Fishermen, Seafaring, and English Identity in the Seventeenth-Century *Robin Hood's Fishing*

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The seventeenth-century Robin Hood ballad conventionally titled either *Robin Hood's Fishing* or *The Noble Fisherman* occupies a unique place in the corpus of outlaw rhymes.[1] Rather than depicting his outlaw exploits, in this ballad Robin abandons the forest life in favor of working as a fisherman in Scarborough and battling pirates on the high seas. While on the surface this narrative seems both odd and also without reason, Robin's decision to take up the life of a fisherman is directly tied to contemporary perceptions of sailors, the seafaring trade, and English identity. The poem represents a critical moment in the evolution of the Robin Hood legend that sees Robin move from a symbol of social resistance toward a figure who is capable of reinforcing his country's cultural identity. By fighting off pirates from France—England's traditional adversary—and taking part in the distinctly English profession of fishing, Robin Hood solidifies cultural identity. Thus, rather than merely a "bizarre metamorphosis" of the Robin Hood tradition, *Robin Hood's Fishing* instead appeals to England's deeply rooted cultural association with seafaring and draws upon the seventeenth-century realities of piracy.[2]

Because *Robin Hood's Fishing* is not a ballad that is commonly found in classrooms or scholarship, it is worth briefly recounting the events of the rhyme's narrative. Believing the fisherman's trade to be more profitable than a life of outlawry, Robin Hood abandons his forest-dwelling life and relocates to the coastal town of Scarborough. Adopting the name "Simon-Over-the-Lee," Robin secures a place on a widow's fishing vessel. Robin, however, proves to be a very poor fisherman, and his fellow crewmembers ridicule him. Eventually, French pirates attack the fishing vessel. Defending the ship with his bow, Robin slays the pirates, and the fishermen discover £1,200 on board the French ship.[3] Robin suggests that he should take half of the treasure to the widow who employs him and split the remaining half amongst the other fishermen. The ship's master refuses this offer, insisting instead that Robin keep the whole of the money. Robin, in turn,

[1] The ballad is also sometimes titled "Robin Hood's Preferment." In order to maintain consistency with recently published scholarship, this article will refer to this work as *Robin Hood's Fishing* throughout.
[2] R. B. Dobson and J. Taylor, ed., *Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Introduction to the English Outlaw* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1976), 179.
[3] There are a number of different editions of *Robin Hood's Fishing*: those that date from the seventeenth and eighteenth century and that are found in the garland tradition and well as existing in singular broadsides, and there is a version of the poem that is found in the Forresters Manuscript (British Library Add. MS 71158), which dates to ca. 1670. For this essay, I choose to use the edition of the poem based on the one in the Forresters Manuscript that is edited by Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren for the reasons that they articulate for inclusion in their anthology: "The version found in the Forresters manuscript has a fuller and more lucid sequence of final action, and, as its sense of completeness appears most unlikely to have been generated editorially from the broadside version, its text is used here." See Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren, ed. *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 2nd ed. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), 581-91, 581. All quotations to *Robin Hood's Fishing* will be from this edition, cited parenthetically by line number, with Present-Day English translations provided by myself.

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promises to use the money to build a chapel and hire a priest to sing mass for the rest of the outlaw-turned-seafarer's life. Robin then swears never to return to sea again.[4]

Despite the uniqueness of the ballad's narrative, scholars have paid very little attention to this rhyme. Francis James Child largely dismisses the text, even going so far as to refer to it as "infantile."[5] In the introduction to the ballad in their 1976 edition of the poem, Dobson and Taylor mainly comment upon the perceived oddness of the poem's narrative, remarking "Robin Hood has never undergone a more bizarre metamorphosis than his conversion … from a forest outlaw to a hero of the open sea."[6] The editions of the poem that are found in Child's and Dobson and Taylor's anthologies, however, observe that the ballad seems to have been quite well-liked in spite of its unique premise, with numerous surviving broadsides attesting to its popularity.[7] Dobson and Taylor hint at the purpose for this rhyme's popularity, for they observe that the ballad features Robin as part of "the almost equally popular genre of a successful sea victory over a national enemy."[8] In response to this contention, Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren counter thus: "But it is not so clear that France was the only national enemy at the time, and it is an act of piracy, not national aggression, that Robin single-handedly frustrates."[9] In his overview of the Robin Hood tradition, Knight provides little further commentary on the poem, and he remarks that the ballad "is regarded, if noticed at all, as a freak."[10] However, Knight does note that the ballad emphasizes one of the most central elements of the Robin Hood tradition—charity.[11] To date, Jason Hogue is the only scholar to provide a sustained analysis of the work. In his study, Hogue places the work into the fishing and seafaring context of the seventeenth century, and he notes that "it makes sense to assume that the ballad does not depict a medieval Robin Hood over-hearing about the successful herring trade but rather a Robin Hood contemporaneous with the seventeenth century in which the ballad was composed and during which the cod fishery of the North Sea and Iceland was thriving."[12] The Robin of this ballad should not situated in the nebulous past but rather in the real-world seafaring context of the seventeenth century.

Robin Hood himself held a very specific role in the literary landscape of the seventeenth century. While the medieval Robin was a force of social change, the early modern outlaw largely acted to reinforce the national identity of England. Regarding Robin's role as a national figure during this time, Larissa Tracy observes, "Robin Hood was woven into the tapestry of English

[4] Stephen Knight notes the similarities between the narrative of *Robin Hood's Fishing* and the fifteenth-century ballad *Robin Hood and the Potter*. In each of these ballads, Robin Hood takes on a career outside of outlawry and proves to be particularly inept at the task. See: Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 68.
[5] Francis James Child, ed., *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, vol 3 (New York: Dover, 1965), 211.
[6] Dobson and Taylor, ed., *Rymes of Robyn Hode*, 179.
[7] Child, ed., *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 3:213; Dobson and Taylor, ed., *Rymes of Robyn Hode*, 179.
[8] Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 3:180.
[9] Knight and Ohlgren, ed., *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 581.
[10] Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw*, 68.
[11] Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw*, 69.
[12] Jason Hogue, "Early Modern Fishing Practices and Seafood Culture in *Robin Hood's Fishing*," in *Food and Feast in Premodern Outlaw Tales*, ed. Melissa Ridley Elmes and Kristin Bovaird-Abb0 (London: Routledge, 2022), 222-44, 231.

culture and identity in the early modern period."[13] Robin's social ubiquitous made him a figure that is representative of, rather than one who subverts, the changing landscape of England's national identity during the time. Aiding this social reinforcement is the fact that, as Stephanie Barczewski argues, Robin Hood was a distinctly *English* outlaw; the figure was associated particularly with England, not the whole of the British Isles. Barczewski notes how "the legend was set in the English rural landscape in Sherwood Forest in Nottinghamshire, and all of the earliest references to it … are by English authors or in English sources."[14] As such, by the time that *Robin Hood's Fishing* would have spread across England and achieved popularity, Robin would have embodied the values and ideals of England: he is thus an outlaw hero written to lionize mainstream ideals and virtues.[15]

While, at first glance, it seems odd to associate Robin Hood with seafaring and fishing, these topics do share some history. Regarding the link between Robin Hood and the sea, Knight notes of "the remarkable occurrence of a ship named 'Robin Hood' in Aberdeen as early as 1438, as well as the coastal village named Robin Hood's Bay (known as a smuggler's haven), south of Whitby and only twenty miles from Scarborough."[16] Knight additionally remarks upon the role of the sea in some of Robin's outlaw analogues, observing that "the famous earlier outlaws that might have influenced the Robin Hood story, Fulk Fitz Warren and Eustace of Boulogne (especially the latter), fought at sea as well as in forests."[17] Overall, while Robin Hood was still predominantly a greenwood hero, there are links, albeit rare, between the outlaw and the seascape.

Setting the poem in Scarborough would have called to mind specific kinds of seafaring to a coastal audience. Hogue notes that "Scarborough had long been an important fishing center, and its famous trade fair that originated in the thirteenth century included the prominent sale of cod and herring caught in the North Sea."[18] While fishing was a longstanding and lucrative industry in Scarborough, it was not the only reason sailors came to the port. Shipping, likewise, had grown into a powerful industry in Scarborough during the early seventeenth century.[19] By the 1730s, Scarborough had begun to ship to sixteen locations, and the increase in traffic led to the construction of a new pier during this decade.[20] Shipbuilding was also a major industry in Scarborough, and this business grew in prominence towards the end of the sixteenth and the early parts of the seventeenth centuries.[21] Additionally, the comings and goings of sailors into local businesses and their ships into port were frequent and highly visible even to those who were not,

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[13] Larissa Tracy, "'For our dere ladyes sake': Bringing the outlaw in from the Forest—Robin Hood, Marian, and Normative National Identity," *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 38, no. 1-2 (2012): 35+, https://link-gale-com.proxy.bsu.edu/apps/doc/A345458988/LitRC?u=munc80314&sid=summon&xid=73f6cd0d.

[14] Stephanie Barczewski, "Robin Hood: Medieval Rogue or Enlightenment Gentleman?," *La Révolution francaise* 25 (2003):1-15, 2.

[15] Barczewski, "Robin Hood: Medieval Rogue or Enlightenment Gentleman?," 2.

[16] Knight and Ohlgren, ed., *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 581.

[17] Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 38.

[18] Hogue, "Early Modern Fishing Practices," 225. See also: Maryanne Kowalski, "The Commercialization of the Sea Fisheries in Medieval England and Wales," *International Journal of Maritime History* 15, no. 2 (2003): 177-231, 189.

[19] Peter Nash, "The Maritime Shipping Trade of Scarborough, 1550 to 1750," *Northern History* 49, no 2. (2012): 202-22, 203.

[20] Nash, "The Maritime Shipping Trade of Scarborough," 221-22.

[21] Nash, "The Maritime Shipping Trade of Scarborough," 206-7.

themselves, engaged in a seafaring trade. Given the centrality of sailors in both the economic life and also in day-to-day activities for Scarborough, as well as much of the country, it makes sense that the sailors' world became a central part of coastal identity.

While sailors and sailing were commonplace, this did not mean the seas were tamed, and for seafarers in seventeenth-century England, the North Sea off the coast of Scarborough was an especially dangerous place to sail. In particular, pirates and privateers were ever-present concerns for English sailors during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. During the early seventeenth century, the power of the once-mighty British Navy began to deteriorate.[22] Without a strong naval force to drive them back, Algerian pirates plagued the waters along the west coast of England.[23] Oftentimes, these raids were particularly taxing on fishermen and their trade. Regarding this difficulty, N. A. M. Rodger notes that "the single Cornish fishing village of East Looe lost eighty men in ten days in 1626, and sixty-nine ten years later. The fishermen who survived refused to go to sea in the face of such losses."[24] While piracy was most rampant in the Irish Sea and the English Channel, the eastern coast of England was not free from danger. Regarding these hazards, Rodger notes that "where the Barbary raids were least felt, on the East Coast, the Dunkirk privateers and the Armada of Flanders were most active."[25] Whether it was the North Sea around the ballad's Scarborough setting or the waters near anywhere on the island where the ballad might have spread, the threat of maritime raids would have been familiar to the rhyme's audience.

In addition to the harsh reality pirates represented for sailors, seafaring marauders were also popular in literature and on the early modern stage. As Claire Jowitt observes, "Renaissance pirates are frequently unruly, discontented figures, sniping from the sidelines of literary texts and historical records, but the objects of their ire are not always the expected targets."[26] In late sixteenth-century works of literature, such as Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, pirates serve as traditional antagonists, forces of chaos who disrupt the heroes on their journey. However, in works featuring the infamous real-world sixteenth- and seventeenth-century pirate John Ward, authors of these texts often show deference toward his actions, and these works "articulate an explicitly oppositional political dynamic" by fashioning Ward as a "king" on the high seas in contrast to the king on the throne.[27] Ward's position as a separate regent, separate from the established political space, mirrors Robin Hood's rulership of the greenwood in the medieval outlaw ballads.[28]

For much of the early modern period, pirates retained this flexible, multivalent identity, making them "flexible tools in the formation of an English maritime and colonial empire."[29] However, the early seventeenth century and the reign of James I (r. 1603-1625) marked a shift towards depicting pirates as condemnable, a representation that mirrored James's own efforts to

[22] N. A. M. Rodger, *Safeguard of the Sea: A Naval History of Britain, 660-1649* (London: Norton, 1997), 347-63.
[23] Rodger, *Safeguard of the Sea*, 347-63.
[24] Rodger, *Safeguard of the Sea*, 384.
[25] Rodger, *Safeguard of the Sea*, 385.
[26] Claire Jowitt, *The Culture of Piracy, 1580-1630: English Literature and Seaborne Crime* (London: Routledge, 2010), 15.
[27] Jowitt, *The Culture of Piracy*, 16.
[28] For more about Ward's identity as an outlaw on the high seas, see: Kristi J. Castleberry, "Sailing the *Little John*: John Ward and Legitimizing Outlaw Space," *Robin Hood in Outlaw/ed Spaces: Media, Performance, and Other New Directions*, ed. Lesley Coote and Valerie B. Johnson (London: Routledge, 2016), 132-46.
[29] Jowitt, *The Culture of Piracy*, 17.

demonize piracy.[30] Yet, writers during this period also used pirates to make political commentary. For instance, John Ward's depiction in *A Christian Turned Turk* offers "a warning to the monarchs of the dangers and consequences of believing their word is law," which serves as a political commentary on the rule of James I.[31] Overall, literary pirates during the time that *Robin Hood's Fishing* achieved popularity were villainous, but writers often used their treachery for political ends.

The decision to portray Robin in a skirmish with pirates places the outlaw into conflict with the audience's real-world apprehensions. After all, pirates were a real and persistent threat to the physical and economic well-being of all manners of sailors. However, placing the noble outlaw into conflict with figures the audience would identify as real-world threats is a longstanding element of the Robin Hood tradition. In the medieval ballads, Robin frequently harries figures whom the audience would, in actuality, find disagreeable, such as corrupt churchmen, unscrupulous law enforcers, and traitorous yeomen. Because these figures represent evils that the audience might encounter outside the balladic landscape, the audience accepts them as targets of Robin's violence.[32] Similarly, because pirates were such an ever-present hazard in all of England's waters, they made for a particularly "portable" antagonistic force; no matter where the ballad was published or performed in the long early modern period, piracy would have been a problem. This versatility surely contributed to the ballad's enduring popularity.

While the dangers that pirates represented would have been starkly relevant to the audience of *Robin Hood's Fishing* because of the current-day realities of the seas, sailing and the sea also played central roles in perceptions of English identity. The sea has, of course, long served as a defining part of the English character, with its roots reaching back to the culture's migration and its transmarine origins.[33] Regarding the correlation between the sea and seafaring and English identity, Sebastian I. Sobecki remarks, "What has historically delimited and therefore defined insular Britons is the sea."[34] As a people who came from the sea, the surrounding waters represented a part of the English people's cultural history. Writing about the role of the sea in shaping English identity in late-medieval England, Sobecki further contends that "someone writing in sixteenth-century England, however, might not only be more likely to identify '[their Island]' with Britain but also be more inclined to identify him- or herself as one of its English dwellers, themselves encircled by the sea."[35] In essence, the people who lived on the island during the seventeenth century derived a portion of their identity from their enclosure by the sea. By the time *Robin Hood's Fishing* was composed, one common way the English shaped their own identities was *by means of* the seascape.

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[30] Jowitt, *The Culture of Piracy*, 190-91.
[31] Jowitt, *The Culture of Piracy*, 198.
[32] A. J. Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood: The Late Medieval Stories in Historical Context* (London: Routledge, 2004), 107. See also: Perry Neil Harrison, "Tolkien, Robin Hood, and the Matter of the Greenwood," *Tolkien Studies* 19 (2022): 71-84.
[33] Nicholas Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 34.
[34] Sebastian I. Sobecki, "Introduction," in *The Sea and Englishness in the Middle Ages: Maritime Narratives, Identity and Culture*, ed. Sebastian I. Sobecki (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), 2.
[35] Sebastian I. Sobecki, *The Sea and Medieval English Literature* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), 2-3.

Therefore, the choice to situate Robin Hood, who by the seventeenth century was a well-established symbol of the English people, within the context of the sea makes much more sense when *Robin Hood's Fishing* is considered alongside the link between English identity and the surrounding waters. For the balladeer, the decision was not to merely to pluck Robin from his familiar forest habitat and transplant him into an unnatural maritime environment. Instead, this narrative choice also placed one symbol of national identity (Robin Hood) into conversation with another (the seascape). While, admittedly, this interaction does lead to some (if the pun can be forgiven) "fish out of water" comedy, it also appeals to the audience on a deeply nationalistic level.

The ballad itself seems keenly interested in constructing the fishing life as noble and worthy of both financial and social respect. This is seen most clearly during Robin's initial decision to pursue the life of a fisherman:

> ["]I am weary of the woods," said hee,
> "And chasing of the fallow deer.
> "The fisher-man more mony hath
> Then any marchant two or three;
> Therefore I will to Scarburough go
> And there a fisher-man will bee." (7-12)
>
> ["I am weary of the woods," he said, "and chasing the fallow deer. The fisherman has more money than any two or three merchants. Therefore, I will go to Scarborough and be a fisherman there."]

Robin's claim that a fisherman makes far more money than an outlaw or a merchant is, of course, not one to be taken seriously. Regarding Robin's assertion, Hogue notes, "By most accounts … fishermen were decidedly not known for being wealth, definitely not two or three times more so than merchants."[36] Aside from the obvious purpose of appealing to the seafarers among the ballad's audience, there is another reason why the ballad might make this rather dubious claim. Namely, this claim elevates the importance of the fisherman's trade beyond that of a merchant and, more importantly, Robin's own outlaw trade. If Robin is able to make a better living as a fisherman than as an outlaw, then the fisherman is, at least in part, lauded as being just as successful as a national hero.

While money is the first reason why Robin decides to give up his bow in favor of a fishing line, it later becomes evident that the holds the profession in a great deal of esteem:

> "Were I under Plumpton Parke," said hee,
> "There among my fellows all,
> Look so little you sett by mee,
> I'd sett by yee twiyce as small.
>
> "Heigh ho," quoth Symon then,
> "Farwell to the green leaves on the tree,
> Were I in Plumpton Parke againe,
> A fisher-man I nare would bee." (65-72)

[36] Hogue, "Early Modern Fishing Practices," 231.

> ["If I were under Plumpton Park," he said, "There among all my fellows, as little as you set aside for me, I'd set aside for you twice as small." "Hi ho," said Simon then, "farewell to the green leaves on the tree. If I were in Plumpton Park again, I would not be a fisherman."]

While Robin contemplates returning to the forest, he quickly dismisses the notion, asserting that, were he to return to the greenwood and his fellows, he would no longer be able to call himself a fisherman. This is especially notable because, at this point in the narrative, Robin has not achieved the riches he believed were a part of the fisherman's life. Through these statements, Robin indicates that it not the money, but rather the career itself, that Robin finds most appealing. Indeed, one sentiment becomes clear through Robin's brief debate with himself: in Robin's mind, the fisherman's trade is a noble profession that is worthy of praise. In addition to glorifying the fisherman's life himself, Robin Hood also imprints his status as a national hero upon the trade. By depicting a figure as well-known and respected as Robin to engage in a nautical life and struggle with the same tasks at which the members of the audience excel, the career of a fisherman is afforded a greater degree of respect and dignity.

Robin's presence also highlights the danger inherent in the seventeenth-century nautical life and accentuates the bravery of the real-world fishermen. Without a strong Royal Navy to protect vessels around England, seafarers were required to risk their lives and their livelihoods every time they left shore. Indeed, in *Robin Hood's Fishing*, the ship's master seems distinctly aware of this danger when Robin first informs him of the approaching French pirates:

> "Wo is me," said the master man,
> "Alas, that ever I was borne,
> For all the fish that wee have tane,
> Alas the day, 'tis all forlorne.
>
> "For all the gold that I have tane
> For the losse of my fish I do not care,
> For wee shall prisoners into France,
> Not a man of us that they will spare." (81-88)
>
> ["Woe is me," said the master man, "Alas, that I was ever born. Despite all the fish that we have taken, alas the day, it is all forlorn. I do not care for all the gold that I have taken, for the loss of my fish. Because we shall be prisoners in France. They will not spare a man of us."]

In this statement, the master demonstrates a terror that the seafarers in the audience surely knew all too well: the threat of pirates. In particular, the master's fear that the crew would be taken prisoner by the French would have resonated with the audience because of real-world events. During the seventeenth century, French privateers often took prisoners as part of the spoils of their raids.[37] These prisoners often spent years in prison, as England had little power to coerce these

[37] Renaud Morieux, *The Society of Prisoners: Anglo-French Wars and Incarceration in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 55.

privateers to return their captives until the ransom was paid.[38] Even when they did not take their targets captive, privateers were a financial danger. Fishing ships were often not worth the pirates' effort of sending them back to friendly waters, and pillaging the ship and robbing the fishermen was often the way these privateers made their profit from attacking the vessels. Moreover, these spoils were often taken by violence.[39] This pillaging left fishers, who were often existing through life on unsteady financial footing, in a precarious position. With these realities in mind, the fear of French pirates that the ship's master conveys to Robin is more than a mere literary device: it is also a fear that many sailors (a potential audience of the poem) may have shared.

However, unlike the sailors in real-world fishing vessels, the rhyme's ship has Robin Hood as its defender. For a seafaring culture that was assuredly deeply apprehensive about its vulnerability, the image of Robin Hood, bravely defending the fishing boat as one of its own, would have been powerful and appealing. Certainly, those who braved pirate-infested waters for their trade would have wished for a similarly brave and effective protector. While Robin's defense of the ship functions as a kind of wish-fulfillment for the audience, there is one aspect of the pirates that is not rooted in reality—the buccaneers' nationality. Certainly, French corsairs did trouble the waters during the seventeenth century; nonetheless, they were not the most common pirates to menace the British coastline. Instead, Algerian and Dutch pirates would have been threats that were far more thoroughly rooted in reality.[40] So why, then, does the ballad depict the French as its maritime antagonist? One potential explanation lies in the recent naval histories of both nations. For centuries, England boasted naval superiority over France, an advantage that served the country well during several sixteenth-century Anglo-French wars.[41] This naval superiority persisted into the early part of the seventeenth century and, despite some failures, during this period "the English fleet … was far superior to the nascent French navy."[42] However, this dynamic changed when England battled France during the Huguenot Rebellion of 1627, a conflict England entered, in part, because of France's growing navy.[43] England's fleet, however, was unable to turn the tides of the conflict, and the armada returned in defeat in 1628. By 1630, France's navy had grown larger and more powerful than that of England.[44]

Therefore, just because the French were not England's most pressing piratical enemy does not mean that the country's traditional adversary was not a nautical concern. Indeed, the recent failure of the British fleet to ensure victory over France, followed shortly by France's rise to naval superiority, would have certainly bruised the ego of the English and brought about a feeling of national vulnerability. Additionally, while French privateers were not the timeliest piratical threat, they may have been the most infamous. The notorious danger that French privateers represented, specifically to fishermen, in the real-world would have made the ballad's French pirates seem like

[38] Morieux, *The Society of Prisoners*, 72.
[39] Morieux, *The Society of Prisoners*, 72.
[40] Rodger, *Safeguard of the Sea*, 385.
[41] Rodger, *Safeguard of the Sea*, 165-66; 187; 192-93.
[42] Thomas Cogswell, "Prelude to Ré: The Anglo-French Struggle Over La Rochelle, 1624-1627," *History* 71, no. 231 (1986): 1-21, 8.
[43] Cogswell, "Prelude to Ré," 12-13.
[44] Jan Glete, *Warfare at Sea, 1500-1650: Maritime Conflicts and the Transformation of Europe* (London: Routledge, 2000), 178.

a sinister and pressing opponent. These sentiments would have made the French a fitting nautical adversary for Robin Hood to conquer.

Robin's victory over French adversaries reflects the role of pirates in seventeenth-century literature. Rather than possessing an alternative kingdom-space, as he did in the medieval ballads and like John Ward did in sixteenth-century literature, Robin Hood's conflict with the pirates serves as a political purpose. Through his victory over the pirates, Robin Hood, already a firm symbol of English identity, helps solidify national identity through his victory over the country's recognizable enemy.

While placing Robin Hood onto the high seas may feel strange to the modern reader, these elements—the familiar seascape, the appeal to the nobility of a common English vocation, and the battle against an encroaching threat to British naval superiority—would have presented fertile ground on which a popular ballad could grow in popularity. Robin, himself already a symbol of national identity and pride, would have fit well right alongside these fellow expressions of Englishness. Rather than existing merely as a curiosity or "bizarre metamorphosis" of the Robin Hood tradition, *Robin Hood's Fishing* uses the prevalence of fishing and seafaring throughout England alongside the very real dangers of piracy in order to engage with the audience. While certainly very different than the rest of the outlaw's balladic corpus, the rhyme deftly appeals to perceptions of English identity in ways that are both familiar and unique within the Robin Hood tradition. Ultimately, despite its unconventional narrative, the poem succeeds in situating both Robin Hood and the fishing trade as noble elements of English identity.

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