

## INTRODUCTION: EXPLORATIONS IN REALISM AND VERISIMILITUDE IN POST-MEDIEVAL ROBIN HOOD TEXTS

Alexander L. Kaufman  
Ball State University

The essays in this special issue of *The Bulletin of the International Association for Robin Hood Studies* originate in an IARHS-sponsored roundtable session at the 58th International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, USA, in 2023. Panelists were asked to think broadly on the topic of realism and verisimilitude in the Robin Hood tradition, using key texts to focus their remarks that explored the complicated nature of representation of the medieval past and how more contemporary works navigated aspects of exemplification and, in some cases, insisted upon (re)presenting “the real” to audiences in new and varied ways.

At the heart of the roundtable, and the discussions that followed, was the issue of authorial intent. What historical reality of the Middle Ages were the authors and the filmmakers seeking to represent? To what ends? How were these works bridging the past with the present moment in which these new texts were created? As a result, how were these “real” works serving as a commentary on contemporary ideas? The presenters’ remarks and the discussion that followed in the roundtable made evident that the Robin Hood tradition, from its inception and continuing to the first quarter of the twenty first century, remains committed to a representation of the past that is interested in aspects of realism, though always with at least one caveat. Indeed, in some cases these Robin Hood works present a wholly imagined future, or a time/space that exists outside of the “real.”

One of the main reasons that authors, filmmakers, and audiences crave elements of verisimilitude in Robin Hood texts is the tradition’s initial eschewing of medieval fantasy, romance, or fairytale tropes. The Robin Hood tradition has been connected in some manner with a historical reality since its earliest surviving poetic works, such as *Robin Hood and the Monk* (ca. 1463), *Robin Hood and the Potter* (ca. 1468), and *A Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode* (ca. 1495). All three of these earliest extant poems concern the exploits of the outlaws in known locations, mostly in the North of England. These outlaws engage with persons of all three medieval estates including, in the *Geste*, King Edward. While scholars have debated which King Edward is represented in the poem, the literary predilections for such an inclusion, and the ideological implications of an outlaw and his band interacting with the King of England, are perhaps more significant than knowing the royal’s “true” identity.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, degrees of realism persist in these and later Robin Hood texts.

Some scholars continue to seek the “real” that is within Robin Hood literary works, the broad media corpus, or (quasi)historical records, and for the latter we should include the chronicle tradition from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Period and its propensity toward figuration in

---

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion on this matter, see the following studies: Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 47-48; and Thomas H. Ohlgren, *Robin Hood: The Early Poems, 1465-1560: Texts, Contexts, and Ideology* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007), 146-51.

the various chroniclers' use of such literary devices as emplotment, characterization, and ideological frameworks.<sup>2</sup>

Within Robin Hood studies, and the question of realism within fictive works, an important piece of scholarship remains Barbara Hanawalt's chapter on the early poems of the outlaw and extant historical records of outlawry and banditry in late-medieval England. In her research and analysis, Hanawalt demonstrates that the poems offer a realistic depiction of crime and criminality, especially the structure and the size of organized gangs. Robin Hood's band of outlaws maintains a hierarchy of power, which is mirrored in the structure of criminal gangs in fourteenth-century England. Moreover, Hanawalt's research shows how, much like the fictional "Merry Men and Women" of the North of England, real units of criminality worked together in fewer numbers for the majority of their actions, whereas major, large-scale, and complex crimes required a larger host. The noble robber portrait of Robin Hood that is furthered not only in the early poems but also in most post-medieval works is something that Hanawalt was able to disprove. While Robin Hood insisted that he and his band only rob, beat, and bind the nobility, dishonest lawmen, corrupt clergy, and crooked judges, Hanawalt's examination of historical records reveals that outlaws and bandits stole from all ranks of society, and that the lower-classes were in some cases easier targets because they had the basic necessities that outlaws and bandits on the run needed: food and drink.<sup>3</sup> As Hanawalt's cogent, focused research shows, these early poems of the Robin Hood tradition provide us with a touchstone for later texts that seek to represent the medieval world and the Robin Hood tradition: some authors strive for realism; some make awkward gestures towards realism; while still others purposefully mess with the historical record and create at times fraught, at other times creative, "realistic" narratives.

The essays of this special issue begin with Emily Youree's "Getting (and Staying) Medieval: Historical Setting in Robin Hood Adaptations," which explores the ways in which filmmakers insist upon the inclusion of the medieval world as the setting for Robin Hood movies for both the validation of historicity and also for pedagogical reasons. Johanna Black's piece continues the exploration of film, specifically Kevin Reynolds's 1991 release *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, with a critical examination of the film's purported embrace of feminism in the essay "Fantasy Feminism: Joseph Campbell's Heroic Model as a Framework for Marginalization in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*." Lastly, Carl B. Sell, in his essay "The Hooded Man Reborn: The Post-Apocalyptic Robin Hood of Paul Kane's *Hooded Man* Novels," discusses how the post-apocalyptic realism of this Robin Hood trilogy is recursive in nature, one that is dependent upon

---

<sup>2</sup> For studies on the medieval historical contexts of the Robin Hood tradition, see these studies: John Bellamy, *Robin Hood: An Historical Enquiry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); David Crook, *Robin Hood: Legend and Reality* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2020); J. C. Holt, *Robin Hood*, 2nd ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996); W. M. Ormrod, "Robin Hood and Public Record: The Authority of Writing in the Medieval Outlaw Tradition," in *Medieval Cultural Studies: Essays in Honour of Stephen Knight*, ed. Ruth Evans, Helen Fulton, and David Matthews (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), 57-74; A. J. Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood: The Late-Medieval Stories in Historical Context* (London: Routledge, 2004); and Stephen H. Rigby, ed., *Historians on Robin Hood: The Outlaw's Legend in the Later Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Barbara A. Hanawalt, "Ballads and Bandits: Fourteenth-Century Outlaws and the Robin Hood Poems," in *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 154-75.

other post-apocalyptic fictions but also aspects of realism embraced and employed by Howard Pyle in his episodic work *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* (1883).

These essays seek to underscore how the histories that are a part of Robin Hood texts are themselves fictive in nature. We should begin to consider how Robin Hood literary and media works belong to the broad genre of fantasy and its numerous sub- and adjacent-genres. For audiences of Robin Hood texts, there is a tendency to continue to describe the tradition as grounded in realism, and a growing number of writers and filmmakers (especially since the 1970s and the New Hollywood movement, where grittier, more “authentic” characterization and action, i.e., violence, is on display) have explored how the medieval and post-medieval Robin Hood tradition negotiates the reality of outlawry and the historical contexts associated with the outlaw.<sup>4</sup> To complicate matters, these works often explore elements of historical reality along with tropes that belong to genres such as speculative fiction, fantasy, science fiction, fairytales, and contemporary romance. In doing so, we are left to wonder if, in such texts, we have fully moved toward an unreal Robin Hood; and if so, what are the implications?

---

<sup>4</sup> For example, in the media coverage that surrounded the production of his 2010 film *Robin Hood*, Ridley Scott stated that his film and outlaw was to be more historically accurate and realistic: “He’s a guy who’s been on the road, as opposed to a guy walking around with a feather in his hat and wearing a little green skirt—I never liked that Robin Hood, I couldn’t buy it.” Of course, Scott’s reference to that other “guy” was either Douglas Fairbanks’ portrayal of Robin Hood in *Douglas Fairbanks in Robin Hood* (1922) or, more likely, Errol Flynn’s portrayal in *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938). Both Fairbanks’ and Flynn’s versions of the English outlaw, and the two films themselves, are as legendary and iconoclastic as the literary tradition that preceded them, perhaps even more so in the case of Flynn, hence Scott’s desire to move beyond those totemic representations and versions and on to something different and, in his estimation, new and, importantly, real. See “Ridley Scott’s Realistic Robin Hood,” *Belfast Telegraph*, 13 April 2010, <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/entertainment/film-tv/news/ridley-scotts-realistic-robin-hood/28529196.html>.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bellamy, John. *Robin Hood: An Historical Enquiry*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985.
- Crook, David. *Robin Hood: Legend and Reality*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2020.
- Hanawalt, Barbara A. "Ballads and Bandits: Fourteenth-Century Outlaws and the Robin Hood Poems." In *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context*, 154-75, edited by Barbara A. Hanawalt. Medieval Studies at Minnesota 4. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1992.
- Holt, J. C. *Robin Hood*. 2nd ed. London: Thames and Hudson, 1996.
- Knight, Stephen. *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994.
- Ohlgren, Thomas H. *Robin Hood: The Early Poems, 1465-1560: Texts, Contexts, and Ideology*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007.
- Ormrod, W. M. "Robin Hood and Public Record: The Authority of Writing in the Medieval Outlaw Tradition." In *Medieval Cultural Studies: Essays in Honour of Stephen Knight*, 57-74, edited by Ruth Evans, Helen Fulton, and David Matthews. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006.
- Pollard, A. J. *Imagining Robin Hood: The Late-Medieval Stories in Historical Context*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- "Ridley Scott's Realistic Robin Hood." *Belfast Telegraph*, 13 April 2010, <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/entertainment/film-tv/news/ridley-scotts-realistic-robin-hood/28529196.html>.
- Rigby, Stephen H., ed. *Historians on Robin Hood: The Outlaw's Legend in the Later Middle Ages*. Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2024.