surviving English romances either reflect or imitate the conditions of performance before a listening audience: either way, oral performance, real or fictionally evoked, is an aspect of their narrative art.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, the repeated recognition of surrounding bird sounds in the greenwood merges with the repeated syllables of human sounds, the spoken (or sung) words of the poem, complicating a clear-cut nature/culture distinction, blurring the natural and the cultural into a composite character of the greenwood and its materialities.

In addition to a potentially shared merriness and affinity between bird and man in the greenwood, the poet’s description also implies that Robin Hood and his men are similar to the deer, as they are all seeking safety in shadow among the trees. Harlan-Haughey observes that “the deer’s refuge under the green trees parallels the behavior of the outlaws themselves.”<sup>28</sup> In their simultaneous seeking out of refuge, human (outlaw) and animal (deer) are conflated and thus take on a similar value, in terms of their relationship to other humans, since they are both hunted. This conflation of human and animal challenges the accepted understanding that humans represent the dominant species in this pairing and, by implication, raises questions about the extent to which this scene supports a view of the cosmos as divinely ordered. But we can go a bit further if we notice that the poem attributes an agency to the deer, through the use of the action verbs “draw” and “leve,” when the deer “draw to þe dale” and “leve þe hilles hee,” and even “shadow,” when the deer shelter themselves:

And shadow hem in þe leves grene  
vndur the grene wode tre.

While the verb “draw” suggests an involuntary reaction, being drawn toward something, the acts of leaving, finding shade, and taking shelter indicate a rational decision-making process. Included in the greenwood’s story, then, are these decisive physical movements of the deer, which the poem tracks by following them across all four lines of the stanza, as the descending deer draw to the valley, leave the high hills, and then come to rest in the shade under the trees. “To se” these more-than-human bodies is to acknowledge the physicality of quadrupedal matter in motion, exerting a subtle influence in and on the poem.

This subtle moment in *Robin Hood and the Monk* in which the outlaws bear a similarity to the herds of deer resonates with the more protracted and explicit scene in the *Gest*, in which Little John (alias “Raynolde grenelefe”) tricks the Sheriff into thinking that he is pursuing “Seuen score of dere vpon an herde,” when in fact he is being led directly toward an ambush of merry men, who are led by a green “mayster hart,” that is, Robin Hood himself.<sup>29</sup> The deceptive wordplay John uses adds to the humor of this episode: Little John as “Raynolde grenelefe,” Robin Hood as “mayster harte,” merry men as “Seuen score of dere.” But despite these semiotic disguises that take place, this wordplay also draws our attention to the material similarities of the merry men and the deer, particularly the circumstances of their living and being in the greenwood. First of all, the trick played on the Sheriff is possible because he very well could have been pursuing deer; hunting

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<sup>27</sup> Nancy Mason Bradbury, *Writing Aloud: Storytelling in Late Medieval England* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>28</sup> Harlan-Haughey, *The Ecology of the English Outlaw*, 182.

<sup>29</sup> Ohlgren and Matheson, 115: Wynkyn de Worde edition of *A Lytell Gest of Robyn Hode*, p. C1v, lines.723 and 736.



is what he was doing in the greenwood in the first place, after all, accompanied as he is with his hounds. That these deer end up being outlaws reminds the audience of the similarity of their predicaments: both are hunted beings. As Harlan-Haughey notes, “the outlaws are also conflated with their prey, deer.”<sup>30</sup> In addition, the outlaws and the deer share an access to the forest’s resources, and besides sharing food and water, they share the greenwood “resource” of the color green, in the form of leaves and other verdure, which provides a hiding place or cover for deer and man alike. Little John’s taking on of the alias “Greenleaf” parallels (and makes more humorous) the fact that Robin Hood and his men are hiding behind the green leaves of the forest. This semiotic disguise, a cover or “false” signifier, is thus related to and entangled with the physical disguise of greenwood vegetation, material that covers the bodies of deer and men, blurring those bodies and identities, and thereby troubling the assurance of predominance of one form of life over another.

This dynamic of the greenwood’s matter therefore highlights another ecomaterialist undercurrent at work in the poem: its plant life. Even before the birds and beasts appear in *Robin Hood and the Monk*, the poet points out that the “leves be large and long,” the vegetal matter described with respect to its material heft and length. Unlike the action verbs the poet ascribes to the animals in the passage, however, the leaves of the greenwood trees are followed by a linking, or “to be” verb. While this verbiage might seem to detract from the poem’s portrayal of plant agency, it actually communicates effectively the stillness of plant-being, as well as the significance of arboreal scale, which supersedes and overshadows (literally and figuratively) the smaller beings in the picture, whether bird, deer, or outlaw. Moreover, later in the poem, we encounter another arboreal being, the famous trysting tree of Robin Hood legend, which the poet contrasts to the opening trees with respect to its differing leafy composition:

Loke þat ye kepe wel owre tristil tre  
Vndur þe levys smale.”<sup>31</sup>

One distinguishing characteristic of “owre” trysting tree, a meeting place for the outlaws, must have been its observably small leaves. Among the matter of the greenwood, I suggest that the trysting tree represents a single plant “character” in the Robin Hood tradition, whose storied existence interweaves and interconnects the various textual nodes in which it appears, including the ballads *Robin Hood and the Potter*, *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*, and the *Gest* (as well as in *Adam Bell*, *Clim of the Clough*, and *William of Cloudesley*, not a Robin Hood ballad but related in some ways).<sup>32</sup>

The trysting tree is a living being whose ubiquitous presence in the early Robin Hood stories warrants it special attention from an ecomaterialist perspective. In its poetic form, variants of the common “under the trystell-tree” function similarly to the even more common line “under the greenwood tree.” However, the specificity of the trysting tree marks it as a unique tree within the greenwood. I do not mean that the tree need be a single tree (such as the Major Oak of Sherwood Forest), the supposedly one and only trysting tree of Robin Hood legend. But I do

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<sup>30</sup> Harlan-Haughey, *The Ecology of the English Outlaw*, 186.

<sup>31</sup> Ohlgren and Matheson, 11: *Robin Hood and the Monk*, Cambridge, University Library MS. Ff.5.48, folio 131r, lines 143-4.

<sup>32</sup> See *Robin Hood and the Potter* in Ohlgren and Matheson, 23-38; *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*, 169-83; and *Adam Bell*, *Clim of the Clough*, and *William of Cloudesley*, 235-67, in Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*.

suggest that this material-semiotic actor plays a special role in the Robin Hood story because of its appearance, like the key characters in the outlaw band, in multiple versions of the story. This tree, at which outlaws meet, exercises a strong influence of greenwood “matter” on the human beings operating around and within it and telling stories about it. When significant trees come into contact with outlaws at specific times and places, the trees take on, in that moment, the identity or signifier of “trysting tree,” only to be replaced at another time and place by another tree/outlaw encounter; yet, in its participation in this encounter, the trysting tree always embodies a certain material relationship between plants and humans that highlights humans’ dependence on vegetal matter. The trysting tree thus has an instrumental value for its use by humans as a meeting place, but, as opposed to a tree that is converted into firewood or a bow and arrow, this living tree that stands in relation to others in the greenwood also maintains an intrinsic ontological value of plant-being, emphasized by the trysting tree’s inclusion as an individual tree across multiple texts. This reading is supported by the impromptu designation of a trysting tree given by Little John in *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne* when he suggests that Robin Hood “Stand you still, master ... Under this trusty tree.”<sup>33</sup> The trysting tree represents an easily recognizable tree chosen as a landmark presumably for a significant quality: size, height, gnarled bark, some kind of defining feature that would signal its presence in contrast to the more abstract qualities of trees inhering the larger greenwood landscape. The trysting tree expresses itself in such a way that its physical material influences the story; it matters.

Nor does it seem insignificant, as Knight and Ohlgren note of the “trusty tree” of *Guy of Gisborne*, that “the three notions of tryst, trust, and trestle all embody central concepts of the outlaw band, with its meetings, fidelity, and occasional address by the leader.”<sup>34</sup> We might go further, in an ecomaterialist reading, to suggest that all three of these notions are potentially relevant in relation to *any* greenwood tree. Trees in general signal hidden romantic encounters, semi-permanent stability, and structural, communal support. The greenwood trees, especially in *Guy of Gisborne* in the scene above, merge with (and against) the bodies and intentions of the outlaws and yeomen who “lean to” them and hide behind them. Harlan-Haughey figures this “leaning to” as a point of fluidity between or convergence among human, plant, and animal: “The literary outlaw becomes, in some ways, treelike, before springing into action—from tree to wolf in a moment.”<sup>35</sup> Beyond this predatory enabling, however, the merging of bodies against or behind (seemingly *within*, from an outside perspective) a tree invokes the intimacy of secret lovers, involved in a romantic “tryst,” bound to one another to keep their secret, known only to themselves and the trees they have brushed up against in order to hide their carnal encounters. The trysting tree, of course, is also physically involved; bark grazes skin in material union, and greenwood tales and poems bear a trace of this tryst. Furthermore, greenwood trysting trees are “trusty” in the sense that they are planted firmly in the ground and live for many years, some of them long outliving humans. They are consistent in a way that humans and animals are not, and the trysting tree acts like a “trestle” in that it provides an implicit, easily unnoticed, support for the greenwood

<sup>33</sup> Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*, p. 174, lines 31-2.

<sup>34</sup> Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*, 182n32. For trees as places of assembly and public address, see Della Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England: Literature, Lore and Landscape*, Anglo-Saxon Studies 13 (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer), 96-7.

<sup>35</sup> Harlan-Haughey, *The Ecology of the English Outlaw*, 171.

characters. The trysting tree of early Robin Hood rymes, which survives in various ways to this day, adds to the greenwood a character of stillness and permanence, a character whose materiality and bodily existence single it out within its environment of shining leaves, singing birds, descending deer, and merry men, all of whom make and tell the greenwood's story.

Finally, in addition to plants, the storied matter of the greenwood in *Monk* even includes nonliving agents, for there is a certain agency in the merry May morning itself that is enlivened by the implicit sunshine evoked in the first line of the poem with the "sheyning" of the "shawes." In what is almost an ecological description, the poet connects the economy of beings in the opening greenwood picture through a web of interdependencies, beginning with the sun's rays striking the tree leaves, moving to the birds who make their homes among these leaves, then tilting our perspective down to the deer. By this point, the sunlight has filtered through the green leaves, creating simultaneously the brightened leaves that attract the birds as well as the effect of shade below the trees, to which the deer are drawn for comfort and refuge. This physical play of light on leaf reappears later in the poem as a wordplay on "light" that retains an element of the summer sunlight illuminating the greenwood and a visceral stirring up of the quality of merriness:

the scheref made to seke notyngham  
 bothe be strete and stye  
 And robyn was in mery scherwode  
 As lizt as lef on lynde.<sup>36</sup>

The "lightness" of Robin Hood, a metaphor for both the swiftness and ease with which he eludes the Sheriff and the perpetual mirth the greenwood inspires, is not simply a metaphor, though. The image of light on leaf embodies a relationship that includes the many beings of the greenwood and recalls the opening scene even when here we apparently observe only Robin and the Sheriff in action. The state of being "light" is the antithesis of heaviness, and may even be weightless (like sunlight), but it is nonetheless a material agent in the storytelling process, like the "weightless" material of birdsong. If we understand light in the modern sense as being composed of physical photons, moreover, this light is a substance that produces a material effect on the greenwood. The storied matter of the greenwood is thusly "enlightened," carrying both semiotic and material traces of warmth and illumination.

## CONCLUSION: THE MATTER OF THE HUMAN

Having interrogated the nonhuman agential characters in the "storied" greenwood, I now return to its human representatives. Once more applying Rudd's interpretative framework, we can ask: To what extent should we consider Robin Hood and the merry men of the greenwood part of "the world," that is, part of the material world, part of "nature" rather than human "culture"?<sup>37</sup> And to what degree are they set apart from nature? First, we might note there is debate about whether Robin Hood should be understood as a human character at all, or as a mythical figure.<sup>38</sup> Stephen

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<sup>36</sup> Ohlgren and Matheson, 16: *Robin Hood and the Monk*, Cambridge, University Library MS. Ff.5.48, folio 134v, lines 298-302.

<sup>37</sup> Rudd, *Greenery*, 5.

<sup>38</sup> Stephen Knight gives a summary of this debate in *Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 202-24. Although there is little evidence of paganism or even magic in the early Robin Hood literature

Knight, arguing against an interpretation of Robin Hood as forest sprite or a Green Man, contends that “Robin Hood is always represented as fully human, is always located in a certain form of earthly, and indeed, earthy, life.”<sup>39</sup> In other words, Knight argues that despite Robin’s intimate connection with the forest setting, a distinctive and important part of Robin’s identity—or his “mythic biography” to use Knight’s term—he is decidedly *not* fantastical or fairy-like; he has most often been represented as a flesh-and-blood human, somewhat vulnerable, and certainly mortal. Furthermore, Knight’s distinction between the “earthly” and “earthy” attributes of Robin’s life in the greenwood (with an emphasis on the latter term) suggests that not only is he of the earth, in the sense that he resides on the earth below the heavens, but also that he is of the earth’s material substance, earthy as in made “from dust,” of a common material make-up with the physical environment of the greenwood setting itself.<sup>40</sup> Knight uses this latter emphasis on the “earthy” as support for the claim that Robin Hood is “fully human,” but this attribute of earthiness—this living among the elements, so to speak—is one that Robin shares with the *nonhuman* beings of the greenwood. Perhaps being *earthly* situates Robin Hood in the human world, below the supernatural, but his earthiness complicates and questions his humanity, blurring clear-cut distinctions between humans and animals (and even plants) and concomitantly, between nature/culture distinctions. As folklorist Joseph Nagy argues, “Robin Hood is not so much a figure outside society as one who exists *between* culture and nature.”<sup>41</sup> As such, Robin Hood emblemizes the material-semiotic nature of storied matter in the greenwood setting; his physicalized (“earthy”) body, both material and narrative, is always something more *and* something less than human at it crosses back and forth between nature (greenwood) and culture (town).

*Robin Hood and the Monk* in particular dramatizes this blurring of nature and culture through the tension it portrays between Robin Hood and Little John. Harlan-Haughey perceptively notes that the poem aligns Little John with nature and Robin Hood with civilization (or culture), a central conflict in the poem. As noted, the poem begins with the assumed perspective of a human observer taking in the natural setting and feeling merry as a result of what he sees; this sentiment is then spoken by Little John. However, Robin Hood does not share the sentiment; in fact, at the

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(with *Guy of Gisborne* being the notable exception, perhaps containing ritualistic elements), the folk origins of the legend that manifested in May Day festivities and play-games seem to connect the “spirit” of Robin Hood to the medieval forest in ways beyond his literary representation therein. On accounts of Robin Hood play-games and revels recorded in church records, see David Wiles, “Robin Hood as Summer Lord,” in *Robin Hood: An Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism*, ed. Stephen Knight (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 77-98. On possible Green Man connections, see Lorraine Stock, “Lords of the Wildwood: The Wild Man, the Green Man, and Robin Hood,” in *Robin Hood in Popular Culture*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 239-49.

<sup>39</sup> Knight, *Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography*, xii.

<sup>40</sup> The primary definition of “earthy” (in current use but dating back to Old English) in the *OED* is as follows: “Of or relating to the earth, terrestrial; worldly, material. Hence: of or belonging to the material or lower elements of human nature; base, coarse. Opposed to *celestial, heavenly, spiritual*”; see *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “earthy (*adj.* and *n.*),” accessed June 17, 2022,

<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/59047?rskkey=xqoYRY&result=1&isAdvanced=false>. The word “earthy,” on the other hand (also in current use and dating from 1398) reads thus: “Of a material substance: that is of the nature of earth or soil; having the characteristic properties of earth; resembling earth in a particular way;” see *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “earthy (*adj.*),” accessed June 17, 2022,

<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/59064?redirectedFrom=earthy>.

<sup>41</sup> Joseph Falaky Nagy, “The Paradoxes of Robin Hood,” *Folklore* 91, no. 2 (1980): 198.

beginning of this story he is not at all merry. He tells John,  
 on thyng greves me ...  
 And does my hert mych woo  
 þat I may not no solem day  
 To mas nor matyns goo.<sup>42</sup>

Despite Little John's urging Robin to cheer up and enjoy the May morning, Robin is home-sick for Christian culture and ritual, for what he sees as something that he cannot access within the exile of the woods. And although I would not go as far as calling Little John a "nature worshipper," he is certainly the counterpoint to the more pious Robin in this story.<sup>43</sup> Little John frequently swears by Christ throughout the poem, though he claims,

A more mery man þen I am one  
 [l]yves not in cristiante.<sup>44</sup>

Being "in cristiante" has a material-semiotic dimension, since it implies residing within a physical location, that is, inside the realm that belongs to God, as well as being "inside" this religion, belonging to it. One would suppose that John is included within the "cristiante" to which he refers; that is, no one in Christendom is merrier than he. However, it could also be inferred that Little John does *not* live within Christianity, or at least he imagines himself not to, being free of it or outside it by being an outlaw and in the forest. That is, the "merry" man does not live in Christianity, not inside the bounds of civilization and culture but outside them, inside the greenwood, or "in" nature. Robin, on other hand, complains that it has been more than a fortnight "Syn I my Sauyour see."<sup>45</sup> The implied human observer enjoying nature in the first three stanzas is decidedly not Robin Hood, who apparently sees an absence of Christ in the greenwood; only in making the risky journey back into Nottingham, where he will be turned over to the Sheriff by "a gret hedid Munke," is Robin able to feel as though he is a part of his own culture, the human world.<sup>46</sup> From Robin's point of view, "in cristiante" would translate to the human world, and that which is outside of "cristiante" is the soulless wilderness of the greenwood, representing a separation from God, who is discovered not in the quiet retreats of nature but in the fellowship of believers and holy communion. For John, in contrast, "in cristiante" seems to take on a more totalizing gesture, a boundless realm that is tantamount to the entire material world—the more-than-human world—the sum of all there is.

Accordingly, the human elements in the ballad's opening speak directly to Rudd's pair of questions: "How far are humans regarded part of the world? How far set apart from it?"<sup>47</sup> If we

<sup>42</sup> Ohlgren and Matheson, 7: *Robin Hood and the Monk*, Cambridge, University Library MS. Ff.5.48, folio 129r, lines 21-24.

<sup>43</sup> Harlan-Haughey, *The Ecology of the English Outlaw*, 156. Harlan-Haughey considers him as a nature worshipper because her argument positions Little John as more "bestial" than Robin, a result of his stance toward nature; however, his participation in the merriness of the greenwood, whether this is worship or not, seems to me a bit at odds with an animality expressed through the outlaw's predation of other greenwood animals.

<sup>44</sup> Ohlgren and Matheson, 7: *Robin Hood and the Monk*, Cambridge, University Library MS. Ff.5.48, folio 128v, line 15.

<sup>45</sup> Ohlgren and Matheson, 7: *Robin Hood and the Monk*, Cambridge, University Library MS. Ff.5.48, folio 129r, line 26.

<sup>46</sup> Ohlgren and Matheson, 9: *Robin Hood and the Monk*, Cambridge, University Library MS. Ff.5.48, folio 130r, line 75.

<sup>47</sup> Rudd, *Greenery*, 5.

read the tension between Robin (culture) and Little John (nature) both symbolically and literally, we can conclude that 1) this tension represents a blurring of the relationship between nature and culture to the extent that nature/culture distinctions collapse in the face of permeability between the categories, and that 2) Robin Hood and Little John interact with each other in a material world in which, as a result of their own strained relationship, they constantly waver between being more or less “part of the world,” more or less nature and more or less culture, depending on their degree of entanglement with the poem’s storied matter. It appears at first that *Monk* vindicates Little John’s embrace of the more-than-human greenwood over Robin’s poor choice to leave because Little John saves him from prison—what can be extrapolated as the “prison” of culture with its rigid rules, rituals, and hierarchies—and brings him back to the merry greenwood. Nature wins. However, John’s refusal to accept Robin’s offer to make him the master “Off alle my men and me” troubles this reading.<sup>48</sup> Little John is content with having brought his master home, stating,

I haue brouzht þe vndur grene wode lyne  
ffare wel and haue gode day.<sup>49</sup>

If we read Robin as the impulse toward culture over nature, does Robin’s retention of leadership at the poem’s end suggest that culture still has the upper hand over nature in the final analysis? I do not think this is what the poem suggests. When we last see the outlaws in the story, they are in their greenwood home, drinking wine and eating venison—we see nature and culture, intertwined. Additionally, Robin never admits outright that he was wrong for leaving the forest. I submit that these counterpoints and ambiguities highlight the way that Robin Hood stories enmesh the natural and the cultural, blurring them together in liminal spaces that challenge a privileged provenance of either category. These ambiguities leave open the possibility of non-anthropocentric interpretation. The Robin Hood/Little John tension sets up the culture/nature binary but does not give us the easy answer that human culture (represented here by religion) is superior to an untamed or “fallen” nature, nor does it seem to leave us with a simple answer that Little John’s unquestioning acceptance of nonhuman nature (outside the reach of official culture) is the preferable stance. His loyalty and servitude to Robin Hood exists in tension with his commitment to the more-than-human world he praises, suggesting that the supposedly “human world” in *Robin Hood and the Monk*, depicted as that which is not the greenwood, is really also a part of the more-than-human world that encompasses both. In being part of both nature and culture, the humans are also part of the poem’s storied matter. Their vulnerable bodies matter, just as the animal, plant, and enlivening materialities of the forest matter. Today, in the twenty-first century as in the medieval period, humans are a part of the story of forest ecologies, as well as, unfortunately, our planet’s many environmental woes such as climate change, deforestation, and species extinction. Our impact on more-than-human green worlds is all too apparent. What we can learn from Robin Hood’s greenwood is that we do not need to take center stage, and we should not allow ourselves thoughtlessly to ignore, exploit, and destroy the other material agents with whom we share the world. Our stories are important, but “our” stories are not ours alone.

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<sup>48</sup> Ohlgren and Matheson, 16: *Robin Hood and the Monk*, Cambridge, University Library MS. Ff.5.48, folio 135r, line 313.

<sup>49</sup> Ohlgren and Matheson, 16: *Robin Hood and the Monk*, Cambridge, University Library MS. Ff.5.48, folio 135r, lines 308-9.

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