"For Our dere Ladyes sake": Bringing the Outlaw in from the Forest—Robin Hood, Marian, and Normative National Identity

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Few outlaw tales are as popular or as persistent as the legend of Robin Hood that has made its way from fifteenth-century ballads and May games to modern blockbuster films like Robin Hood Prince of Thieves (1991) and, most recently, Ridley Scott’s Robin Hood (2010). Over the centuries, multiple and contested images of Robin Hood have appeared, often at the same time, serving various social agendas, sometimes contradictory, other times complementary. Within this tradition, Robin Hood is often associated with the fair Maid Marian: his love, his paramour, his inspiration. While she has a long history in pastourelles and May games, Maid Marian does not exist in the earlier tradition of the outlaw ballads; Robin’s singular devotion, like that of King Arthur, is to the Virgin Mary. For fifteenth-century audiences, Robin’s devotion to Mary makes him a legitimate hero, on par with Arthurian tradition. It, therefore, contradicts his marginal status as celebrated in modern scholarship. The association normalizes Robin in the ballads and places him in an exalted, nationalist position—a hero of England, despite the localized setting, who represents the ideas and nature of being English in the Middle Ages—contrary to his liminal construction by modern critics as a border walker and outlaw.

After the Reformation, moreover, in order to bring Robin in line with Protestant concerns of English national identity, the Virgin Mary was transformed into his secular lover, Maid Marian, particularly in the early-modern plays of Anthony Munday. Through Robin’s devotion to, first the Virgin Mary, and then to her secularized successor, Marian, the famous outlaw is presented to late-medieval and early-modern audiences, not as a liminal and transgressive figure, but as a normative construction of national and religious identity reifying the status quo rather than subverting it.

A great deal of scholarship has been carried out over the last fifty years on the medieval incarnations of Robin Hood, sparking debates about the origins and date of the texts, the questions of class and religion, the search for a historical Robin Hood, and the nature of the outlaw. Embedded in almost every discussion of Robin Hood, in his medieval and modern incarnations, is an assumption of liminality—“a state in which normal distinction and order are transcended” (Nagy 206), or alterity—“the active and radical separation of an individual from the normal status quo” (Kaufman 32). Liminality literally means to be on the “threshold” (from Latin limen), a definition implying ambiguity, disorientation, and a certain dissolution or de-emphasis on class structures and other
social regulation. As a liminal figure, Robin Hood would function in the margins, outside the accepted civilized space, and he would undermine cultural institutions and the complex social fabric. Stephen Knight argues that the political and social upheaval of fourteenth-century England may have been the context of this “anti-authoritarian development of the hero: alterity grew to represent contextual problems” (“Alterity” 7).

Robin Hood is not primarily a liminal figure, however. Nor is he fully anti-authoritarian. In maintaining allegiance to the king, operating within the tenets of medieval natural law, and showing a singular devotion to the Virgin Mary, Robin Hood, specifically in the *Gest of Robyn Hode* (c. 1450? and in Anthony Munday’s sixteenth century play, *The Downfall of Robert, Earle of Huntington* (c. 1598), functions as a normalized figure upon whom the interests of English national identity are inscribed.  

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Opening Doors: Liminality, Alterity and Normality

Robin’s status as an outlaw is generally the starting point for discussions of his liminality and alterity. According to Joseph Nagy, in English legal terms an outlaw like Robin Hood is “one who does not appear in court for his trial, who places himself beyond the grasp of the forces of law and authority, such as the sheriff, and who is therefore deprived of his social identity and status” (200). Nagy argues that the continued fascination with Robin Hood is rooted in his liminality and his “mystique” (198). He further contends that Robin Hood exists between culture and nature and “several other pairs of opposed categories as well” and that his “liminal world” provides a “context in which social values and realities are mirrored and redefined” (198). Similarly, Knight argues that the domain of the Robin Hood myth is the “crucial gap of otherness between law and outlaw” and that in the medieval ballads specifically, “the space of alterity is where forest freedoms confront urban oppressions; in gentrification it becomes a terrain where inclusive aggression usurps the authority of true royalty, which Robin now defends” (“Introduction” xi).

In the fifteenth-century ballads, however, as well as in Munday’s play, Robin Hood is less of a liminal than a normative figure who actually represents social values clearly, not a mirrored distortion or parody. These ballads affirm certain social distinctions in their construction of national identity, grounded in orthodox religious piety and the recognition of royal judicial prerogative. The ballads and early poems *Robin Hood and the Monk* (after 1450), *Robin Hood and the Potter* (c. 1500), and *A Gest of Robyn Hode* (the *Gest*) challenge corrupt authority structures and ennoble the outlaw as the arbiter of justice—a particularly English form of justice that emerged in opposition to continental legal practice in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. These early ballads were possibly composed in the fourteenth century (Ohlgren, “Edwardus redivivus” 2), but survive in copies from the fifteenth century (Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study* 56–7). Knight dates the *Gest* to the reign of Edward IV, contemporary with Thomas Malory’s *Morte Darthur* (1471) (Robin Hood: A Complete Study 47, 75). But Knight also notes clear references