

The Outlaw Hero as Transgressor in Popular Culture

Review of Thomas Hahn, ed. *Robin Hood in Popular Culture: Violence, Transgression, and Justice*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000.

A look at the anthology *Robin Hood in Popular Culture*, edited by Thomas Hahn, can give some valuable insights into the role and functions of the hero in popular culture. The subtitle *Violence, Transgression, and Justice* shows the direction of the inquiry. As the editor points out, since popular culture since the Middle Ages has been playful and transgressive, outlaw heroes are amongst the most popular figures, as they “are in a categorical way, transgressors” (Hahn 1). And Robin Hood is the most popular of them all. Certainly, the hero is a transgressor in general, not only the outlaw and not only in popular culture. Transgressiveness is a characteristic trait of many different kinds of heroes. Several articles in the previous issue of this journal discuss this; one even mentions Robin Hood explicitly (Lüdemann 77).

The reviewed volume resulted from a conference at the University of Rochester in 1997, which Mr. Hahn organized. This conference was the first meeting of the International Association for Robin Hood Studies and thus marks the starting point for the recent research on the famous English outlaw. As the expression of a revived interest in and a hallmark of Robin Hood studies, the findings in it are worth reconsidering, although it has already been more than a decade since it was published. This collection of articles, many of them by renowned scholars of the field, contributes to the question we are dealing with in this journal’s current issue. Robin Hood has been a hero of popular culture since the late Middle Ages and a figure of public imagination who produces “multiple, continuous and contradictory meanings” (Hahn 9). What holds true for Robin is also a problem with many other heroic figures. We do not encounter them as fixed, but as an “elusive, labile [...] multiplicity that makes the hero so hard to capture” (ibid. 10).

All articles in the anthology but one (by Sherron Lux) describe Robin Hood or his companions as heroes or heroic or refer to their heroism. Neither can we find an elaborate theory of the popular hero, nor are the models of heroism and heroization through popular culture made explicit. Still, we can trace those theories and models which implicitly refer to the discourse of the heroic. Therefore, I will paraphrase these texts and depict how they treat the hero, heroization, and heroism and how this is linked to the idea of transgression in popular culture.

Frank Abbot recalls his work as a scriptwriter for the Nottingham Robin Hood Centre. With *Tales of Robin Hood* he created a narrative for a site which is a mixture of theme park, museum and multimedia entertainment. As it gives the hero a place, a face, and a voice (Giesen), this can be regarded as a perfect example of heroization. Confronted with the elusive nature of Robin Hood, he admits “that even as a ‘teacher’s study pack’ in the digital age, the transgressive nature of Robin Hood is still intact: he still remains a hero” (Abbot 19).

The resemblance of the DC Comics superhero Green Arrow to Robin Hood seems obvious. But, as Sarah Beach argues in her essay, besides the fact that the former is an archer as well, it was not until the 1960s that the almost forgotten DC character was re-furbished as an anti-authoritarian hero. From this moment on, “Robin Hood motifs began informing everything about the character of Oliver Queen, the Green Arrow” (Beach 24). Much as the yeoman Robin Hood became gentrified in the seventeenth century as the fallen Earl Robert of Huntington, the broke millionaire Oliver Queen became a non-conformist rebel fighting crime and injustice. Beach wonders why “an upper class claims an under-class outlaw hero as one of their own” (ibid. 21). She explains it as the desire of all segments of

the population to have contact with a figure as soon as it takes on a mythical quality. She calls this the “social aspects of mythology” (ibid.). Popular myth transgresses the boundaries of class and creates something of universal interest. In this sense, the “laughter of an outlaw hero, challenging convention and social structures” (ibid. 28) also means that it is more to him than a class standpoint, but that he deals with “issues that are *humanly* important” (ibid. 21).

The class aspect of the Robin Hood myth is enforced in Laura Blunk’s analysis of Richard Carpenter’s 1980s TV show *Robin of Sherwood*. Despite all the “mutability of its hero”, the story of Robin Hood is about resistance, and he remains a rebel (Blunk 29). More than other adaptations of Robin Hood, Carpenter’s version depicts the “genuinely revolutionary behavior of its heroes” (ibid. 30). Blunk argues that because “Robin and his companions consciously choose to become outlaws and, finding strength in their new community, reject the authority of a ruling order” (ibid. 33), the focus is on freedom, solidarity and the foundation of a new and alternative social order. The hero as a single figure functions merely as a symbol, but to act successfully he needs his fellows, followers and supporters. In the end it is the community that makes the hero, who is an expression of a collective effort.

Another essay in the book deals with the radical politics of Robin Hood. Yoshiko Uéno introduces a little-known play from 1927 by the Japanese avant-garde author Tomoyoshi Murayama to a broader Western audience. In Japan, Robin Hood “is generally considered a pastoral hero enjoying merry adventures in the forest, rather than as a political one” (Uéno 266). In a quote from Murayama’s autobiography, the conscious heroization by the Marxist playwright for a distinct political purpose becomes obvious: “I had to use my old familiar Robin Hood, a chivalrous robber in the forest fighting against a ruler, and to make him a revolutionary intellectual backing the peasants’ revolt” (ibid. 268). Once again the fact appears that the polymorphous outlaw hero is open to “kaleidoscopic readings” (ibid. 272), which also points to the universality of the legend. In light of the popularity of Robin Hood in Japan, Uéno can refer to Eric Hobsbawm’s famous studies on primitive rebels and social bandits (c.f. Hobsbawm *Rebels* and Hobsbawm *Bandits*) and claim that “Robin Hood does not remain a national hero of England but an archetype of a chivalrous outlaw all over the world” (ibid.).

The repetition of this simple truth, that Robin

Hood is “no longer [...] a merely English hero” but “a genuinely universal figure” (Dobson 61-62), comes forth when R. B. Dobson quotes his own seminal work *Rymes of Robyn Hood* (together with John Taylor) of 1976 in his article on “The Genesis of a Popular Hero”. Dobson doubts that the Robin Hood legend can be traced back to its origin. Although all attempts have been futile, he admits that the mystery of its origin is part of its appeal. Instead he tries to present a genealogy of the Robin Hood discourse. Because most remaining sources are transformations of the Tudor era, we must avoid reconstructing a supposed original medieval form. Dobson concludes that “it certainly remains more open that [sic] it once did at what particular point of time the outlaw hero began to be deliberately projected as an exponent of social radicalism and subversion, as a yeoman hero for a yeoman audience” (ibid. 65). This shows that the process of heroization is made by deliberate projections and by responses from a specific audience. Dobson’s plea to give up the search for the historical Robin Hood has been heard. Indeed, contemporary scholars hardly bother with the historical reality of Robin Hood. This has opened up the possibility of investigating the semantics of mythical narratives and the imaginative potential of the outlaw hero today.

In the essay “Which Way to the Forest?”, Stephen Knight, certainly one of the most productive and best-known contemporary scholars of Robin Hood, sketches out the “Directions in Robin Hood Studies”. As Dobson has shown, the reconstruction of a historical figure is off the agenda. Knight approaches areas and methodologies which promise new insights for future inquiries. According to him, “materials elusive to classical historiography and literary criticism” (ibid. 119) could be explored through cultural studies, new historicism, structuralist folklore studies and psychological readings. In general, he advocates reading “the context in the text and the text in the context” (ibid. 120). He also lists quite a few desiderata, from gender issues to the forest myth. Of course, the arguments he outlines build on the academic discussion of the late 1990s, and the progress of this research program could most likely be reviewed in the work conducted by the International Association for Robin Hood Studies in the last 17 years.

Hahn’s volume already presents some essays which contribute to this change in focus. The most exciting article in the book in this regard is probably Stuart Kane’s “Horseplay: Robin Hood, Guy of Gisbourne and the Neg(oti)ation of the

Bestial". Kane starts his observation with the acknowledgement of "acts of raw, uncontained violence performed by the outlaw hero and his company" (Kane 101) in the fifteenth century ballad *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisbourne*. In his battle with the bounty hunter Gisbourne, who is clothed in a suit made out of horse-skin, including the animal's head as a hood, the bestiality of the forest dweller comes to the light of day. After triumphing over his adversary, Robin Hood decapitates and mutilates his victim, whose head he puts on his bow staff. Finally he straps him off his suit and clads himself in it. Kane reads this ballad as a multiple transgression of the body. The blurring of distinctions between man and animal, of nature and civilisation, and the violent suppression of homoeroticism are negotiated in notions of the bestial. The man-hunting man Gisbourne marks the "intersections of desire and eroticized violence" (ibid. 107). By dressing in his metaphorical skin, Robin takes over the victim's identity and "finally completes Guy's performance of the bestial" (ibid. 109). While the animal skin presents the ambiguity of Gisbourne's identity, Robin Hood "obscures his identity [...] which allows him to cross the borders between man and animal, and outlaw and agent of legal authority" (ibid. 110). The hero is the triumphant transgressor.

Lorraine Kochanske Stock presents another piece on how the identity of the outlaw is obscured. Stock depicts how Robin Hood is mingled with the folklore figures of the Wild Man and the Green Man in the English May Games of the Middle Ages and the early modern era. These three figures "share ambivalent significations of otherness" (Stock 248). In the May Games, which were viewed by the authorities as "potentially sinful practices" (ibid. 244), the participants perform festivals of transgression. Over the course of time, when the May Games developed into Robin Hood Games, celebrating the outlaw as the saint of the forest, the popularity of Robin Hood as a "cultural antithesis of 'civilization'" (ibid. 240) becomes apparent.

But not only does the discourse of the outlaw hero cover the antithesis of civilisation. Like many other heroes, Robin Hood can play a role in the foundation of the community. In addition to Blunk, as seen above, Thomas H. Ohlgren and Bernard Lumpkin also pursue the relationship between outlaw and community in their essays. According to Lumpkin, taking up a thesis by Hobsbawm, "the outlaw represents a larger community and outlawry is a collective effort guided by a belief in a code of higher principles" (Lumpkin

142). Because he sticks to this code, the outlaw qualifies as a heroic figure for his community and does not fall amongst the company of common criminals. Besides courtesy and righteousness, "fellowship is another ideal in the outlaw's code" (ibid. 146). The "fellowship and solidarity of the entire group" are the prerequisites for realizing the "dream of yeomanly community" (ibid. 147). The formation of this community can be seen as a narrative of the early ballads: "Robin Hood [...] starts without his own community and sets out to create one" (ibid. 148). In addition to his adventures, this foundational act also has the quality of a heroic deed.

Ohlgren explores the outlaw's community by tracing the mercantile ideology of the early ballads and makes some surprising discoveries. There are plenty of indications that these ballads from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries pay tribute to "suppressed yeomen fraternities" and transform "the hero from knightly adventurer to merchant adventurer" (Ohlgren 176). Surveying the ballads *Robin Hood and the Potter* and especially the *Gest of Robyn Hode*, Ohlgren takes the stance that in the depiction of festivities and rituals we are dealing with images of guilds and brotherhoods. He shows a "patrician guild's interest in the outlaw hero" (ibid. 189) and thus concludes that Robin Hood marks the "social and economic transformation of late medieval England" (ibid. 190) from a feudal to a mercantile, bourgeois society. The merchant adventurer, who sometimes uses dubious business practices, is the hero of a new rising class.

Marian is a character that was added quite late to the myth of Robin Hood in the early seventeenth century. Since then she has become a recurring character and gained further in importance with the advent of feminist theory in academia. Evelyn M. Perry's interpretation of the eighteenth century ballad *Robin Hood and Maid Marian* and Sherron Lux's article on Marian in the Robin Hood movies contribute to this field of research.

Perry's contribution, "Disguising and Revealing the Female Hero's Identity", is a more compelling feminist approach and highly interesting for the question of heroism. First she bemoans that critics have failed "to address the potential, and indeed, the reality, of the female hero" and "do not take account of the innate heroic qualities – courage, intellect, strength – of the female characters who appear in these materials" (Perry 191). Perry then turns to the ballad to show "that female heroism does not have to be distinct

from the male notion in order to serve as critique of the latter” (ibid. 192). In the ballad, Marian ventures into the forest disguised as a man to search for Robin: “Marian’s cross-dressing becomes the outward expression of her ‘perplexed and vexed’ [as described in the ballad] internal state – an understanding that is crucial to our appreciation of her experience as a hero” (ibid. 193). Eventually she meets Robin, who also is disguised, and they start fighting. She fights well and bravely, and finally the famous outlaw yields to her. But at this moment, recognising her lover, she submits to him as she reveals (“discovers”, ibid. 194) herself. Her female identity is restored. The question Perry puts on the table is whether the woman has to be outside of herself, to transgress her gender identity, to have a heroic experience. Marian’s cross-dressing “defines one space of female heroism” (ibid. 196) that challenges “the accepted notion that literary, and thus social, heroism is a male characteristic” (ibid. 195). Referring to Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* and Lee R. Edwards’s *Psyche as Hero: Female Heroism and Fictional Form*, Perry advocates the “accurate representation of heroic potential of women in literature” (ibid. 196). She concludes that a feminist reading of the ballad could open up “the possibility for female readers to identify the hero within themselves” and enhance “the potential for them to explore, and to liberate, that hero” (ibid.).

Although Lux does not call Marian a hero, she clearly distinguishes between accounts which depict Marian as a mere passive embellishment and ones which portray her as a woman with agency. It is obvious that the Marian who stands out with bravery and cunning and who has to make her own choices and act on her own behalf qualifies as a heroine.

David Lampe also registers that “the dramatization of choice given to strong and emancipated women” (Lampe 139) is a main feature of corrections of the Robin Hood myth made in several novels written after Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* (1820), Thomas L. Peacock’s *Maid Marian* (1823) and Thomas M. Thackeray’s *Rebecca and Rowena* (1846). Lampe observes “the relativity of law, morality, and heroic virtue” (ibid. 133) and the importance of a minstrel to spread the hero’s story. It is not a man’s deeds that make him a hero but the tales told about him.

At first sight, the elaboration of “The Significance of Places and Names in Some Robin Hood Texts” by Helen Phillips seems to be traditional, as scholars like James C. Holt and others

have dealt with the geography of Robin Hood to track down the provenance of the stories, due to the fact that contradictory place names are mentioned in them. Most famously, Robin lives in Sherwood Forest, Nottinghamshire, but there are other stories situating him in Barnesdale, Yorkshire. On the other hand, a multitude of places in Britain are named with reference to Robin Hood, mainly showing the popularity of the tales. He is “a hero who gets appropriated by different places as readily as he does by different causes, ideologies and eras” (Phillips 201). But Phillips also offers an understanding of the crucial “threefold topography of forest, town and highroad” (ibid. 197) in the narratives. She discusses at length the significance of these places in the medieval context. Her most important finding is that as the greenwood becomes “a place for penitence in the eventide of life” and no longer “the base for banditry” (ibid. 210). “Robin and the forest’s traditional roles as the sites of opposition to repressive law are erased and both are transformed into harmless entertainment” (ibid. 213). Phillips calls this a “denuding of his heroic and subversive role” (ibid.). This shift happens especially after the restoration of the kingdom under Charles II in the mid seventeenth century. It seems as if the hero loses his transgressiveness as the wilderness of the forest is conquered by civilisation piece by piece, and thus it is questionable whether he is even a hero any longer.

Lois Potter also writes about the forest and Robin Hood’s relation to the early nineteenth century Byronic hero. Lord Byron’s residence in Sherwood Forest does not link his literary figure Childe Harold with the medieval archer. However, Potter shows how some Nottinghamshire romanticist poets mixed the gloomy Byronic hero and Robin Hood, such as Robert Milhouse in his poem *Sherwood Forest*: “the hero of *their* Nottinghamshire was a conflation of a long-dead mythical outlaw and an aristocrat who spent most of his adult life outside England” (Potter 224). This is another example of the shape-shifting quality of Robin Hood, adapted to popular forms of a specific time.

The essays of Kevin J. Harty, Linda V. Troost, Michael Eaton and Gary Yershon deal with adaptations of the Robin Hood myth in films, operas, and popular plays, bringing forth more examples of the outlaw’s popularity in different contemporary media without offering many new insights in regard to the question of the heroic. Notable is only Harty’s distinction between the hero as boor and the hero as gentleman (Harty 97), together with his rather commonplace medievalist

criticism that new versions of the myth “re-examine the present in the light of the past” (ibid. 99). There are four more essays in the book that I will mention only for the sake of completeness. Marcus A. J. Smith and Julian Wasserman present a stack of court records referring to Robin Hood, most of them insisting that Robin Hood-like behaviour is no excuse for criminal acts and offers no protection from legal persecution. This might illustrate how much Robin Hood is anchored in the cultural consciousness. Kelly DeVries makes an interesting claim regarding the weapon technology of the longbow and therefore situates the origin of the Robin Hood myth in the late fourteenth to early fifteenth century. Finally, with the help of the ballad *Guy of Gisbourne*, John Marshall tries to reconstruct the recorded performance of the play *Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham* in Norfolk in 1469/70.

Hahn’s anthology is not only the starting point for the Robin Hood scholarship of the twenty-first century but also provides a good link to the questions confronted by the Collaborative Research Centre “Heroes – Heroizations – Heroisms”. Is the hero the founder of the community, or is the former more likely the product of the latter? Thus, can the hero be explained only by the imaginations of his audience? What role do texts, images and performances play in this process of mediating the heroic? What historical conjunctures do we find in the heroization of a specific figure? Also, do men and women relate differently to the heroic and to what extent is the heroic in general tangled up in gender relations? As we have seen, all these questions are addressed in the book, although their concern is the rather isolated figure of Robin Hood. The wide range of topics, all focusing on Robin Hood in popular culture, presents us clarifying analyses of various segments of the myth. Still, it is necessary to pursue the approach of the Collaborative Research Centre to make sense of the findings in the context of the social significance of heroism. With regard to the collection of essays at hand, thus far we can state that popular imaginations of the outlaw hero bear the potential of transgression. Maybe other heroes could be pacified and integrated into the norms of society and therefore lose their transgressiveness. The outlaw evades this integration by definition. Many attempts to make the myth of Robin Hood more pleasing for a social elite may have succeeded. But myth always contains the possibility that the audience reinterprets it differently and unleashes transgression again. Therefore, whenever popular imagination seeks a transgressive hero, Robin Hood will be a candidate.

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