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Stephen Knight. *Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003. xxi + 247 pp. $25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3885-1.

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So Did He Really Wear Green Tights?

Any scholar who takes up the study of the legend of Robin Hood will constantly be confronted with the same question from colleagues, students, acquaintances and, eventually, readers: was Robin Hood real? No amount of postmodern dissembling will allow you to avoid giving an answer. You can politely attempt to explain that this is really far from the most interesting question about Robin Hood, that the real issues concern how and why his legend has remained so popular and has evolved in so many different ways in so many different venues. Your listener will not be satisfied, however, until you grudgingly provide an opinion as to whether or not there ever was a flesh-and-blood outlaw scampering around Sherwood Forest and robbing the rich in order to give to the poor.

In *Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography*, Stephen Knight, the world's foremost expert on the English outlaw, confronts this issue. He explains the title by stating at the outset that "this book is a mythic biography in two ways: it deals with both the human and the superhuman manifestations and meanings of the figure; but it is also a biography of a myth, that is, a single study of a figure who has over centuries and in many places and many genres had a varying but powerful identity" (p. xiii). Knight clearly understands the need for us to see our heroes as real people: "Though the power of heroic figures is inherently mythic, we also yearn for them to have a human presence. Obsessed with our own identity, or our quest for it, we need figures of myth to have some biographic standing" (p. xii).

The book that Knight has produced, however, goes far beyond a conventional attempt to determine Robin Hood's reality through historical or literary evidence, a subject that has been thoroughly explored, at least as much as it can be given the limited source material, by previous scholars. Knight focuses less on the "real" Robin Hood than he does on what he refers to as his "essentially surviving identity," or, more accurately, identities (p. xvii). Knight points to four major "repersonifications of the myth" of Robin Hood: the yeoman of the medieval ballads ("Bold Robin Hood"); the sixteenth-century aristocrat ("Robert, Earl of Huntingdon"); the romanticized gentleman of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries ("Robin Hood Esquire"); and the twentieth-century

cinematic hero ("Robin Hood of Hollywood").

In the medieval period, Knight identifies Robin Hood as a "bold and antiauthoritarian outlaw hero" and "a symbol both of the natural life and of resistance to oppression" (p. 11). Some literary scholars have identified the long ballad *A Gest of Robyn Hude* as hinting at a less plebeian and overtly rebellious Robin Hood, but Knight takes issue with such claims, arguing that "the poem resists any elements of gentrification that have been included" (p. 31). In the sixteenth century, a new version of the outlaw appeared, the fallen nobleman driven into forest exile by the evil Prince John and his minions. This occurred, according to Knight, due to the obsession of Tudor historians with the misdeeds of King John I and the irresponsible absenteeism of Richard the Lion-hearted; the real-life noble rebel Fulk Fitz Warren may have been the model for their new model Robin Hood. This version flourished until the late eighteenth century, when literary antiquarians such as Thomas Percy, Thomas Evans, and Joseph Ritson began collecting and reprinting the medieval and early modern ballads. Their efforts bore fruit in 1818-19, two years that Knight describes as "the most important single period in Robin Hood's whole mythic biography" (p. 100). In those years, John Keats, Sir Walter Scott, and Thomas Love Peacock all published interpretations of the legend that had a major impact on its future evolution: "In various ways they brought together the noble status and inherent dignity of the gentrified outlaw with the vigor and dynamic meaning of the old social bandit, and they did this not simply in terms of narrative, but also, preeminently, in terms of values. The noble bandit now came to symbolize values central to the nineteenth and even twentieth centuries– especially ideals of national identity, masculine vigor and natural value" (pp. 100-101). In the twentieth century, the action-oriented nature of the Robin Hood legend made it perfect for the movie screen, where Robin has been depicted by some of Hollywood's most popular and aggressively masculine actors, including Douglas Fairbanks, Errol Flynn, and Kevin Costner. There have also been less conventional treatments, including a version starring the Muppets, and parodies, most prominently Mel Brooks's *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* (1993), which deals with some of the legend's longstanding ambiguities of gender and sexuality. Robin Hood also continued to function as a popular literary hero in the twentieth century, with a more feminist version emerging in its final decades, as has also happened in the case of the Arthurian legend.

The chronological evolution of the legend that Knight traces is hardly new, and has been outlined in numerous other works, including his own *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw* (1994), a book whose title now seems to have been somewhat undermined by its own author. What is more novel, and more impressive, is the range of manifestations of Robin Hood that Knight refers to, and the depth of analytical insight he is able to bring to bear upon them. Scholars of the legend tend to be divided into two categories: medievalists who focus on the early ballads and other scattered references dating from prior to 1600 and modern literary critics or cultural historians who focus on Robin Hood's more recent manifestations. Knight, however, ranges freely across the legend's entire history with expertise and confidence. Only occasionally does he extend his interpretations beyond what the textual evidence will support. His contention that the early Victorian Robin Hood was a "distinctly radical figure" (p. 110), for example, is an overstatement, for it equates radicalism with a desire for reform in a way that few contemporary Britons would have condoned. The Robin Hood of this era either slotted neatly into Whiggish historiography by appearing as a compatriot of the rebel baron Simon de Montfort during the reign of Henry III, or fit into emerging racialist notions of Saxon superiority, as in Scott's *Ivanhoe*. He did retain some of his more antiauthoritarian characteristics in popular chapbooks, but these were far less influential in terms of their impact upon contemporary audiences. It is very difficult to interpret Robin's appearances in the vast majority of popular novels and other literary genres in the nineteenth century as having any overt political agenda, certainly not a radical one, intended as they were primarily for the purpose of popular entertainment.

But such moments are exceptions in what is likely to remain the most comprehensive study of the complete history of the Robin Hood legend for some time to come. "The multiplicity and variation of the Robin Hood myth are central to its own continued life and its own varying biography," Knight writes (p. xiv). This book does an excellent job of capturing that multiplicity and variation, and of providing more than a mere survey of appearances, manifestations and references.

So, after all that, did Robin Hood really exist? In the end, Knight, too, dodges the question by providing an inconclusive account of the various theories, none of which he seems particularly convinced by, before concluding with a shrugging "there is more to history than historicism" (p. 198). Barring an unexpected archival or archaeological discovery, this may be the best that we can hope for; Knight's allegiances are clearly with the postmodernists, whose answer would be, "It depends on which Robin Hood you are talking about."