GAMES OF THE GREENWOOD: ARCHERY, PLUCK-BUFFET, AND VIOLENCE IN *A LYTELL GESTE OF ROBYN HODE*

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While gaming has been discussed as a thematic and performative element in the medieval Robin Hood ballads and in the May Day festivals, the function of gaming in the earliest ballads remains underexamined beyond its use in determining truth and justice.[1] It is difficult to imagine how Robin Hood and his men would administer retributive and distributive justice without the competition that includes truth-telling games, the wrestling match, pluck-buffet, and the archery contest. Gaming is the mechanism by which action and its resulting justice are often set into motion.[2] However, pluck-buffet, a game Robin Hood and the King play in the Greenwood, sticks out as an odd companion of archery and wrestling in the *Geste*. While pluck-buffet is not an innovation of the Robin Hood corpus, the form in which it appears is. The version of pluck-buffet that Robin plays with the King in the Greenwood appears nowhere else in literature.[3] According to George Kittredge in his landmark survey of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* pluck-buffet is an ancient competition comprised of successive blows delivered by two men, and while the combatants are always of near equal social stature, age is sometimes a factor in differing rank; according to Saxo Grammaticus, the game is a Germanic custom much like the single-combat duel.[4] Interestingly, pluck-buffet does not appear as an exchange of blows or as a duel in the *Geste*; instead, it pits two people of clearly unequal social statuses in a competitive match of skill. Instead of the equal exchange of violent blows, the buffet is transformed into a penalty for losing a

[1] Alexandra F. Johnston, "The Robin Hood of the Records," in *Playing Robin Hood: The Legend as Performance in Five Centuries,* ed. Lois Potter (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998), 27-44; Paul Whitfield White, *Drama and Religion in English Provincial Society: 1485-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 53-54; Lorraine Kochanske Stock, "… *A new playe … 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," in "New Readings of the Robin Hood Tradition," special issue, *The Bulletin of the International Association for Robin Hood Studies* 5 (2023): 48-72; and especially John Marshall, *Early English Performance: Medieval Plays and Robin Hood Games: Shifting Paradigms in Early English Drama Studies*, ed., Philip Butterworth (London: Routledge, 2020), esp. Part IV, 219-357, which collects six of Marshall's essays on Robin Hood and performance, have written about the performance and associated games of the Robin Hood tradition. There have been various critics who have covered the truth-telling competition as a narrative plot point and its resulting justice. I have written about this elsewhere, as has Christine Chism. See Chism's "Mortal Friends in *Robin and Gandelyn* and the Medieval Robin Hood Ballads," in *Robin Hood in Outlaw/ed Spaces: Media, Performance, and Other New Directions*, ed. Lesley Coote and Valerie B. Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2017), 40-56. Chism argues that gaming acts as a potentially profitable extension of friendship that may or may not pay off socially for the occupants of the Greenwood.

[2] Dean A. Hoffman, "'Wyth the Shot Y Wyll / Alle thy Lustes to Full-fyl': Archery as Symbol in the Early Ballads of Robin Hood," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 86, no. 4 (1985), 494-505. See page 494 for his argument that archery is a symbol of justice.

[3] Pluck-buffet appears in a different form in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Richard Coer de Lyon*, and *Turk and Gawain*, but when it appears in these poems it is an exchange of blows that sets adventure in motion.

[4] See George Lyman Kittredge's *A Study of Gawain and the Green Knight* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013). Kittredge ties the poem to both the Irish tradition of the beheading game and the exchange of blows witnessed in single-combat duel. In the case of pluck-buffet, the exchange of blows, he argues, is the catalyst for the romance protagonists to begin an adventure which eventually brings them to a space where "disenchantment" occurs in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* as well as in *Turk and Gawain,* 121-25.

Megan Woosley, "Games of the Greenwood: Archery, Pluck-Buffet, and Violence in *A Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode*," in Gayle Fallon, ed., "The Ludic Outlaw: Medievalism, Games, Sports, and Play," special issue, *The Bulletin of the International Association for Robin Hood Studies* 6 (2024): 7-21. DOI: 10.33043/BIARHS.6.1.7-21.

competition of skill, or alternatively, as Kittredge claims, into a privilege for a winner who earns the right to inflict violence upon a loser.[5] While Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren suggest this muted violence mimics the loss of life in military engagements, I would like to examine other ways we could possibly interpret the *Geste*'s particular manifestation of pluck-buffet.[6] I argue it is a unique instance of yeoman liminality, and by extension a metaphor for many emergent middle-strata persons. The game itself operates by both employing and resisting established paradigms of gaming, and also by using humor and orchestrated violence to carefully explore taboo spaces and to avoid outright disorder.[7]

The *Geste* both supports and complicates the well-established medieval literary paradigms of gaming that imply that physical prowess, skill, and performance are tied to rank, estate, and ethics.[8] Let us first start by illustrating the paradigm of aristocratic or romance gaming in the medieval tradition and then investigate how it is reflected in the archery competition in the *Geste*. The aristocratic literary paradigm—take, for example, the literary jousting competition—stresses that those of gentle birth are often superior specimens of manners and bodily form, and such excellence is often revealed in varied successes in skill and prowess, an echo of the polysemous nature of the words *gentile* and *noble*.[9] That is, the good knight wins battles, melees, jousts, and judicial duels and those wins re-inscribe the widely accepted philosophy of aristocratic excellence and dominance.

Alternatively, in the world of Robin Hood, the literary gaming paradigm is replicated in parodic and inverted ways—often skill or worth is determined and reflected in actions, and not the reverse, mirroring the belief that what one does or says, as evidenced by the truth-telling competitions, is more important than who one is by estate or skill. When clerics lie in response to yeomen's queries about how much money they have in their possession, it is a reflection of their lack of good character and failure in their responsibilities to God and mankind and not necessarily a sign that they are all a corrupted estate worthy of receiving retributive violence and financial penalty. Even for aristocrats, there is more to worth than appearance, performance, and rank, and actions often belie estate; for example, in the *Geste*, the yeomen quiz Sir Richard at the Lee, a knight, about the contents of his purse as if they are fully aware of good and bad knights in their

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[5] Kittredge, *A Study of Gawain,* 221.

[6] Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren, ed., *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), 228.

[7] My argument about pluck-buffet has been through several permutations and was first presented as a brief aside in a paper about games at "Robin Hood: Media Creature," the Seventh Biennial International Conference of the International Association for Robin Hood Studies (University of Rochester: Rochester, NY, 2009) and then completely revised with helpful comments and presented as a focused argument about cathartic violence at the 2021 meeting of the Southeastern Medieval Association (Wofford College: Spartanburg, SC, 2021). I am thankful for suggestions and questions that helped me shape this into the form it in which it appears now.

[8] Richard Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 33-36.

[9] *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. "gentile," "noble," and "gentilesse." The words *gentile* and *noble* carry the conflation of two separate meanings: high birth and superior form. Often when one is used, both senses are connoted, particularly with expanded meaning in the case of superior form: in appearance, bodily physique, success in battle and competition, but always in manners. The convergence of all these various meanings is addressed by the Old Woman in Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, when she interrogates the term *gentilesse.* These permutations can be seen in the entry for *gentilesse* in the *Middle English Compendium*, which clearly establishes the term to mean "excellence" of beauty and form, excellence of manners, excellence of chivalric characteristics (kindness, generosity, graciousness), as well as noble birth.

world. In fact, at the outset of the ballad when Little John looks to Robin Hood to advise them whom they should target in their truth-telling game, Robin directs them to avoid *good* yeomen, knights, and squires:

> Ne no knyght ne no squyer
> That wolde be a good felawe[10]
> [Neither no knight nor squire who will be a good fellow]

The word "good" emphasizes at once that appearance and social station are not aligned. This is a deviation from literary tournament paradigms—where one who is the best of blood is also often the noblest in character and most adept in skill. The *Geste* toys with such notions, sometimes adhering to this trope and sometimes resisting. The text's turning away marks an emergent gaming philosophy that pairs with contemporaneous late medieval and early modern thought that worth is not contingent on blood. However, these inversions end up reinforcing traditional paradigms about the yeomen in the tales: they always win and represent worthy but complex characters for the audience.

The traditional gaming paradigm appears as an acceptable model for the games in the *Geste* as long as the challenging competitor is ethically lacking, and his loss leads to a painful punishment that is either financial or physical. The Sheriff eventually loses his cook and many costly household items as a result of losing to John in an archery competition. Numerous financial penalties are doled out as a result of losing truth-telling games. The Sheriff loses his head after Robin Hood wins the archery competition/ambush. Likewise, the loss in an aristocratic tournament may carry a financial penalty in historical practice through ransom and penalty for failed challenges; however, losing, particularly in literature, was seen as sufficient penalty itself. Losing a historical and literary joust as well could have meant death, as many knights died in tournament. Such dangers are mentioned in the *Geste*. Sir Richard is indebted because his son killed another knight and a squire in a jousting tournament:

> In felde wolde Iuste full fayre
> He slewe a knyght of lancastshyre
> And a squyre bolde[11]
> [In a joust on a field, he fully killed a knight of Lancaster and his squire.]

There is much to lose in participating in aristocratic tournament, but it comes from the injury involved in participation and not after. According to *The Book of Chivalry* by Geoffroi de Charney, "physical hardship, crushing and wounding, and sometimes the danger of death" were the risks involved in tournaments.[12] The financial penalty exacted of Sir Richard's family seems to be uncommon. Juliet Barker, English tournament historian, suggests as long as an inquest proved the

[10] All quotations, cited by page and line number, of the early Robin Hood poems are from Thomas H. Ohlgren and Lister M. Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Edition of the Texts, ca. 1425 to ca. 1600* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2013). For the *Geste*, I will be citing from Wynkyn de Worde's edition, *A Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode* (ca. 1506), 89-147; Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rhymes of Robyn Hode*, 95, lines 54-55.

[11] Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hode*, 99, lines 207-9.

[12] Geoffroi de Charney, *The Book of Chivalry,* ed., Richard Kaeuper, and Elspeth Kennedy (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1996), 87.

knight in question accidentally killed another knight in competition, a pardon was issued.[13] The financial constraint of Sir Richard is a product of buying a royal pardon, and not of a financial penalty of foul play in the tournament itself.[14] The negative penalties associated with losing a tournament is often loss of reputation as a worthy knight or serious injury.

In the yeoman game of pluck-buffet, loss is nearly always seen in negative financial or physical terms, and the adverse, winning, provides economic revenue, suggesting that yeomen can acquire cash or goods through the appropriation of aristocratic forms of tournament:

> Who so sayleth of the rose garlonde sayd Robyn
> His takyll he shall tyne
> And yelde it to his mayster[15]
> ["Whoever fails to hit the rose-garland," Robin said, "will forfeit his gear and give it to his master."]

The loser not only is beaten as a result of the loss, but also he loses his costly gear. The winner gets to be physically violent and gain goods. In other early ballads, like *Robin Hood and the Potter*, Robin concerns himself with having excellent gear in the competition with the Sheriff; likewise, in the world of the *Geste,* Robin wins good gear in the ambush, and the prize for pluck-buffet acknowledges the gear is superior:

> Be it neuer so fyne
> For no man wyll I spare[16]
> [No matter how fine the gear is, no man will I spare.]

We can assume that a yeoman prides himself on his tackle and bow, as obtaining quality weapons could be a costly endeavor in medieval England. Edmund Burke chronicles the inflation of yew wood for good bow staves, and it would be right to assume that quality arrows exacted a high price, as well, in the late Middle Ages. [17] In an order to the Tower of London to fletchers, a sheaf of arrows in 1347 was 1s 4d, "all to be of good dry [ash] wood."[18] To lose one's gear in competition was to take a financial blow, since it was expensive to outfit a yeoman archer, and the *Geste* simultaneously emphasizes substantial financial loss since the gear would have been distributed to the group of competing yeomen.[19]

To continue the comparison of this game in the *Geste* to aristocratic tournaments, we also must look at another benefit of winning a game of pluck-buffet: often a contestant received gain and glory without the immediate threat of death. The winner was exalted, trusted, and held up as a worthy individual in addition to being rewarded with costly monetary prizes. The various material rewards in the *Geste* are exaggerated in order to make the association between the tournament and games clear, especially in the example of the wrestling competition Sir Richard happens upon. The prizes in the *Geste*'s wrestling match (a white bull, a courser, a bridle and

[13] Richard Barber and Juliet R. V. Barker, *Tournaments: Jousts, Chivalry and Pageants in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1989), 51.
[14] Barber and Barker, *Tournaments*, 51.
[15] Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hode*, 140, lines 1573-75.
[16] Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hode*, 140, lines 1576-77.
[17] Edmund Burke, *The History of Archery* (London: Heineman, 1958), 172.
[18] Michael Prestwich, *Armies and Warfare in the Middle Ages: The English Experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 140-1.
[19] Prestwich, *Armies and Warfare*, 140.

saddle adorned with gold, a pair of gloves, a red gold ring, a cask of wine, lines 541-46) are humorously exaggerated for a game of wrestling often associated with the lower classes. To make this connection clearer, the historical prizes associated with tournaments in England and France, along with the prizes reported in some literary texts like *The History of William Marshall*, feature similar rewards: a golden leaf or golden lance, for example.[20] The hyperbolic distortion directly courts a literary context, as acknowledged by Knight and Ohlgren, and lays bare the lucrative business of professional tournament and gaming.[21] Furthermore, in historical practice and in the world of Robin Hood, archery earns competitors prize money for good performance.[22] Knights who traveled the competitive tournament circuit, as well as townspeople who competed in local archery competitions, could earn good remuneration.[23] Likewise, in the pluck-buffet game, as mentioned above, champions could take home expensive tackle.

But that is not all that is going on in these scenes in the *Geste.* In literature, the prize attached to winning was the title itself, because winning "was prize enough,"[24] but often the prize in aristocratic tournament and engagement is connected with superiority and exaltation: the hand or favor of a potential lover. In judicial duels and other martial engagements, the winner represents the favor of God and justice.[25] It is worth noting that the winner in pluck-buffet is not called a winner here. He is called, instead, "master," suggesting the winner gains some sort of social

[20] See footnote 11. See also Juliet R. V. Barker, *The Tournament in England: 1100-1400* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1986), 18. Richard Barber and Juliet Barker detail a long list of tournament prizes that parallel the prizes (rings, rubies, courser with saddle and bridle, and various cloths, for example) that are associated with the wrestling match. They also review some prizes and the order of the tournament from the translation of René's *Tournament Book*, taken from the facsimile edited by François Avril; see François Avril, *Le Livre des Tournois du Roi René* (Paris: Editions Herscher, 1986).

[21] Knight and Ohlgren, ed., *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 157n548. Knight and Ohlgren mention the usual prize for wrestling was a ram. The courser is clearly aristocratic.

[22] Maurice Keen, *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend* (London: Routledge, 1961), 139. Keen explains that Edward I (1272-1307) ordered every man to "have his own arms and be ready for service," but this is most likely in reference to foot soldiers and peasants who were expected to defend the nation in case of attack.

[23] Kelly DeVries, "Longbow Archery and the Earliest Robin Hood Legends," in *Robin Hood in Popular Culture: Violence, Transgression, and Justice*, ed., Thomas Hahn (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 53-57. The prizes attached to local archery contests initiated by Edward III further encouraged participation to sharpen skills of yeomen. According to medieval weapon historian DeVries, these archery contests were not for peasants: "peasants rarely participated in archery contests—it seems that they did not have the skill or time for these types of leisure activities. These contests are much more imitative of upper-class jousts held in England frequently during the last two centuries of the Middle Ages," 57. Imitative of aristocratic jousts, but restrictive of peasant participation, the archery contests allowed the yeoman to both emulate the upper classes and also to rise above the lower through the cash prizes attached to archery competitions.

[24] Mary Arlene Santina, *The Tournament in Literature: Literary Representations of the Medieval Tournament in Old French Works 1150-1226* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 114.

[25] Paul R. Hyams, "Trial by Ordeal: The Key to Proof in Early Common Law," in *On the Laws and Customs of England: Essays in Honor of Samuel E. Thorne*, ed., Morris S. Arnold et al. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1981), 90. Hyams argues that "final proof in early English law, as elsewhere, was generally left to the judgment of God. Because God was by definition impeccable." Although the tournament is not a judicial duel or a trial by ordeal, the belief that connects favor and truth with the hand of God in early medieval legal examination proliferates into other categories of medieval thought. It is often extended to tournament and military engagements in the romance tradition. One such literary instance of this is the trials of Lancelot to win Guinevere's favor in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur.* Additionally, Lancelot proves Guinevere's honor through his performance in tournament against Maleagant. See my argument about this in "Yeomen Justice: the Robin Hood Ballads and the Appropriation of Aristocratic and Clerical Justice" (PhD diss., University of Missouri, 2013), 173-216.

leverage over the loser, but one must remember Robin is in competition with the King disguised as an abbot. In a fellowship, no man is the leader—all are united equally. In this yeoman tournament, social dominance is given to the winner and that dominance also alludes to the paradigm established in aristocratic tournament games in the word *pris*, which is related to the English word *prize* and French *prix* in the tournament context. These words carry the meaning of both material reward of "money" from Latin *pretium*, but they also have a "figurative meaning" of "intellectual and moral" value, of "renown[ed and] most esteemed."[26] Winning and losing are seen in terms of economic gain and loss as well as worth and primacy. Pluck-buffet is a game that is truly illustrative of the intermediate status of the yeoman. It is a game that brings the entire ballad to a climax, much like when the *nouveau riche* meet the *vieux riche*. The text presents a set of questions that could potentially destabilize an entire system built upon a complex philosophy of gaming. Who will be more worthy in body and skill? The answer to this interaction requires a careful response from the text. When the King is the competitor in the *Geste*, the ballad finds itself in dangerous territory. The text must negotiate how to both uphold the natural worth of the yeoman and also the respect of the King. The entire hierarchical system teeters on a perilous precipice that must be navigated through orchestrated punishment—in this case, sanctioned physical violence. In previous scenes in the poem, the yeomen best the corrupt Sheriff in archery, showing their superiority in skill and worth, and they expose clerics as morally bankrupt in truth-telling games, but in this particular game of pluck-buffet there is the potential to completely disrupt the social order.[27] The potential violence of social upheaval and unrest is absorbed into the physical violence for entertainment.

Instead of manifesting the threat as social revolution, the King's body responds in a precise and directed way that sets the world of Robin Hood right again. The King nearly knocks Robin to the ground, a metaphorical representation of the divine strength and primacy of the King of England as one who stands clearly above him in physical and social space:

> And sych a buffet he gaue Roybn
> To grounde he yede full nere[28]
> [And such a blow he gave Robin, nearly to the ground he went.]

The force of the blow triggers Robin to recognize his physical strength and skill, which simultaneously acknowledges the King's embodied nobility and physical prowess, a reiteration of traditional literary gaming philosophy. Strength and success equals nobility:

> There is pith in thyn arme sayd Robyn
> I trowe thou canst well shote[29]
> ["There is force in your arm," said Robin, "I trust you are able to shoot well."]

[26] James Titterton, "*Por pris et por enor*: Ideas of Honour as Reflected in the Medieval Tournament," in *The Medieval Tournament as Spectacle: Tourneys, Jousts and Pas d'Armes, 1100-1600*, ed. Alan V. Murray and Karen Watts (Boydell Press, 2020), 45-46.
[27] Keen, *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend*,155-57. Keen argues that the King was outside the social system and to upset his primacy would be akin to attacking God. The King acts as a just figure who rights the wrongs of the evil men who fail to adhere to their duties as required by their estate.
[28] Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hode*, 141, lines 1611-12.
[29] Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hode*, 141, lines 1615-16.

To contrast the force and strength of his being, the buffets given by Robin that precede the King's blow are not as hard or noteworthy: first, Robin strikes an unnamed fellow "wonder sare"[30] [exceedingly much], then he hits Little John, Will Scathelock, and presumably Gilbert of the White Hand "full sore"[31] [severely]. As Robin bests his fellows, he collects tackle and distributes blows, building his reputation for the listener to admire. As the strikes progress, the blows intensify; similarly, the tension crescendos to a climax. The listener recognizes the pattern and expects Robin to excel, but they are simultaneously attuned to the irony of the scene.

Robin's continued wins are expected in this textual space; therefore, when he loses by such a large margin, it is as if the hand of God has intervened and reset the natural order in accordance with the paradigm readers have come to expect. The King is the absolute best earthly representation of man. Nevertheless, Robin's loss still feels unexpected, and such a fissure is comical for the audience members who both recognize he cannot win against the King in this moment but also understand he is the best archer. The ballad reflects this conundrum and suggests that despite Robin's success with his friends, which demonstrates his dominance over his men, Robin still misses "the garlonde" by "[t]hre fyngers and mare"[32] [by more than the width of three fingers]. This is a rather large margin of error for an archer who can split the stick in two. Robin's failure entertains listeners and possibly even provides cathartic satisfaction for the audience through his fellows' responses: Gilbert eagerly urges Robin to "[s]tande forth and take [his] pay,"[33] and we all have a laugh as Robin is struck to the ground. The tension of the moment is diffused through violence and then laughter. The audience has internalized the message of the traditional paradigm of gaming: the highest rung on the social ladder should have the most skill, and when Robin Hood loses, the text releases the built-up tension through humor and the violence of the blow. Up until that point, we expect Robin to win because, in other contexts, yeoman skill is often superior. Yeomen are, after all, the least morally bankrupt in the world of Robin Hood.[34] That paradigm is destroyed in the successive scenes, but it stands out as a problematic episode in the *Geste* because here Robin still continues to represent natural nobility that has met its match.

Yeoman games in the medieval Robin Hood ballads vacillate between the paradigm that attaches nobility with skill and the paradigm that skill is not related to rank, thus illustrating the reluctance of the text to produce a game with a stable gaming philosophy. In the successive pluck-buffet matches between Robin and the King, sometimes Robin wins and sometimes the King does—because both characters present with differing kinds of noble worth, and thus the games reward and reproduce an ethos that paradoxically privileges both. Both characters are equals in skill and as a result both appear worthy, but they cannot be equals outside of the imagined social space of the Greenwood. The *Geste* acknowledges worth is tied up with winning and that both are worthy—the word *good*, which also carries a doubled meaning of good conduct and performance and good breeding, appears in front of Robin's name:[35]

[30] Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hode*, 140, line 1582.
[31] Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hode*, 140, lines 1590.
[32] Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hode*, 141, lines 1593-94.
[33] Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hode*, 141, line 1598.
[34] I acknowledge that it is problematic to call Robin Hood and his yeomen the least morally bankrupt, as there is clear evidence they participate in criminal activity; however, the text is invested in providing an alternative form of nobility in the greenwood no matter how fantastical it is.
[35] *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. "gód."

And many a buffet our kynge wan
Of Robyn hode that day
And nothynge spared good Robyn
Our kynge in his pay[36]
[And many a blow our king received from Robin Hood that day, and good Robin did not spare our king of his payment.]

The King needs no virtuous qualifier; his righteousness is obvious by his win and title. He appears in the greenwood to restore justice and right the wrongs the Sheriff has reported to him, but what he finds is "good Robyn," whose own body has also been a receptacle of success. The paradigm of aristocratic competition pervades the text, however. The King recognizes he should be the winner and in an embarrassing manner tries to qualify his loss because he is new to the game:

So god me helpe sayd our kynge
Thy game is nought to lere
I sholde not get a shote of the
Though I shote all this yere[37]
["So help me God," said our king, "your game is not heard to learn: I should not beat you in shooting, although I shot all this year.]

The King's acknowledgement that the game is not hard to learn is a direct recognition that the literary gaming paradigm has unraveled, and he calls upon God to help strengthen his body in a moment of humorous frustration. However, inside the forest, the King (disguised as an abbot) wins against Robin Hood. Robin is so impressed that he asks the King to join his band:

That may no better be
Syr abbot, I delyuer the myn arowe
I pray the syr serue thou me [38]
["If it cannot be otherwise, sir abbot, I deliver to you my arrow; I pray that you, sir, deliver to me the blow."]

Although skill determines the winner in this game of physical violence and tournament, notions of worthy character and competition are complicated. Importantly, the text, at this moment, is unwilling to commit.

The reluctance of the text to allow the King to consistently win suggests an acknowledgment of Robin's natural nobility. In fact, the King admires his band's loyalty to him:

His men are more at his byddynge
Then my men be at myn[39]
["His men are more at his bidding than my men are at my own."]

The fellowship between them is temporary, however; once Robin leaves the greenwood he cannot continue to be in fellowship with the King. Clearly if the previously established literary paradigm of gaming applied, the King would surface as the winner every time. But this is a game of archery, and the bow is the weapon of the yeoman, not the king. It is important to communicate the King is the most fitting or noble, and also the most trustworthy, which is why he is allowed to win. His

[36] Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hode*, 143, lines 1679-82.
[37] Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hode*, 143, lines 1683-86.
[38] Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hode*, 141, lines 1600-1603.
[39] Ohlgren and Matheson, ed., *Early Rymes of Robyn Hode*, 139, lines 1545-46.

win further supports the idea that this text is not interested in revolution or in maligning the King.[40] The game does not seek to destabilize the hierarchy and instead seeks to act as a recognition of the breakdown of this literary paradigm.

Instability is a hallmark of newly formed cultural identity. If the archery competition is the yeomen's tournament, then the pluck-buffet competition illustrates what happens when divergent philosophies collide. It exposes the pitfalls of the transposition of one paradigm to another. The rules of one genre of medieval literature do not map neatly onto another—romance to folk ballad, aristocratic tournament to yeoman gaming. These are not interchangeable worlds in the same way that yeomen do not fit precisely in the separate worlds of the aristocracy, the clergy, or the commoners. They must forge their own space and build their own value system, as Robin and his men attempt to do in the ballads. The emergent yeoman identity, if we can even call it that—as well as the identity of the emergent middle strata—is fragile, unpredictable, and complex, but it demonstrates the same ambiguity of the term *yeoman* during the late Middle Ages.[41] The idea of the yeoman is only beginning to take shape. Likewise, the literature featuring yeomanry borrows from contemporary popular clerical and aristocratic genres. Nevertheless, yeomen, like the ballads they are featured in, resist definite social categorization. Their status is slippery and amorphous, much like the philosophy of gaming that manifests in the *Geste*.

It is one thing for a yeoman to upstage the corrupt clerics and the Sheriff of Nottingham in archery and games in the text. However, it is another thing entirely to suggest the yeoman brotherhood is superior in skill and character to the King, yet that is approximately what the text does. Instead of leaving that threat of social disruption through gaming to stand unanswered in the text, I contend the pluck-buffet game symbolically absorbs the potential violence of social revolution and redistributes it to the bodies of the two men in competition with one another. Violence in the pluck-buffet competition acts as a humorous conduit to help the men in the text negotiate potentially subversive interactions, filtering them instead into rough play. The yeomen stand to lose everything when they come into contact with the King and those who carry the official seal of England, and as a result, the text takes direction from games in order to help negotiate this treacherous territory. Similar strategies can be located outside the literary canon.

In medieval art, pluck-buffet negotiates taboo space through orchestrated violence. Another medieval game, hot cockles, a version of blindman's bluff, does the same. In this game, also called the buffeting game or, in French, *la main chaude*, one buries one's head in the lap of another and is slapped by anonymous participants. The person being slapped must correctly identify the assailant. If the guess is correct, the person who slapped then becomes the one to receive the next blow. The slapping may be applied to the arm draped along the back, but it nearly always makes contact with one's backside; the recipient's head is buried deep in the lap of the

[40] Maurice Keen writes that the Robin Hood ballads are situated in a fourteenth-century social context and posits that they are a form of peasant discontent. Keen frames the audience for Robin Hood as rural peasants because of the ballad form. He admits in a later introduction to *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend* that he was mistaken and that the ballads have more in common with metrical romances, noting that the form says nothing about the audience. Like J. C. Holt, R. H. Hilton argues that the audience is the yeoman, specifically one who shares space with the aristocrat. See the entire debate among J. C. Holt, R. H. Hilton, and Maurice Keen in R. H. Hilton, ed., *Peasants, Knights, and Heretics: Studies in Medieval English History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).
[41] Knight and Ohlgren, ed., *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 34.

opposite sex.[42] The game has obvious sexual implications. Hot cockles first appears in literature in Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* in the sixteenth century as a reference to a game shepherds play.[43] The game itself is not a working-class game of rural peasants; it is a parlor game that is well documented in art of the fourteenth century among the aristocracy, but it is worth noting that the pastoral settings of early modern poems are also fantastical spaces like the greenwood. In the margins of breviaries and romances, hot cockles depicts mixed-sex participants in titillating scenes (see fig. 1).[44] Hot cockles features in multiple fourteenth-century French ivory carvings. In the holding of the British Museum (see fig. 2), both women and men are participants, knights kneel and watch, partygoers kiss in the background, and an older hooded gentleman spies on the younger gamers. The scene is full of mystery and excitement for everyone involved. In the French ivories, commonalities exist among the various surviving pieces, suggesting they may have been popular over a long period of time and "disseminated from shop to shop."[45]

Like the strange and tense space Robin finds himself in when he is in contact and in competition with the King's body, the interactions among potential love interests are limited to what is proper behavior. The possibility for offense is high. In a tightly controlled situation where social interaction was dictated by rules and limitations, games like hot cockles were ways for others to get to know one another, to touch one other, to test boundaries, and to survive potentially fraught and embarrassing situations with prescribed violence. It is in these ritualized and organized games of violence that one navigates precarious situations and is able to enjoy the bodies of others through the convergence of pleasure and violence.

Violent gaming is also a strategy that is used to negotiate seriously grave situations. Hot cockles, sometimes called "blindman's bluff" in many footnotes in scenes of Christ's torture in the York and Wakefield pageant plays, coordinates violence and humor in order to avoid the spectator recognition of a solemn moment of theological import. The threat of doing violence to Christ's body is rearranged from the violence of torture to the light and entertaining violence of a game. Of course, such instances were created to connect medieval spectators' pleasure in them to sin: one who enjoys and laughs at the interactions takes pleasure in the crucifixion of Christ. Sin is pleasurable, and violence and humor are connected here to human complicity in the torture of Christ's body.

Perhaps pluck-buffet's odd appearance in the *Geste* is related to the structural formula in nearly contemporaneous texts: it acts as a plot device. Pluck-buffet's appearance in the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus, *Richard Coer de Lyon*, *Turk and Gawain*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* tests two men and determines the supremacy of one combatant's strength, power, and chivalry, but it simultaneously serves as a narrative trope to set the resulting adventure in motion. In *Richard Coer de Lyon*, pluck-buffet pits the king's son, who has wrongly imprisoned

[42] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "hot cockles." See also Hannelore Magnus, "The Seventeenth-Century Young Gentry at Hot Cockles: Investigating a Southern Netherlandish Novelty as a Prelude to the Rococo *Fêtes Galantes*," *Dutch Crossing* 39, no. 2 (2015): 128-149.
[43] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "hot cockles."
[44] For an additional image of this game, see "Initial P: A Funeral Service," MS. Ludwig IX 2 (83.ML.98), fol. 99, c. 1320-25, France, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, USA, https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/105VAW#full-artwork-details, accessed October 22, 2021.
[45] Richard H. Randall, "Games on a Medieval Ivory," *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University* 56, no. 1/2 (1997): 3–9, https://doi.org/10.2307/3774756.

Richard, against Richard, who will eventually strike the boy dead with his waxed fist. That interaction places Richard in a position to tear out and then eat the heart of a lion, thus giving Richard his claim to fame. In a similar way, the pluck-buffet competition in the *Geste* sets into motion Robin's adventure in the King's retinue. The tale ends with a penniless Robin returning to the Greenwood, unable to live in royal space. Pluck-buffet foreshadows this return; it is the mechanism that quells and softens the potential social violence represented by Robin's competitive Greenwood economy. Robin and his men never act to overthrow social hierarchy, suggesting this literature is not the literature of revolt, but rather a fantasy for restructuring of the yeoman's social space through acceptable games of violence.

Figure 1. Close-up of Oxford, Bodleian Library MS. Bodl. 264, fol. 52r. Photo: © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK, https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/60834383-7146-41ab-bfe1-48ee97bc04be/surfaces/367872af-4672-480a-8d35-5e69687cb531/. Terms of use: CC-BY-NC 4.0.

Figure 2. “Writing-Tablet.” Writing-tablet(?); ivory; carved; leaf of; depicts game of forfeits; blindfolded knight kneels with head in woman's lap; another knight kneels; five knights stand behind, two kiss; above is triple arched canopy; hole in top left-hand corner. The British Museum, London, UK, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1888-1217-1.

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