

INTRODUCTION: NEW READINGS OF THE EARLY ROBIN HOOD TRADITION

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At first glance, “New Readings” may seem to be a rather unusual theme around which to organize a special issue of a journal. After all, should not all scholarship strive to provide novel interpretations of the material it examines? Yet, in the world of Robin Hood studies, “New Readings” holds a special significance; several topics and voices have fruitfully driven the scholarly narrative for much of the field’s existence, and scholars have often found it difficult to break from these well-trodden paths. With this in mind, the “New Readings” in this volume seek not only to introduce new research, but also to clear innovative paths in the Robin Hood Studies landscape.

Yet, the new directions presented in this issue did not arise in a vacuum; they come in response to a call for scholars to actively seek out new ways to engage with the earliest Robin Hood texts. In the introduction to their 2013 edition *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Edition of the Texts, ca. 1425-1600*, Thomas H. Ohlgren and Lister M. Matheson note that they have eschewed attempts to modernize the texts of the early Robin Hood rhymes. Instead, they state that they have “aimed ... for faithful and accurate transcriptions [of the early Robin Hood rhymes], ‘warts and all.’”¹ The purpose of this extremely faithful treatment of the texts is to encourage scholars of the Robin Hood tradition, as well as linguists and researchers of early printed texts, to reconsider scholarly trends and commonplaces that, in many cases, go all the way back to the eighteenth century and Joseph Ritson.² At their core, the essays in this issue seek to take up Ohlgren and Matheson’s scholarly call by providing new and insightful readings of some of the earliest Robin Hood rhymes, plays, and traditions.

In her contribution to this special issue, “Blood on the Table: The Subversion of Fellowship in *A Lytell Geste of Robyn Hood*,” Sarah Harlan-Haughey reconsiders the feast scenes depicted in one of the most central texts in the Robin Hood tradition. In particular, Harlan-Haughey explores how the text’s feast subverts “the theme of fellowship” by presenting “dinners where the guest is prey and the host a predator—or *vice versa*.” To make this argument, Harlan-Haughey astutely notes that “approximately 202 out of 1824 lines in the Wynkyn de Worde edition—12 percent of the poem—speak directly of food.” With this prevalence in mind, she examines several of the key feasting scenes in the *Geste*, such as Robin’s refusal to allow his men to eat until he has taken mass, Little John’s theft of the Sheriff’s dinnerware, and the outlaws’ shared meal with the captive Sheriff. This in-depth examination establishes how the poem both emphasizes and subverts mealtime courtesy, particularly in guildhall contexts. Ultimately, the article concludes that the compiler of the *Geste* uses the brutal and disruptive nature of the rhyme’s feasts to “undermine and critique the pomp and ceremony of the guild’s feasts.”

¹ Thomas H. Ohlgren and Lister M. Matheson, ed. *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Edition of the Texts, ca. 1426-1600*, (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 2013), xxii.

² Ohlgren and Matheson, *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood*, xxiii.

In her essay, “Harts, Hounds, Humans: Hunting in *A Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode*,” Kristin Bovaird-Abbo refigures and reimagines the *Geste* and its core interpretation. Contrary to the common literary and popular culture tendency to associate Robin Hood with a fox, Bovaird-Abbo argues that the *Geste* “suggests another animal association for Robin Hood—the hound.” To support this argument, this essay points to the widespread ownership of dogs—both for hunting and security—amongst all classes in medieval society. Moreover, Bovaird-Abbo gestures toward Robin’s relationship to the king, which is reminiscent of a hound’s interaction with its master. When viewed together, these elements create an outlaw that is distinctly hound-like in his loyalty and behavior. Yet, this argument does not suggest that Robin is domesticated. Instead, Bovaird-Abbo observes that the leash on which the outlaw is kept is short, and ultimately Robin finds himself much freer and richer (socially and financially) as an outlaw than as the king’s loyal hound.

This volume’s final essay, “‘A new play . . . to be played in Maye games’: The Contexts for Dramatizations of Robin Hood Tales at Early Modern May Games, Whitsun Ales, and Robin Hood Revels,” by Lorraine Kochanske Stock turns from the medieval rhymes to another central element of the early Robin Hood tradition—performance. In this contribution, Stock argues that none of the three common explanations that explain the outlaw’s association with the May games—the “seasonal approach,” the “carnival” theory, and the “economic/parochial” theory—fully explain the symbiotic relationship between Robin Hood and the games. Instead, using a sweeping and thorough examination of Robin Hood’s relationship with the May games and Morris Dance, Stock argues that the theories must be viewed in tandem to fully understand the outlaw’s role in the celebrations. This revised understanding of the outlaw’s place in the tradition of the May games provides a richer view of the outlaw’s popularity in early modern England.

While undoubtedly providing scholars with significant new material to consider, these essays are also notable for the ways they expand and subvert the ongoing scholarly conversation in their field. Harlan-Haughey’s contribution builds upon decades of scholarly examination of the *Geste*’s audience in order to situate the rhyme’s feasting scenes within a guild context. Bovaird-Abbo casts aside the established animal metaphor for Robin; instead, she reimagines the woodland figure in a way that accentuates elements of his character that are often overlooked. Stock’s astute synthesis navigates the tension between the competing explanations for Robin’s role in the May games, providing researchers with a new, unified lens through which to view the outlaw’s performative tradition. While acknowledging and engaging with longstanding scholarly trends in Robin Hood Studies—audience, metaphor, performance—these essays also open up new scholarly conversations that will, hopefully, move the field in innovative directions in the near future.

These three essays embody Ohlgren and Matheson’s call to reinterpret the earliest Robin Hood traditions at their core level and, ultimately, show how fertile the ground is for explorations of the outlaw that push back against or stretch the edges of established trends in Robin Hood studies. These contributions demonstrate the vibrant new directions that remain to be explored and help to pave the way for many fruitful conversations in the future.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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