

## Robin Hood, Sherwood Forest and the Sheriff of Nottingham

Robin Hood has been long pursued not only by the sheriff of Nottingham but also by numerous scholars. We, like the sheriff, have been chasing him around the greenwood for decades.<sup>1</sup> It is particularly appropriate, here in Nottingham, to think about this endless search on the fiftieth anniversary of *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, for the journal and the modern study of the medieval outlaw both began within a year of each other.<sup>2</sup> *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, appropriately, has made its contribution to the swelling flood of publications on Robin Hood, though modestly. It was not until volume 36, in 1992, that the famous robber first graced its pages, when Andrew Ayton published his article on military service and the development of the legend. A year later Colin Richmond's piece on the social appeal of the outlaw tales appeared; and in 2001 and 2004 Thomas Ohlgren contributed studies of the contexts of the earliest manuscripts of two of the stories.<sup>3</sup> These articles have reflected the development of Robin Hood studies in two ways; the manner in which Robin Hood has come in from the academic cold and the interdisciplinary character of recent study. In modern academic enquiry, historians have concentrated on the question of whether there was ever a real Robin Hood located in the early thirteenth century;<sup>4</sup> on the social context of the stories and their audiences, especially the social status of the hero

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- 1 This is a revised and extended version of a lecture delivered at the University of Nottingham on 15 November 2007 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the journal. I am grateful to the Institute for Medieval Research for the honour.
  - 2 R. H. Hilton, 'The Origins of Robin Hood', *Past and Present*, 14 (1958), 30-44.
  - 3 Andrew Ayton, 'Military Service and the Development of the Robin Hood Legend in the Fourteenth Century', *NMS*, xxxvi (1992), 126-47; Colin Richmond, 'An Outlaw and Some Peasants: The Possible Significance of Robin Hood', *NMS*, xxxvi (1993), 90-101; Thomas H. Ohlgren, 'Richard Call, the Pastons and the Manuscript Context of Robin Hood and the Potter (Cambridge University Library Ee 4.35.1)', *NMS*, xlv (2001), 210-33; idem, 'Robin Hood and the Monk and the Manuscript Context of Cambridge University Library MS Ff.5.48', *NMS*, xlvi (2004). Two other eminent Robin Hood scholars, Sir James Holt and Stephen Knight, have published in its pages but not on the outlaw.
  - 4 D. Crook, 'Some Further Evidence Concerning the dating of the origins of the Legend of Robin Hood', *E[nglish] H[istorical] R[evue]*, 99 (1984), 530-4; 'The Sheriff of Nottingham and the Robin Hood stories: The Genesis of the Legend?', in *Thirteenth Century England*, 2, ed. P. R. Coss and S. D. Lloyd (Woodbridge, 1988), 59-68; J. C. Holt, 'The Origins of the Legend', in *Robin Hood: The many faces of the Celebrated English Outlaw*, ed. K. Carpenter (Oxford, 1995), pp. 27-34; J. C. Holt, *Robin Hood* (2nd edn, London, 1989), pp. 40-61, 187-90; R. B. Dobson and John Taylor, 'Robin Hood of Barnsdale: a Fellow Thou Has Long Sought', *Northern History*, xix (1983), 210-20; R. B. Dobson, 'Robin Hood: The Genesis of a Popular Hero', in *Robin Hood in Popular Culture*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 70-7; R. B. Dobson and John Taylor, *Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Introduction to the English Outlaw* (3rd edn, Stroud, 1997), pp. xxi-xxii, xxx-xxxii, 10-17.

himself;<sup>5</sup> and on the problem of whether they are subversive or affirmative of the social order.<sup>6</sup> Literary scholars have looked at these issues too, but have additionally focussed on the composition of the early versions, their language and provenance and on Robin Hood in performance.<sup>7</sup> All have shared the objective of seeking to understand the place of outlaw literature in popular culture in the pre-Reformation era. The Matter of the Greenwood is now taken as seriously as the Matter of Britain.

This piece, as befits a journal of medieval studies, focuses on the earliest known versions of the stories of Robin Hood. It does not consider the manifestations of Robin Hood after the Reformation, let alone his resuscitation in Music Hall, Film and Television in the last century and more.<sup>8</sup> And it does not dwell on the question of whether there was ever a real Robin Hood or on the earliest putative roots of the stories of Robin Hood in the thirteenth century. The focus is on the fictional creation, possibly based on an actual historic figure, that emerged in the fourteenth century and who is the hero of surviving stories that are known to have been in circulation for a century and a half before 1540.

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5 Hilton, 'Origins', reprinted in *Peasants, Knights and Heretics: Studies in Medieval English History*, ed. R. H. Hilton (Cambridge, 1976); Maurice Keen, 'Robin Hood – Peasant or Gentleman', *Past and Present*, 19 (1961), repr. in *Peasants, Knights and Heretics*, ed. Hilton, 258-64; J. C. Holt, 'The Origins and Audience of the Ballads of Robin Hood', *Past and Present*, 18 (1960), repr. *Peasants, Knights and Heretics*, 236-57; Holt, *Robin Hood*, 118-24, 128-43; Peter Coss, 'Aspects of Cultural Diffusion in Medieval England: The Early Romances, Local Society and Robin Hood', *Past and Present*, 108 (1985), 66-79, esp. 73-4; Richmond, 'An Outlaw and Some Peasants', 90-101; Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*, xxxvi; Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo, 1997), pp. 34, 59.

6 E. J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (Harmondsworth, 1970), pp. 13-15, 34-5, 44-8, 111-14; Hilton, 'Origins'; Maurice Keen, *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend* (2nd edn, 1977), pp. xiii-xv, 148-59 and also 'Robin Hood – Peasant or Gentleman?'; Holt, 'Origins and Audience' and *Robin Hood*, 109-58. R. Tardiff, 'The "Mystery" of Robin Hood: a New Social Context for the Texts', in *Words and Worlds: Studies in the Social Role of Verbal Culture*, ed. Stephen Knight and S. N. Murkherjee (London, 1983), pp. 130-45; Thomas H. Ohlgren, 'The "Marchaunt" of Sherwood: Mercantile Ideology in A Gest of Robyn Hode', in *Robin Hood and Popular Culture*, ed. Hahn, pp. 175-90 and 'Edwardus redivivus in A Gest of Robin Hode', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 99 (2000), 19-25; A. J. Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood: The Late-Medieval Stories in Historical Context* (Abingdon, 2004), pp. 156-83, 206-10. [Editorial note: cf. *NMS*, xlix (2005), 254-7 for a valuable review of this book by W. M. Ormrod]

7 See especially Douglas Gray, 'The Robin Hood Poems', *Poetica*, xviii (1984), 1-18; Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 44-81; idem, *Robin Hood: a Mythic Biography* (Ithaca, 2003), pp. 1-32; Ohlgren, 'Richard Call' and 'Monk'; and John Marshall, 'Playing the Game: Reconstructing Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham', in *Robin Hood in Popular Culture*, ed. Hahn, 161-74.

8 See Knight, *Complete Study*.

The first unambiguous reference to stories of Robin Hood occurs in the pages of Langland's *Piers Ploughman* in 1377.<sup>9</sup> The first extant written versions date from the mid-fifteenth century. And they were first printed in the last decade of the century. Besides being narrated and read, they were also performed in parochial May Games and gentry halls. We can identify eight separate surviving stories from before the Reformation. Three are in independent, manuscript or printed form; five are to be found amalgamated, not entirely coherently, into the *Gest of Robin Hood*, the first attempt to provide a composite narrative which survives only as a printed book, which may well have been put together by the printer himself from manuscript copies. The *Gest* combines the stories of how Robin helps a knight redeem his lands from the abbey of St Mary's which has defrauded him; of how Robin goes into Nottingham to participate in an archery contest, but is captured by the sheriff and then rescued; of how Little John makes a fool of the sheriff by joining his service; of how the king comes in disguise in the forest and pardons Robin and takes him into his service; and of how, many years later, Robin is betrayed and dies. 'Guy of Guisborne' tells how Robin kills a bounty hunter, Guy, and the sheriff. 'Robin Hood and the Potter' is another story of fooling the sheriff. 'Robin Hood and the Monk' is another tale of rescue from the sheriff's clutches.<sup>10</sup>

There is one surviving play text, possibly from the 1470s, and a summary of another story by the Scottish chronicler Walter Bower. There are likely to have been other tales that were not recorded and other texts that have not survived. One might liken these stories to twentieth-century comics in which a whole series of adventures were hung on stock characters. Particularly appropriate is Batman, because he was deliberately conceived in 1940 as a kind of urban Robin Hood. His creator is on record as saying that that is why he gave the Boy Wonder the name he did. As with Batman, so with the fifteenth-century Robin Hood. The stories are woven around stock characters – the hero, Little John, the sheriff, the monk, the King – in which the hero has different adventures, triumphing against the same set of villains in an infinitely varying set of circumstances. There is no Prince John, no King Richard and no Maid Marion. The king is 'King Edward', the setting unmistakably between 1272 and 1340. Robin is devoted to the Blessed Virgin Mary: Maid Marion is a post Reformation cross-over. Robin is not an Anglo-Saxon earl of Huntingdon disinherited by the Normans: he is a plain yeoman; he is not leading a nationalist movement against a foreign occupation. He and his Merry Men do, however, live by poaching the king's deer and highway robbery. He does not rob the rich to give to the poor; he robs the undeserving and supports the deserving. Plot lines, actions and incidents are endlessly repeated and

9 [Editorial note: since Prof. Pollard delivered this lecture news has been received that a group working with Prof. Thomas Ohlgren claims to have discovered at least one earlier 14th century reference that suggests knowledge of Robin Hood pre-dating Langland's by 30 to 50 years; we hope to publish fuller information on this in a future issue.]

10 For this and the following paragraphs see Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood*, 2-13 and the references thereat.

varied. Outlaws go into Nottingham in disguise and fool the sheriff, there are archery contests, daring rescues and pitched battles between Robin's and the sheriff's men. In the eight 'stories' the sheriff dies twice, a monk is robbed twice, the king intervenes twice. Robin Hood was originally a late medieval 'comic' hero.

In all these there is not one, but several Robin Hoods; sometimes the fount of restorative justice; sometimes a cold-blooded killer. Sometimes he is more courtly, sometimes more common; sometimes he is high-minded, sometimes he is a trickster. This is even apparent in the *Gest* in which the compiler has not successfully eradicated the different characterisations contained in the constituent stories he has brought together. The only consistent characterisation is his piety and devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Otherwise he is protean. In the pre-reformation stories he is figured as both swashbuckling adventurer and knock-about comedian.

This ludic characteristic continues into what we know about Robin Hood in performance. We have most evidence of them as parochial plays, linked to fund-raising activities during May Games. No texts, if there were any, of parochial plays survive. The one surviving play text, which it has been compellingly argued was the text of a play to which John Paston III referred in 1473, is a version of Robin Hood and Guy of Guisborne. Parish performances were mounted for fund raising, towards a new porch or a new tower. What happened is hard to tell, but one suspects that there was an element of festive 'ransoming' of people. And thus the 'rich' were robbed to pay, if not for the poor, then for a good cause.<sup>11</sup> The Robin Hood stories were embedded in this specific parochial context. But it was not restricted to that world. Besides John Paston commissioning a play, Henry VIII also participated in a Robin Hood interlude, re-enacting 'Robin and the King' in 1515.<sup>12</sup>

Robin Hood was all things to all men. On one level these were rollicking romps or ripping yarns. In the last 50 years, however, scholars, have been preoccupied with the search for deeper meanings. In particular they have asked what the adventures of this outlaw hero stories signified for contemporary society? And by contemporary society one should strictly speaking understand the generations familiar with the stories in circulation in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries in the forms and versions that have survived and are available to us. There are two features of them already established in the fifteenth century, and both now familiar the world over, which are especially appropriate for consideration on this occasion: Robin Hood was an outlaw associated with Sherwood Forest and his arch enemy was the sheriff of Nottingham. The rest of this paper explores the characteristics of both of these features in the early stories and considers their significance in their fifteenth and early-sixteenth century context.

11 These kinds of activities survived as 'rag stunts' in British Universities until the late twentieth century, including, no doubt, Robin Hood stunts at Nottingham.

12 Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood*, 168-70.

Let us begin with Sherwood. Who was Robin Hood, what was his social status and what was his connection with the forest? The answers are not straightforward because in the earliest version we have no 'back-story'. He is just a yeoman who is outlawed, as are all 140 of his merry men. Moreover he is not only associated with Sherwood; he is placed as frequently, indeed more frequently, in the area of Barnsdale in southern Yorkshire. We do not know why he is in the forest, or why he was outlawed. All we know is that he and the merry men roam freely in forests, poach the king's deer and rob passers-by. This is how Robin introduces himself when, in the *Gest*, he invites the king (disguised as monk) to dine with him:

We be yemen of this foreste,  
Under the grene wode tre,  
We lyve by our kynges dere  
Other shyft have not we.<sup>13</sup>

They are yeomen, he says, of this forest. The line raises two questions: what is meant by 'yeomen of'? Which forest is 'this forest'?

Perhaps the longest standing modern debate about Robin Hood has been the meaning of the word 'yeoman' as a social descriptor in the late middle ages. It was at the heart of the debate between Hilton and Holt in the early sixties. Was it a middle household rank (the older meaning of the word), or was it an intermediate rural, social status (a newer meaning), both of which were current during the later middle ages? If the yeoman Robin was a household officer, it implied he was created for an aristocratic audience; if an independent working farmer, it then followed, for a peasant audience. Broadly speaking, and to summarise a subtle and complex discussion to which many have contributed, it is now generally accepted that by the mid-fifteenth century, the date of the earliest surviving story, the appeal was to all social ranks, but that the hero himself was particularly associated with the new emerging middling sorts of society, both in town and in country. They were broadly representative of the middling sorts. Robin and the Merry Men were outlawed yeomen who had taken refuge in the forest.<sup>14</sup>

However, the stanza proclaims that they were yeomen of this forest, not in this forest. I have argued elsewhere that they were in fact a specific type of yeomen, yeomen foresters.<sup>15</sup> That is why they were able to live so comfortably by the king's deer. Yeomen foresters were both yeomen by rank as members of an aristocratic household and yeoman

13 *Gest*, st. 377. All references to the texts are to those printed in Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*.

14 Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood*, 29-42 and n. 5 above.

15 Richard Almond and A. J. Pollard, 'The Yeomanry of Robin Hood and Social Terminology in Fifteenth-century England', *Past and Present*, 170 (2001), 52-77.

by social status as prominent members of the parish or village community. Robin was, as Chaucer put it in his description of the Knight's yeoman, 'a forster ... soothly' (modernised by Coghill as a proper forester). 'Of wodecraft wel coude he al the usage'. He knew everything to do with managing woods. Chaucer described a riding forester, mounted on horseback. He is dressed accordingly 'in cote and hood of grene' and carries the forester's tackle. Even his baldric (the belt on which his horn was carried) was green. A contemporary woodcut of a robed man on horseback carrying a bow was used twice at the end of the fifteenth century: once to illustrate the knight's yeoman in an edition of the *Canterbury Tales* and secondly to illustrate Robin Hood in Pinson's first edition of the *Gest*.<sup>16</sup>

The texts of the earliest stories reveal that Robin Hood fits exactly this description. He was a master of woodcraft, or forestry, which involves knowledge of the vert and venison, the habitat and game, as well as command of the art of venery, hunting, with which a forester needed to be familiar so that he could properly serve his lord when out hunting. Robin and his men put this knowledge to use in poaching, and when the king turns up in the forest they put on a hunt for him. In particular they reveal themselves to be expert at the art of 'bow and stably', practised in parks as well as forests, in which game are driven at hunters at stands, in open forest called *trystle trees*, who shoot them as they pass (as game driven towards the guns is shot today). It is because they are yeomen foresters that they know the forest paths and tracks like the backs of their hands.<sup>17</sup> It is because they are yeomen foresters that Robin instructs Little John at the beginning of the *Gest* not to molest a 'gode yeman / That walketh by grene wode shaw', or, in other words, a yeoman who faithfully carries out his duty of patrolling the forest. This is a job description, matched by the actual oath of office of the foresters of Sherwood 'to keep and walk the office of forestership and true watch make both early and late of vert and venison'. And these foresters, forest and other records reveal, were yeomen by status, enjoying an income and standing in local society that marked them out as leading members of their village and parish elites.<sup>18</sup>

The Merry Men were outlawed foresters. When Robin declares to the king in disguise that they have no other shift but living by his deer, the irony would have been appreciated by both audience (and in the story the king in disguise). Foresters lived by protecting the

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16 *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. W. W. Skeat, 6 vols. 2nd edn (Oxford, 1900), iv, 4, *Canterbury Tales*, 'Prologue', ii, 103-17.

17 Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood*, 43-53.

18 *Gest*, st. 13-14; University of Nottingham, Department of Manuscripts (cited as NUM), Mi L3/1 & 2, *Sherwood Forest Book*, f. Dxii (It should be noted that this manuscript differs considerably from *The Sherwood Forest Book*, ed. Helen E. Boulton (Thoroton Society, Record Series xxiii, 1965), after The National Archives (PRO), Treasury of Receipt, Miscellaneous Book no. 76, although both deal fully with the duties of foresters and other officials).

king's deer; these outlawed foresters by poaching them. But of course they do actually have another shift: highway robbery, which is exactly what Robin and his men are doing in the story when they intercept the monk who is king, introduce themselves, and invite him to dinner.

But by which greenwood shaw did these gamekeepers turned poachers walk? Which was this forest in which they lived by the king's deer? Was it Sherwood or Barnsdale? For in the stories, Robin and his Merry Men seem to float freely between the two, the one in Nottinghamshire the other in south Yorkshire several miles apart; a cause of much rancour between tourist boards today. The highway robbery seems mostly to take place in Barnsdale, where the main road south runs between York and Doncaster. It is here, near Wentbridge, that the impoverished knight, cellarer of St Mary's and the Potter are waylaid. At the beginning of the *Gest* Robin is specifically described as standing in Barnsdale leaning against a tree. In the stories linked to the abbey, the setting is always Barnsdale. In the stories linked to the sheriff of Nottingham, however, it is usually Sherwood. After Little John has fled from the service of the sheriff's household with the cook, his plate and bullion, he comes across the sheriff out hunting five miles into the forest, which can only be Sherwood.<sup>19</sup> But in the story of Robin and the Monk it is more confusing. On a wonderful Whitsuntide morning in May in the 'feyre foreste', Robin resolves to go into Nottingham to Mass. But Little John refuses to accompany him. So, we are told Robin goes to Nottingham alone, John to merry Sherwood, 'The pathes he knows ilkone'.<sup>20</sup> Does this mean that the conversation took place in Barnsdale? It is hardly conceivable that a man could walk in a morning from Barnsdale to Nottingham in time for Mass. The audience must surely imagine it to be Sherwood.

When the sheriff vainly chases Robin in the forest it is also usually in Sherwood. Twice, however, he pursues him into Barnsdale. The story summarised by Walter Bower, a true story, he assures us, of the famous robber, has Robin in Barnsdale celebrating mass on Corpus Christi day. Robin is warned that his whereabouts has been betrayed and the sheriff with his posse is on his way. He refuses to abandon mass, routs the sheriff when he arrives, robs and ransoms him.<sup>21</sup> In the tale of Robin Hood and Guy of Guisborne, it is more complicated. Robin and John are in the unspecified greenwood on another idyllic early summer day and have come across Guy. They quarrel (again) and so John goes off from this greenwood, where Guy is, to Barnsdale (the gates of these he also knows each one). Here he finds that the sheriff had routed the outlaws and was in pursuit of them. He tries to

19 *Gest*, st. 3, 82, 83, 181.

20 'Monk', st. 1-7, 16. Later (st. 76) Robin escapes from prison in Nottingham to Sherwood.

21 *Johannis de Fordan Scotichronicon*, ed. T. Hearne (Oxford, 1722), iii, 774. The sheriff is not specifically identified as Nottingham, but he is one who has frequently lain in wait for him before. One may reasonably suppose that he was in the story Bower summarised.



shoot the sheriff, misses and kills one of his men, 'good' William a Trent instead. He is captured and tied to a tree. At this point the narrator switches to 'talk' of Robin and Guy 'in the green wood where they bee', surely Sherwood. They fight, Guy is killed, mutilated, beheaded and his head skewered on a stake. Robin dons the dead man's clothes and resolves to go to Barnsdale to see how his men are faring. He blows the dead man's horn, which the sheriff hears. It is the agreed signal that Guy has killed Robin. Robin in disguise joins the sheriff (within hearing range, in Barnsdale?) and releases John. The sheriff, who by now belatedly realises what is going on, flees toward his 'house' in Nottingham, but this time is shot and killed by John.<sup>22</sup>

A similar problem exists with the story of Robin Hood and the Potter. It begins with Robin and his men apparently in Barnsdale: we are told that the Potter who is travelling along the road once had the better of Little John at Wentbridge. But the plot develops with Robin Hood taking the potter's place to go to Nottingham to sell the pots. In the denouement Robin, still in disguise as the potter, agrees to lead the sheriff to the outlaw. The sheriff and Robin leave Nottingham at dawn the following day and enter the forest where the gullible sheriff is captured, robbed and released to return to the town. It is hard to see this action happening anywhere else than in Sherwood.<sup>23</sup>

In the climax of the *Gest*, it is unambiguous: the king in disguise enters the forest from Nottingham and after he has pardoned Robin and taken him into his service, they return together, king and outlaws, back to Nottingham. And yet, when at the end of the *Gest*, Robin flees from court it is back to Barnsdale, which he sorely longed to see. He returns to the merry greenwood, slays a great hart, blows his horn and rallies all the outlaws 'of that forest' to him. And so he lived in the greenwood for another twenty years until he met his death by the machinations of the prioress of nearby Kirklees. When Robin comes in from the forest, it is from Sherwood; when he flees back fifteen months later it is to Barnsdale.<sup>24</sup>

Other contemporary evidence does not clarify the matter. Lines of verse jotted down shortly after 1400 by a Lincoln cleric began 'Robin Hood in Sherwood stood'; yet thirty years later a judge in the court of Common Pleas quoted an alternative version, 'Robin Hood in Barnsdale stood'. Recent commentators have drawn attention to the greater weight

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22 'Guy', st. 11, 12, 17, 19-21, 41-2, 44-7, 55, 58. Professor Ormrod's suggestion that Robin Hood operates his campaign of defiance from a safe refuge in Barnsdale just outside Nottinghamshire, and thus beyond the sheriff's jurisdiction, does not quite tally with the texts. See W. M. Ormrod, 'Law in the Landscape: Criminality, Outlawry and Regional Identity in Late Medieval England', in *Boundaries of the Law: Geography, Gender and Jurisdiction in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Anthony Musson (Aldershot, 2005), p. 13.

23 'Potter', st. 6, 60-76.

24 *Gest*, st. 354, 369-74, 422-30, 442.



of specific detail concerning Barnsdale and have concluded that the outlaw hero was more closely related to Barnsdale, and probably derived his fame from the legendary exploits of a highwayman in that area. In Sir James Holt's words, 'Barnsdale seems real, Sherwood is somewhat like the 'wood near Athens' of a *Midsummer Night's Dream*'. Barnsdale was, these scholars have argued, the original setting.<sup>25</sup>

The problem remains that Barnsdale was not a forest and seems never to have been so. The road may have passed through woods above Wentbridge, where highway robberies still took place in the fifteenth century, but it was not a forest in either the legal or environmental sense. In the eighteenth century it was heathland. To describe it as the greenwood, the home for a gang of 140 outlaws, is to stretch imagination to breaking point. Even Sherwood, which extended for twenty or so miles north of Nottingham almost to Worksop, was no longer, if it ever had been since its earliest days, an unbroken stretch of virgin woodland and heath. By the end of the fifteenth century there were ten townships belonging to the ancient demesne of the crown and a great number of cultivated fields within its bounds alongside the tracts of woods, parks and clearings which were managed as a habitat for the deer. By the time a survey was drawn up on the orders of James I in 1609 the Forest was dominated by privately held 'lordships' and freehold settlements. Only ten per cent was woodland, six per cent parkland and 37% heathland. Almost half of the forest had been taken over for husbandry as either arable or pasture.<sup>26</sup> Sherwood may not have been, as one is led to imagine in the stories, a vast unspoilt wilderness with which only the outlawed foresters were familiar, but it was nevertheless legally a royal forest in which kings occasionally hunted.

The merging of Sherwood and Barnsdale in the fictional world may well reflect the elision by the fifteenth century of two story traditions, placed in different settings, which in Holt's view, infected or contaminated one another.<sup>27</sup> Eventually in modern times, in the literary and popular imagination, the location has settled on Sherwood. But more important than its precise location is the fact that it is a fictional forest. This forest, of which Robin and his merry men are yeomen, the 'Greenwood' in which it is perpetual spring, is a generic and idealised location. In every story it is conjured up in the same way. That is why it does not ultimately matter whether the forest on a Whitsun morning in May, in which the story of Robin Hood and the Monk opens, is Barnsdale or Sherwood. What matters is that,

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25 Dobson and Taylor, *Rymes*, 18-24; Holt, *Robin Hood*, 83-8.

26 NUM, Mi L 3/1 & 2, *Sherwood Forest Book*, fos. Bxi-Cxv; *Sherwood Forest in 1609*, ed. S. N. Matoris and S. M. Groves (Thoroton Society, Record Series, xl, 1997), pp. xxiv-xxvii.

27 Holt, *Robin Hood*, 87. A linguistic difference is apparent. One may note that the audience is told in respect of Sherwood that Little John knows each path, but that in the more northerly Barnsdale he knows each *gate* (i.e. path or trackway).

In somer when the shawes be sheyne  
 And leves be large and long  
 Hit is full mery in feyre foreste  
 To here the foullys song.<sup>28</sup>

This forest of the imagination stretched unbroken between Barnsdale and Nottingham. It is in this idealised sylvan setting, that the outlawed foresters lived and into which to his great cost the sheriff from time to time ventured.

Fictionalisation and confusion over the forest is matched in all the stories by the fictionalisation and confusion of the outlaws' perpetual enemy, the sheriff of Nottingham. He appears in all the tales, with the exception of 'The Death of Robin Hood', by which time in the narrative of the Gest he is himself already dead. John Paston had a play of Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham performed; parish records reveal that plays of Robin, the sheriff and the king were in the repertoire, and the sub-title of the Gest is 'Robin Hood, the sheriff of Nottingham and the King'.<sup>29</sup> He is central to all the stories, the representative of the authority which Robin flouts.

From 1449, when the town of Nottingham was raised to county status independent of Nottinghamshire, there were in fact two sheriffs of Nottingham in office in any one year. The old office of bailiff was redesignated sheriff, but the duties remained largely the same. They were responsible for collecting the fee farm and other dues owed to the crown; they were to hold what was henceforth the county court in the town once a month, in which pleas of contract and trespass were held and were to receive the profits of that court; and were to hold prisoners for trial in the town gaol (under the Guildhall) and deliver royal writs. They were elected annually to office from Michaelmas to Michaelmas from the body of burgesses by the burgesses and alderman themselves.<sup>30</sup> Every year the outgoing sheriffs formally handed over their charge to the incoming officers. On 30 September 1505, for instance, they indented for one prisoner, three writs of *exigis facias* which were due to be returned before the justices at Martinmas, and the collection of fetters, irons and keys to the prison.<sup>31</sup>

28 'Monk', st. 1.

29 *The Paston Letters*, ed. James Gairdner (6 vols. London, 1904), v, no. 833 (p. 185); John Marshall, "'goon in-to Bernysdale": The trail of the Paston Robin Hood Play', *Leeds Studies in English*, xxix (1998), 185-217; Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood*, 168-71.

30 *Records of the Borough of Nottingham*, ed. W. H. Stevenson et al., 9 vols. Nottingham, 1882-1956, ii, 1399-1485, 192-5; *A Centenary History of Nottingham*, ed. J. V. Beckett (Manchester 1997), pp. 65-8, 89-90.

31 *Records of Nottingham*, iii, 1485-1547, 98-100.

The sheriffs of Nottingham were townsmen, merchant or artisan burgesses. One for whom the borough records provide some biographical detail was Walter Hilton. Hilton, who served in the office in 1463-4, towards the beginning of his civic career, was a painter and image maker. In 1483 he pursued a debt against Emma Sherwood, widow for the gilding and painting of a tabernacle of St Philip as well as the decoration of a mantletree (mantelpiece). He was in 1473, as far as the subsidy returns for the town indicate, of relatively modest means, from the middle ranks of urban society, paying 2s 8d. He acquired property in the town, including a garden by the river Leen over which he subsequently came into conflict with the commons, and witnessed other property transactions. He served as a chamberlain in 1470-1, during which year his servant Nicholas Hill acted several times on official business. In 1476-7 he was one of the chamberlains of the gild of St George in the church of St Peter. And finally he was elected mayor in 1489-90 and one of the seven aldermen by 1495. He died in 1503, leaving a bequest of 3s 4d to the bridgewardens delivered by his widow Joan, his executrix.<sup>32</sup>

In his year as sheriff, as a relatively young man, Hilton led the contingent of soldiers sent by the town to serve Edward IV at York in May 1464. He was splendidly arrayed for the occasion in a red jacket on which were sewn white 'letters'. In that year, too, he would have participated in the ceremonial that welcomed visits from the king himself, the earl of Warwick, Chancellor George Neville, and Lord Hastings.<sup>33</sup> Walter Hilton, though of a more unusual craft and of more modest substance than others, may be taken as typical of the bourgeois sheriffs of Nottingham in the later fifteenth century. He was nothing like the sheriff of Nottingham in the stories.

Everything about the fictional sheriff of the stories suggests that he is in reality the sheriff of Nottinghamshire, the county not the town. Except, of course, there was no such office as sheriff of Nottinghamshire: it was a joint shrievalty of both Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. Does it matter? 'Nottingham' is after all a convenient abbreviation of the correct title, which was probably too much of a mouthful for the balladeers and storytellers. It is at one with him chasing the outlaws into Barnsdale outside his bailiwick. By the fifteenth century, the sheriff of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, like his urban counterparts, served for just one year at a time. His duties were relatively light, principally to convene the county court and to supervise the election of representatives to parliament, to collect certain royal revenues in the counties and be responsible for legal administration;

32 *Records of Nottingham*, ii, 292, 332, 415-16, 419; iii, 401, 420, 227, 433, 434, 459; *Account Books of the Gilds of St George and St Mary in the Church of St Peter Nottingham*, ed. R. F. B. Hodgkinson and L. V. A. Lowe (Thoroton Society Record Series, vii, 1939), pp. 36-7. It was in the dispute over the garden that he was described as an image maker (*Records of Nottingham*, ii, 419).

33 *Records of Nottingham*, ii, 376-9. For the merchants and artisans of medieval Nottingham see *Centenary History*, ed. Beckett, 74-7.

duties mostly carried out by a permanent deputy, under-sheriffs and bailiffs. He was a middle ranking royal officer, with limited powers, the duties of which were performed by permanent deputies and for whom the social cache of the office was as important as the limited opportunities for patronage and local advancement it gave him. To be sheriff of the two counties, as it was to be sheriff of the town for burgesses, was part of the *cursus honorum* of the more substantial gentry. In the later part of the fifteenth century typical sheriffs from Nottinghamshire were the heads of the families of Babington, Pierpoint, Stanhope and Strelley.<sup>34</sup>

About the only aspects of the fifteenth-century sheriff's duty that link with the action of the stories are his residual responsibilities towards the forest. It was to him that the king sent writs for the election of verderers in the county court, writs to have inspections (regards) of the forest or perambulations of the bounds made, and writs summoning the forest eyre. He acted as the king's agent in transporting venison or timber from the forest at the king's command and to liaise with the royal hunting establishment, including its foresters, when the king came to hunt. For most of the fifteenth century, when the forest eyres were in abeyance and the administration of the forest somewhat lax, these duties were not onerous.<sup>35</sup> But it was his responsibility to hunt down outlaws in the forest and to bring them to justice. He served the writs and called out the posse, which the king orders the sheriff to do in the *Gest*,<sup>36</sup> though the execution was usually delegated.

The pursuit of outlaws in the forest apart, the fictional sheriff bears little resemblance to the actual royal officer. He resides in Nottingham, not at a county seat. He entertains Robin, disguised as a potter, to dinner in the hall of his house. After his discomfiture in both the story of Little John and the Sheriff and 'Robin Hood and the Potter', he returns home, his tail between his legs, to Nottingham. And in Guy of Guisborne he is shot down by Little John as he attempts to flee 'full fast away' 'towards his house in Nottingham'. By implication he occupies the royal castle, in which at different times, the audience is led to believe, Robin and Little John are both imprisoned.<sup>37</sup> From here he presides over the town,

34 H. M. Jewell, *English Local Administration in the Middle Ages* (Newton Abbot, 1972), pp. 85, 182-97; R. Gorski, *The Fourteenth-Century Sheriff: English Local Administration in the later Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2003), pp. 1-4, 158-61; Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood*, 103-5; S. J. Payling, *Political Society in Lancastrian England: The Greater Gentry of Nottinghamshire* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 111, 144.

35 E. Powell, *Kingship, Law and Society: Criminal Justice in the reign of Henry V* (Oxford, 1989), p. 74; Jewell, *English Local Administration*, pp. 85, 182-97.

36 *Gest*, st. 326.

37 'Potter', st. 38-40, st. 73-6; *Gest*, st. 204-5; 'Guy', st. 57. The castle and King's Hall were specifically exempted from the town's charter of county status in 1449. The King's Hall, or County Hall as it later became known, remained the venue for the county court and elections to parliament, and its undercroft the county prison (*Records of Nottingham*, ii, 190-1, iii, 118, n.2). See also *Centenary History*, ed. Beckett, pp. 48-54 in which the castle is described as 'rather detached from the town' (53).

where he organises archery contests in the butts and his wife goes out on shopping expeditions in the market. When he captures Robin Hood, it is in the town, where Robin has come to pray in the parish church of St Mary.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless he is immensely wealthy, far wealthier than any mere burgess: Little John breaks into his treasure house and steals all his plate and £300 he had stashed away. The sheriff maintains a grand aristocratic household under the direction of a steward and butler. He rides out from the town to hunt with hounds and horn, just as a great nobleman does, and with his retinue to embark on futile chases of Robin in Sherwood Forest/Barnsdale. He retains on a grand scale, calling out sufficient 'men of armys stronge' to besiege Richard at the Lee in his castle, just as the duke of Norfolk besieged John Paston in Caister. When retaining Reynold Grenelefe, alias Little John, he is prepared to pay him 20 marks a year and supply a good horse. This is far in excess of a yeoman's fee, more appropriate for a leading member of the county gentry, such as would actually serve as sheriff.<sup>39</sup> He is high in favour at court. He is in regular communication with the king, receiving his writs and trusted by him. When his siege of Sir Richard at the Lee's castle fails, he even rides up to London to report to the king that Sir Richard maintains the outlaws and is planning to raise 'the whole northe londe', of which he aims to be lord. The king announces that he will ride down in strength to Nottingham within a fortnight. In the meantime he issues commissions of array to the sheriff for 'all the wide country' (the northern counties?).<sup>40</sup> The fictional sheriff of Nottingham is a permanent viceroy, reminiscent of the office as it had been in earlier times, but akin also to a magnate favoured at court in the later middle ages: a mighty, if not even overmighty, subject.<sup>41</sup>

The sheriff is a man with no name; he is known only by his office. Three models have been proposed, all sheriffs of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire in the early fourteenth century, in which historical context the early stories are unmistakeably set. One, from the third decade of the century suggested by John Bellamy, is Sir Henry de Faucomberg; a second, John de Oxenford, sheriff from 1334-9, was proposed by John Maddicott; and the other Sir Thomas de Bekeryng of Tuxford, who died in 1352, was put forward as a candidate by Richard Gorski. All notoriously abused their office; the second and third were

38 'Potter', st. 36-7, 45-53; *Gest*, st. 146-7.

39 *Gest*, st. 150-2, 155-61, 174-9, 182, 317-18. For the siege of Caister see Colin Richmond, *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: Fastolf's Will* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 192-207 and Helen Castor, *Blood and Roses: the Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century* (London, 2004), pp. 204-12.

40 *Gest*, st. 322-4. See also Robin Hood and the Monk, in which letters are exchanged between the sheriff and the king ('Monk', st. 55-9, 64-5). For discussion of the incidence of written communication in the stories and its significance see W. M. Ormrod, 'Robin Hood and the Public Record: The Authority of the Writing in the Medieval Outlaw Tradition', in *Medieval Cultural Studies: Essays in Honour of Stephen Knight*, ed. Ruth Evans et al. (Cardiff, 2006), pp. 57-74.

41 In Richard Gorski's terms, he is more reminiscent of the regional dictator of the Norman era than the local bureaucrat of later times (Gorski, *Fourteenth-Century Sheriff*, 2).

charged by Edward III for false returns of writ, unlawful purveyance, false imprisonment and extortion. Bekeryng's wife was convicted alongside her husband.<sup>42</sup> Just as Robin Hood may have been the fictionalisation of an earlier famous highwayman, so also the casting of the sheriff may have drawn upon the memory of one who had held the office in an earlier century. But, whatever their crimes and abuse of office, none of these sheriffs was the viceroy envisaged in the stories.

If one were tempted to find local fifteenth-century equivalents of this mighty subject, one would look not among the ranks of sheriffs, but to local magnates. Two figures who would have been familiar to contemporaries hearing or reading the stories then were Ralph, Lord Cromwell of Tattershall and Wingfield in the reign of Henry VI, and William Lord Hastings of Ashby de la Zouche under Edward IV. Cromwell was granted the royal offices of constable of Nottingham Castle and steward and keeper of Sherwood Forest in 1434, which was renewed in 1445 in fee. He was a long-standing and loyal servant of the house of Lancaster who had built up considerable wealth and power in Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire. Treasurer of England from 1433 to 1443, he was a hard-headed and ruthless courtier and councillor of Henry VI. He died in 1456.<sup>43</sup> William, Lord Hastings, who dominated the midlands from the royal honour of Tutbury and his lordship of Ashby de la Zouche after 1461, was in his turn made constable, steward and keeper in 1471, which offices he held until his death in 1483. Hastings, one of Edward IV's right-hand men from the beginning of his reign, exerted considerable power and influence in the north midlands as king's chamberlain, retaining many men in his service on the king's behalf, including five who served as sheriffs of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. Resident from time to time at Nottingham Castle, from which he wrote to Sir John Paston in September 1473, he was an important intermediary between town and crown.<sup>44</sup>

42 John Bellamy, *Robin Hood: an Historical Enquiry* (London, 1985), pp. 43-58; J. R. Maddicott, 'The Birth and Setting of the Robin Hood Ballads', *EHR*, lxxiii (1978), 286-92; Gorsky, *Fourteenth-Century Sheriff*, 103. It may be significant Oxenford and Bekeryng were both charged during Edward III's purge of corrupt officials after he had returned from campaigning in France in 1340. For the argument that the King Edward in the stories is Edward III at this point of his reign see Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood*, 200-3. For the proposal for a prototype from the era of the projected 'real' Robin Hood in the early thirteenth century, Eustace of Lowdham, see Crook 'Sheriff of Nottingham' and Holt, *Robin Hood*, 60-1.

43 *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthews and B. Harrison, 60 vols. Oxford, 2004, xiv, 353-55; Gerald Harriss, *Shaping the Nation: England, 1360-1461* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 595-635; Payling, *Political Society in Lancastrian England*, 97; Rhoda L. Friedrichs, 'Ralph Lord Cromwell and the Politics of Fifteenth-Century England', *NMS*, xxxii (1988), 207-27; eadem, 'The Two Last Wills of Ralph Lord Cromwell', *NMS*, xxxiv (1990), 93-112.

44 *ODNB*, xxv, 286-92; M. A. Hicks, 'Lord Hastings' Indentured Retainers', in idem, *Richard III and His Rivals: Magnates and their Motives in the Wars of the Roses*, London, 1991, pp. 229-46; *Paston Letters*, v, no. 839 (pp. 194-5).

However, the sheriff is given a character which would not have been particularly pleasing to a Cromwell or Hastings (or even an Oxenford or Bekeryng): he is a fool, a coward, an oath-breaker, and a drunkard. Little John, as Reynolde Greenelefe, meets him in the forest with his hounds and promises to lead him to a magnificent green hart and a herd of seven score deer, all with mighty antlers. The gullible sheriff falls for this and is captured. He is made to spend a night under the stars in his underclothes, a hardship he cannot stand. He is released from his torment only after he has sworn never again to do Robin harm; an oath he promptly breaks when he gets back to the comfort of the castle.<sup>45</sup> This is the antithesis of the chivalric ideal to which the likes of Cromwell and Hastings aspired. In 'Robin Hood and the Monk' Little John is able to rescue Robin because the sheriff is in a drunken coma. In Robin Hood and the Potter, Robin, disguised as a potter, promises to lead him to Robin in the forest. Once more he is humiliated, and returns empty-handed. His wife, who clearly also thinks him a bit of a buffoon, finds the whole episode hilariously funny, for when he tells her what has befallen him, she 'toke up a lowed lawhyng'. The abuser of authority is fleshed out as a figure of fun rather than of hatred in this fictional world: he is the object of satire.<sup>46</sup>

And so we return to what Robin stood for and the deeper meaning of the stories. What is the significance of his continuously repeated contest with the sheriff whom he either humiliates or kills? The traditional view of Robin was that he represented peasant resistance in a class war. As the interpretation of the stories has developed, and Robin, the yeoman, has been less closely associated with the peasantry, this has moved on to the idea that he is the 'ordinary' man's enemy of corrupt authority and the perversion of justice.<sup>47</sup> Indeed it has been argued by some that far from being a figure who challenges the social order, Robin affirms it, for his ideal is its restoration to its proper state. The key moment is Robin's restoration by the king who recognises that his rebellion was against the misgovernment of his evil minister, the abuse of authority in his name (personified by the sheriff of Nottingham) and not against the crown itself.<sup>48</sup> In this it is at one with the rhetoric of popular and baronial revolt during the later middle ages.

In this scenario the sheriff can be seen as the personification of the abuse of power by a corrupt and repressive agent of the crown. He stands, as it were, for all the evil ministers of the crown who ever lived. He consequently, twice, meets his deserved end. Once in Guy

45 *Gest*, st. 182-204.

46 'Monk', st. 68; 'Potter', st. 76-9.

47 See Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood*, 156-83, ch. 7, 'Authority and the Social Order', for a fuller discussion.

48 See for instance A. Musson and W. M. Ormrod, *The Evolution of English Justice: Law, Society and Justice in the Fourteenth Century* (Basingstoke, 1994), 169-70; Ormrod, 'Robin Hood and Public Record', 69-70.



of Guisborne, shot in the back by Little John as he flees; a second time in the *Gest* shot by Robin in the streets of Nottingham. In this version Robin stands over his wounded enemy and gloats:

Lye thou there, thou[gh] proude sheriff  
 Evil mote thou cheve;  
 There myght no man to the truste  
 The whyles thou were a lyve.<sup>49</sup>

And then promptly smites off his head. One might modernise the stanza as 'Lie there high and mighty sheriff, evilly must you die who no man could trust while you lived'. The summary killing of the sheriff, in this reading is the just desert for one who has perverted the king's good rule.<sup>50</sup>

But is it as simple as this? The mockery of the sheriff in the comic tales is a mockery of all who enjoy privilege and power. The story of Little John, alias Reynolde Greenlefe, in the service of the sheriff is a parody of the books of nurture laying down the codes and etiquette of household service. In the story these are inverted. Little John declares that he will be the worst servant to him that ever he had. When the sheriff is out hunting, he demands to be served dinner by his Steward, assaults his butler for being discourteous, and ends up fighting the cook.<sup>51</sup> When the sheriff ultimately upbraodes him for his behaviour, he retorts

Mayster ye be to blame,  
 I was mysserved of my dynere  
 When I was with you at home.<sup>52</sup>

This is a feast of misrule in which the aristocratic household is turned upside down. It is introduced as 'good mirth',<sup>53</sup> but knock-about comedy (in this case literally) is subversive. The noble household was a microcosm of society. Social order here is overturned.

We should also think twice about Robin's pardon and admission to royal favour as symbolising the restoration of true justice now the king has discovered the true state of affairs down in Nottingham and his forest of Sherwood. It has been little remarked that Robin negotiates his restoration to favour. He declares to the king

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49 'Guy', st. 58; *Gest*, st. 349.

50 P. C. Maddern, *Violence and the Social Order: East Anglia, 1422-42* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 89, 228-30.

51 *Gest*, st. 153-176.

52 *Ibid.*, st. 190.

53 *Ibid.*, st. 144.

But me like well your servyse  
 I will come again full soon  
 And shoot at the dunne deer  
 As I am wonte to do.<sup>54</sup>

No one ever negotiated a royal pardon; it was never conditional. A pardon lay in the king's absolute grace. This is more like a peace treaty, or love day between equals. Moreover, in due course, after over a year, sickened by the court, Robin flees back to the forest, defies the king, rejoins his outlaws, and takes up his old ways, just as he threatened he would. The point is unambiguous. Robin is not ultimately reconciled to royal rule. No king, no rule is perfect. By implication all power is corrupted. Or in the words of Sir Thomas More paraphrasing St Augustine, and put into the mouth of Ralph Hythlodæus in *Utopia*

When I consider and turn over in my mind the state of all commonwealths flourishing anywhere today, so help me God, I can see nothing else than a kind of conspiracy of the rich, who are aiming at their own interests under the name and title of commonwealth.<sup>55</sup>

In the light of this, perhaps we should pause to think whether the Sheriff of Nottingham is to be seen merely as the archetypal evil minister of the crown, and ponder whether the likes of Lord Cromwell and Lord Hastings, with their local power and special relationships with their kings so uncannily like the sheriff, had reason to join in the general mirth at his expense. They were worldly wise and would have been all too aware that in their own lifetimes the sheriff's fate befell other loyal servants of the crown at the hands of rebel yeomen.<sup>56</sup> If the sheriff can thus be interpreted not as the evil minister, but as the local representative of the crown's legitimate authority, these stories take on a truly subversive character.

A fictionalised Sherwood Forest and fictionalised Sheriff of Nottingham thus signify aspirations and ideologies beyond any literal associations with a specific place or a specific office. But they are sufficiently linked to the particular and historically identifiable to make

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54 Ibid, st. 417.

55 Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. Edward Surtz (New Haven CT, 1964), p. 148. See also Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood*, 207-10 and Professor Ormrod's argument that underlying the story of Robin Hood and the King is a conflict between a tradition of localised, communal, rough justice and centralising, formal, royal justice. In this interpretation the negotiation as if equals between Robin and the King and Robin's ultimate rejection of the court take on a different, more specific political significance (Ormrod, 'Criminality, Outlawry and Regional Identity', *passim*...).

56 As happened to William Crowmer, the sheriff of Kent, in July 1450 during Cade's Rebellion. (I. M. W. Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion of 1450* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 39-40, 93).

the late-medieval stories of Robin Hood believable. They create a 'real' setting. Why these popular stories emerged with a hero and villain linked to Sherwood and Nottingham is, and has been, a matter for speculation. It means, however, that the forest and the sheriff lie at the heart of a medieval discourse about government and justice that has timeless significance.

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