

The Traitor of Sherwood Forest: Historical note

This is an abridged, spoiler-free version of the historical note contained at the end of the book.

The Traitor of Sherwood Forest is a Robin Hood retelling, but in many ways, this book is a return to the past rather than a revision of it. Most people today know Robin Hood as “Robin of Locksley,” the exiled noble, paramour of Maid Marian, champion of the poor and oppressed, and the mortal enemy of a corrupt King John. But that Robin Hood is nowhere to be found in the medieval ballads. Their Robin Hood is brash and childish, alternately charming and bullying—dashing and heroic in one stanza, brutal and ruthless in the next. He devotes himself to the Virgin Mary rather than a mortal woman. And his king, when the king is named at all, is King Edward.

So how did this complicated, morally gray medieval trickster become such a squeaky-clean hero in the present day?

Medieval people didn’t need their heroes to be perfect. They didn’t even need their heroes to be good! Robin Hood was popular in the Middle Ages precisely *because* he was a violent, irreverent rogue who stuck it to everyone in authority. But he underwent a “reboot” during the English Renaissance, thanks in part to Henry VIII, who had a penchant for comparing himself to legendary medieval men. (He loved to dress up as Robin Hood, and he had his own image painted in King Arthur’s place on the Winchester Round Table.) Robin Hood’s rebellion against the clergy would have been delicious to Henry, who had himself broken with the Roman Catholic Church. But the outlaw’s vendetta against the aristocracy and his devotion to the Virgin were different matters entirely—*that* version of Robin Hood could not survive the relentless pens of the nobility or the Protestant Reformation.

Thus, the post-medieval Robin Hood transformed from a chaotic criminal who pitted himself against church and king into an exiled noble fighting an evil King John in the name of King Richard. They also gave him a girlfriend. Like many medieval heroes, the early Robin Hood devoted himself to the Virgin Mary, but “Mariolatry” grew dangerously unfashionable during the rise of Protestantism. As for Maid Marian, she may have originated as part of a medieval May Day tradition. In early (and sometimes bawdy) versions of her story, she had a lover named Robin, but they were both shepherds, not outlaws. When their stories eventually merged, both Robin and Marian were promoted to Robin’s legend continued in England, growing increasingly didactic with the rise of Puritanical (and anti-Catholic) fervor.

Then nineteenth-century writers, who were infamous for bowdlerizing medieval legends and cleaning up medieval heroes, got hold of Robin Hood. They polished off the grime and made him innocent and righteous. Sometimes Robin returned to his yeoman roots—in Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*, for instance—but he was still made to serve the royal cause. Children’s literature starring Robin Hood also emerged in the nineteenth century, featuring Robin as a boyish, romantic gentleman, playful rather than subversive, loyal to England and the crown. This is the Robin Hood that Disney eventually brought to life as the clever, lovable cartoon fox that most of us grew up with: a childlike figure that the medieval Robin Hood probably would have knocked off his horse with a well-aimed shot from his bow, just for the fun of it.

The question of whether or not Robin Hood was a real man still rages among enthusiasts and scholars—and I’m happy to leave the debate to them. The main question I wanted to explore with this retelling was: What did *medieval* people think of Robin Hood? What did he mean to them, and what did he inspire? I wanted to write Robin as the Middle Ages imagined him—tempestuous and contradictory, both chivalrous and cruel. He steals from the rich, and he sometimes protects the poor, but he is also violent, erratic, and deeply flawed. This medieval Robin Hood has a story too—not because he was a disinherited noble, like the later Robin Hoods, or because he was someone privileged who had his power taken away, but because he was *no one*—and he wanted to make the world see him anyway.

Sources

Although I used plenty of creative license in this book, many of the tricks Robin plays, and even some of the dialogue lines, come directly from the medieval ballads. Most of the dates indicated below are estimates, since extant manuscripts often transcribe earlier ballads whose sources are lost texts, analogues, or part of an oral tradition. My sources include:

- “Robin Hood and the Monk” (c. 1370 or earlier)
- *A Gest of Robyn Hode* (c. 1400–1450)
- “Robin Hood and the Potter” (c. 1500 or earlier)
- “Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne” (c. 1500, though not recorded until the 17th century)
- [A spoiler ballad!] (c. 1600s)

Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren’s *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (TEAMS Middle English Texts Series, 2000) was an invaluable resource, and thanks to the hard work of the University of Rochester and the Middle English Texts Series, it’s also available online at: <https://metseditions.org/editions/0pA5QGajC2P8qU3LrhVA5RIRGyYR6aMq>.

Infidelities

Of course, I didn’t practice absolute fidelity to my source texts. Robin wouldn’t have either. Once you start writing characters, they take on lives of their own. Mooch and Wyll switched roles in some circumstances to fit their backstories. (Mooch is better known as “Much” in Robin Hood lore, but I spelled it in this book the way it would have been pronounced in Middle English.) Friar Tuck was a late addition to the Robin Hood canon, so I borrowed his name for “Tuk,” a Muslim mercenary, to make him part of a modern tradition of more diverse Merry Men who are grounded in history.

As with Mooch’s name, I modernized some words to convey the right image or meaning:

“stockings” take the place of “hose”

“fireflies” replace “glow worms”

“lavender” has become “laundress”

“cleft the prick” (an archery term) is “cleft the peg”— for obvious reasons.

Sometimes I do the opposite, using an archaic or translated term as a creative choice, as with “shire reeve.” Variations close to the modern word (*screeffe*, *shyref*, etc.) are used in the late medieval ballads, but in the time of Edward I, the spelling (typically *syrreue*) would be closer to the literal meaning of the word. Likewise, I use “Nottingham Shire” to distinguish it from

Nottingham town, even though it is sometimes a compound word in medieval texts the way it is today.

Finally, Jane Crowe is my own invention. There are very few named women in the medieval Robin Hood stories (although there *is* an anonymous girl in “Robin Hood and the Potter” who carries the pots for Robin and the sheriff’s wife, helping him pull off his trick). Medieval literature is full of such unnamed women and servants, and to me, those untold stories are just as important as Robin’s—maybe even more so, since real social change often happens through the hard work of ordinary people whose names are lost to history, rather than through celebrities and heroes.

Jane is not a noblewoman born to greatness. And she’s no hero either. But she still matters. She is the kind of woman who has been there throughout history—unnoticed and unsung—changing her world from the shadows. And even when the ballads and stories leave her silent, anonymous, and invisible, she can still press the world with her finger and force it to tip.

Amy S. Kaufman, 2026