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## THE DARK SHADE OF LINCOLN GREEN: VIOLENCE, CRUELTY AND ANGER IN THE ROBIN HOOD LEGEND

### Abstract:

The article discusses the themes of violence, aggression and cruelty in Robin Hood texts of various provenance. First, it focuses on the earliest ballads, the original source of the motif which has for various reasons been abandoned and neglected in later retellings until the second half of the twentieth century. The second part discusses the above mentioned themes in modern ‘texts’ – two novels by Angus Donald, *Outlaw* (2009) and *Holy Warrior* (2010), as well as two film adaptations of the legend, one by John Irvin (1991) and the other by Ridley Scott (2010), both of which explore the medieval origins of the story in a classic Hollywood frame. The paper analyses the above mentioned themes in the context of legal authority, presenting Robin as the ultimate agent of justice. It also disputes the authors’ use of the coercion mechanism as the factor influencing the outlaw’s distinctions between right and wrong.

Robin Hood is generally perceived as a noble bandit caring for the poor by providing them with financial support gained by robbing the rich and punishing them for their evil deeds. For a long time the authors of the Robin Hood stories had a tendency to describe only the good deeds and intentions of this hero, as well as his innate sense of justice. The most famous example of such an author is the nineteenth-century American story writer and illustrator Howard Pyle, whose version of the legend virtually determined the image of Robin Hood as the exemplary teenage hero. Yet, at the dawn of the legend, the famous outlaw revealed also his ‘dark side’: he was quick-tempered and spilt blood in a cruel manner that may be unacceptable for the more conservative readers. These negative features of Robin Hood have

become especially popular in the late twentieth- and twenty-first-century retellings and interpretations of the legend, providing elements of novelty in the already fossilised picture. Presenting the hero as flawed with negative emotions makes him a person of flesh and blood and, therefore, much easier to identify with in contemporary societies, involved in various political and social conflicts. This manoeuvre is part of the ongoing evolution and reinterpretation of the legend, as the canonical image itself was created over the centuries. Consequently, Robin Hood, now more a fictional than a historical figure, proves to be a character appealing to modern authors and audiences. “Robin, undiscovered, can change according to the cultural mores of the time. Basically, Robin Hood can be anyone we want him to be” (Donald 2009b).

### Medieval violence

The corpus of medieval Robin Hood ballads is a set of texts placed in relatively late manuscripts and dated from the second half of the fifteenth century to approximately 1520 (Knight, Ohlgren 1997).<sup>1</sup> The level of cruelty and violence depicted in medieval Robin Hood ballads significantly distinguishes them from a later ballad (and literary) tradition. Such images can be observed in the earliest of the ballads, *Robin Hood and the Monk* (ca 1450), when in revenge for denouncing Robin Hood, his companions Little John and Much decide to kill the treacherous monk:

Johne toke the munkis horse be the hed,  
For sothe as I yow say;  
So did Much the litull page,  
For he shulde not scape away.

Be the golett of the hode  
John pulled the munke down;  
John was nothyng of hym agast,  
He lete hym falle on his crown.

Litull John was so agrevyd,  
And drew owt his swerde in hye;  
The munke saw he shulde be ded,  
Lowd mercy can he crye.

”He was my maister,” seid Litull John,  
”That thou hase browght in bale;  
Shalle thou never cum at oure kyng,  
For to telle hym tale.”

John smote of the munkis hed,  
No longer wolde he dwell;  
So did Moch the litull page,  
For ferd lest he wolde tell.

*Robin Hood and the Monk*, ll. 187–206

The monk's servant is killed alongside as an innocent witness and companion to his villainous master. Walter Bower's *Continuation* of John of Fordun's *Scotichronicon*, written in approximately the same period, does not present Robin in a favourable way either. The record under the year 1266 names Robin *famosus siccarius* – a well-known cut-throat, openly referring to the violent, if not criminal activity of the outlaw.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the most striking image of Robin's violent and cruel behaviour is perceivable in his encounter with Guy of Gisborne, a mercenary hired by the Sheriff of Nottingham to eliminate the famous outlaw. Robin meets him sleeping under a tree and soon they get involved in a shooting contest, which helps Robin to enquire about the stranger's intentions. Guy reveals that he was sent to hunt and kill Robin Hood, and, as both identities are revealed, the two men engage in a fierce duel. In the end Robin wins, kills Guy and injures his body, disguises both himself and the body, and follows to seek the person who has sent the killer.

He tooke Sir Guys head by the hayre,  
And sticked itt on his bowes end:  
”Thou hast beene traytor all thy liffe,  
Which thing must have an ende.”

Robin pulled forth an Irish kniffe,  
And nicked Sir Guy in the face,  
That hee was never on a woman borne  
Cold tell who Sir Guye was.

*Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*, ll. 163–170

This passage has been interpreted in numerous ways, mainly pointing to the ritual-like manner of Guy's mutilation. Kane (2000) interprets the ballad's storyline as a hunting game, which begins with Robin's prophetic dream of being caught and humiliated, and later turns into a real hunt. Yet, at the moment Guy names his prey, the roles change and Robin turns into a victorious hunter, who in the end dresses the carcass (Guy's body) in his own clothes and signals the end of hunting with the sound of (Guy's) horn. Other scholars believed Robin to be a part of some nature myth, though at the same time pointing to a very personalised character of the combat between these

two men: “Robin’s opponent is a personal enemy, with a vengeful, almost diabolic character, and his humiliation and destruction are an essential part of the story. The whole encounter has elements of natural myth about it, suggested rather than expressed.” (Knight, Ohlgren 1997). On the other hand, although recognising the ritualistic character of violence in general, as well as the pragmatic reasons for Guy’s mutilation, some scholars turn to the Bakhtinian theory of the carnivalesque and Foucault’s theory of punishment to dispute the discourse of law and the power of the state (Green 2004: 276), as well as the relationship between a monarch and his subjects (Stallybrass 1999: 313) only to conclude that the main issue in the ballad is being in control of the game, rather than the actual victory (Stallybrass 1999: 324).

The discourse of law and power brings in the legal distinctions between violence and cruelty which Baraz (2004) defines as follows: violence is a continuum of acts of aggression which turns into cruelty – an unjustified act of excessive violence. The distinction between a violent and a cruel leader marked the leader’s rule as legitimate or illegitimate, and since justification of one’s acts may sometimes be disputable, cruelty became a tool for delegitimizing rulers and often labelling them as tyrants. This mechanism is, in fact, at the core of this story – Robin kills Guy in an act of self-defence and uses his body as a disguise to reach the Sheriff, whose decision of having Robin (and John) hunted down undermines his authority. The conclusion of the story is the death of the Sheriff, which in fact is an execution and a violent, but nonetheless enforcement of law:

But John tooke Guyes bow in his hand  
His arrowes were rawstye by the roote;  
The sherriffe saw Litle John draw a bow  
And fettle him to shoote.

Towards his house in Nottingam  
He fled full fast away,  
And soe did all his companye,  
Not one behind did stay.

But he cold neither soe fast goe,  
Nor away soe fast runn,  
But Litle John, with an arrow broade,  
Did cleave his heart in twinn.

*Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*, ll.223–234.

The actions of the outlaws may seem primitive, barbaric and unbearably violent for the modern reader, but apart from its role in the discourse of law

and justice, to such depiction of violence the medieval audience was accustomed (e.g. Hilton 1958).

### Contemporary image – the Godfather of Sherwood

Although Robin Hood turned out to be a popular literary hero, the twentieth-century retellings mainly use the cinema as their medium. The beginning of the twenty-first century has revealed a new interest in the outlaw, as in 2009 Adam Thorpe released his novel *Hodd*, inspired by the murder scene in *Robin Hood and the Monk*. The same year witnessed the publishing of *Outlaw*, the first of five novels in the cycle written by Angus Donald. Also, between 2006 and 2009 Stephen A. Lawhead's *King Raven Trilogy* was published. All these novels incorporate violence and cruelty as part of medieval reality, yet Donald's retelling presents a particularly striking and for many disturbing and deliberate image of Robin Hood as a medieval Godfather of Sherwood Forest.<sup>3</sup> I shall focus on two novels from his cycle: *Outlaw (O)* and *Holy Warrior (HW)*.

Angus Donald composes a coherent image of a violent man shaped by a harsh and unfortunate childhood/adolescence. As the third and youngest living son of a nobleman, Robert Odo was not given bright prospects in life. Abandoned by his father at a family manor, he is being taken care of by two men – a priest responsible for his education, and John, a martial skills instructor. It turns out, however, that the boy is regularly and severely beaten by the priest, whose motives for harassment are vague – when confronted by Little John, he exclaims that Robin is “a fiend of Hell sent to tempt good men from the path of righteousness and I will beat him bloody, if I choose, to remove the foul stain of pride from his soul” (*O*, 186). Moments earlier, John overhears the priest's prayer, in which he confesses to weakness and begs for strong will to resist temptation (*O*, 185). It is hard to decide whether adolescent Robin provoked some unhealthy and sinful emotions, as suggested by the content of the prayer and the first part of the priest's exclamation, or it was the priest who noticed something potentially evil in Robin's behaviour and, unconsciously, triggered its development or emergence. The fact is, however, that the priest initiates the mechanism of coercion, one of the most potent factors of behavioural disorders leading to juvenile crimes (Gulla 2009). What is important, according to this theory, the priest may not be fully aware of the morally wrong aspect of coercive ‘upbringing’, especially if he believes that physical violence is the only method enabling him to shape Robin's behaviour in the desired direction, and a proper chastisement for the boy's sins (*O*, 186).<sup>4</sup> He is also not aware of the fact that this mechanism forms a vicious circle – a child – in this case a

teenager – that experiences physical abuse or any other form of coercion, learns that this is the right manner of achieving one’s aims, which results in him/her acting in the very same manner towards the person who initiated the process.<sup>5</sup> At the moment Robin finds an ally/protector in John, his martial instructor, he decides to initiate changes in his life and become a powerful and rich earl – a position not available to him since he is the youngest son of a nobleman. The act that liberates him from the family and social constraints is killing the priest in a torturous manner as described in John’s tale:

The priest was naked and tied to the bed. A gag was stuffed into his mouth. His entire body was covered with burns – red-raw oozing burns with blackened flesh around the edges. Around the bed were the stubs of a dozen candles and the burnt-out remains of two wooden torches that would usually have been stuck in a becket to light a dark passageway. The air was filled with a smell like that of burning pork. It looked as if every inch of skin had felt the touch of a naked flame, over what must have been several hours. I shudder even now to think about the agony that man must have endured before he was finally given release by having his throat cut from ear to ear. And, as a final insult, his own wooden crucifix had been crudely shoved up his arse, right up to the cross bar. (*O*, 187–8).

On the one hand, the choice of torture method symbolises the fires of Hell and points to how great a sinner the priest teacher was. The final touch, on the other hand, implies some form of sexual abuse that might have taken place, and draws a possible connection with cases of paedophilia and physical abuse in Catholic institutions in America and Ireland, publicised in the international media at the beginning of the 2000s, not to mention those in Europe made public the very same year the novel was published. The issue might have served as a source of inspiration for Angus Donald, as apart from the press coverage, it reached the popular audience in numerous films, the most famous of which may be *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002). The act of sacrilege also stands for Robin’s final negation of the Church’s authority over his mind and conscience, and it is an act of resistance and rejection of the Church’s authority over people’s minds in general.

The consequences are far more serious than the obvious outlawry itself – Robin not only becomes sceptical as far as the Church’s moral guidance is concerned, but becomes a rebel against the Catholic Church both in speech and in deeds. He robs and humiliates priests on the highway, abstains from religious service, takes part in pagan rituals which demand human sacrifice, and, finally, objects to the massacre of Jews in York triggered by a deluded monk. There, he first observes with anxiety preaching which, as he foresees, ends up in acts of violence against the Jewish commune (“Robin was watching the monk’s performance with a grim face. The white-robed man had

flecks of spittle at either side of his mouth as he exhorted the crowd to hatred. 'Someone should cut down that madman before he drowns the world with blood,' Robin said quietly, almost to himself" (*HW*, 81)). Then, he decides to take part in protecting a group of Jews finding seclusion in the city tower and, when commanding the defence, the first person he kills is the very same mad preaching monk who ignited the riot and led the attack (*HW*, 111–112). As the conflict develops, he kills yet another 'man of God' to punish him for performing a public 'baptism' of a young Jewish girl in a cauldron of boiling water (*HW*, 127–128). The utmost cruelty and eagerness to manipulate the mob into hatred towards everything and everyone that does not fit the categories of the Catholic Church gives Robin the cause to oppose its leading role in shaping the mindset of the community, and to punish the priest for acts of violence against other human beings, be they direct or indirect.

Furthermore, Robin develops a system of justice and balance of powers, based on physical and intellectual strength, and fear.<sup>6</sup> He believes that establishing a system of firm rules will lead to clearly defining his future territory and area of influence, and keep him safe until his goal – earldom – is obtained. Yet, he does not possess a universal differentiation of good and bad, noble and ignoble, unless in reference to his own goals and interests, nor does he try to eradicate all evil from the face of the Earth. He concentrates on those cases which interfere with him personally, or on people who have asked him for and depend on his protection. As Robin reveals to Alan A'Dale, the narrator of the whole story:

Right and wrong is rarely simple. The world is full of evil folk. But if I were to rush about the earth punishing all the bad men that I found, I would have no rest. And, if I spent my entire life punishing evil deeds, I would not increase the amount of happiness in this world in the slightest. The world has an endless supply of evil. All I can do is to try to provide protection to those who ask it from me, for those whom I love and who serve me. (*HW*, 224–245)

Therefore, Robin is very firm in cases when the folk under his protection is attacked, especially if the aggressor is someone who previously recognised his zone of authority. After the Peveril family raid one of the villages in Robin's realm, he immediately starts his pursuit of them, arguing:

They deserve to die, they deserve to suffer. But, if I am honest, what we are doing tomorrow is in my own interest, too. For years the Peverils have respected me and my demesne. They acknowledge me as Lord of Sherwood. Now they have broken our pact and I must teach them a lesson, them and others like them, that when I stretch out my hand to protect a village, a family, a man, they are protected. I must demonstrate that I will defend my realm. My safety, and my freedom, and my future all depend upon this. If men do not fear me, why should

they not inform the sheriff of my whereabouts? Why should they pay me for protection, pay me to give them justice, if they think I can deliver neither? (*O*, 107)

Robin rightly recognises that to be able to exercise power he is dependent on his ability to effectively inflict proper pressure upon people who surround him (Gulla 2009: 189). He performs a sudden attack on the group of evil-doers, who do not suspect such an immediate reaction. After killing the majority of the group, Robin orders to mutilate the last remaining man by chopping three of his limbs off, and to leave his teenage son alive as a witness of what this kind of betrayal can result in, even though leaving a single person capable of revenge may pose a threat to his further actions (*O*, 108–112). Still, Robin decides that a threat of leaving a potential assassin alive is not so significant as to make him refrain from such a presentation of power (cf. Gulla 2009: 188).

Almost all types of crime judged by Robin or members of his community are punished with mutilation, which seems to be the most terrifying penalty, as it leaves the criminals with a permanent reminder of their offence. The case of rape in one of Robin's troop-training settlements may serve as an example:

Several days after I arrived, one of the men-at-arms, a fellow called Ralph, got drunk and raped one of the servant girls. Thangbrand dragged the rapist before Hugh, who said he was going to make an example of him. He had him beaten bloody with quarterstaves by the other outlaws until he was barely conscious, then the poor man was castrated in an awful ceremony performed in front of the entire population [...]. Naked, bleeding from the gory hole between his legs, and barely able to walk, he was driven out of Thangbrand's settlement into the forest to starve or, more likely, to be eaten alive by wolves. (*O*, 68–69)

Physical damage and social dismissal are also the factors which make a severe punishment play a crime preventing role (Green 2004: 271–273). As loyalty was the most prominent aspect of the outlaw code of conduct, the most unacceptable kind of crime, possibly due to its highly threatening nature, was denouncement. Alan A'Dale's very first encounter with the Wolfshead system of justice<sup>7</sup> is in fact a public execution of a sentence for this crime:

The bound man was lifted on to his feet by two men; at first he was docile and then he began struggling wildly, writhing, twisting his body like a man possessed, as he realized he was about to meet his fate. One of the hooded men punched him in the stomach, a blow that knocked him breathless to the floor, and then he was dragged outside. [...] He was sobbing and choking on the cloth that has been shoved into his mouth and tied there with a long strip of leather. [...] The man's

eyes, huge with terror, rolled in his head. John the giant came over to the man. He pulled the sodden gag out of his mouth and wedged a thin iron bar, crossways, at the back of his mouth, over his tongue, hard up against the hinge of his teeth. One of the men-at-arms strapped the bar in place, with the leather strip that has been used to gag him. The victim was moaning loudly, half-choking and writhing his body, eyes closed, mouth grotesquely forced open by the iron bar. (*O*, 19)

This initial stage of the act of punishment would certainly be enough to evoke fear in young Alan, yet he is made to watch the entire scene, which, due to its explicit and naturalistic nature, is meant to imprint the gruesome image and the importance of loyalty in the minds of both Alan and the reader:

The two men behind the wretch steadied his head, and held it still with the iron bar. John produced a pair of iron tongs from his pouch and seized the man's tongue by the tip. In his other hand he held a short knife, razor sharp. [...] And John the giant sliced through the thick root of the tongue, with one sweep, and then dodged quickly as a fountain of blood roared from the man's mouth. The man was screaming, a bubbling liquid howl of livid pain and, released by his captors, he fell to the ground, still tightly trussed, bellowing and jetting gore from the bloody cave of his gaping mouth. (*O*, 19–20)

In almost all cases the role of the executioner is somehow ascribed to Little John, which in fact seems to be a reprise of the kind of relationship between Robin and his friend found in medieval ballads.<sup>8</sup> John takes his role seriously and never questions the purpose such cruel punishment may serve, as he very well understands how the whole system of justice works. It is he who steps into Robin's shoes to perform a sentence on Hugh, Robin's brother and Sheriff's informer, whose actions resulted in a massacre of Robin's forces. Even though Robin, shocked as he is, limits himself to an act of banishment, John quickly performs the kind of execution carried out on all other informers and denouncers, reminding his former student that, lord's brother or not, the punishment is always one and the same. One may argue that apart from recognising Robin's rights as a nobleman, Little John is also a victim of the coercion mechanism, as he witnessed the abuse of his student and because he was the first person Robin in fact manipulated into his grand plan (*O*, 188–189). Alan A'Dale is yet another example of the initial contamination going further. Growing up in a harsh and cruel environment, he slowly, though unwillingly, starts to recognise the reason behind justice based on revenge, which eventually leads him to kill his boy servant (*HW*, 477–482) – the young Peveril in disguise, who earlier performed several attempts of assassinating Robin when the whole party was involved in the Third Crusade.

## The cinematic vision – *Robin Hood* (1991)

The discourse of power and coercion is also present in film adaptations of the legend, many of which build the plot based on the conflict between social classes and ethnic identities. As Richards notices: “Each cinematic generation has had its own Robin Hood and each major film has been a response to its own times” (1999: 429). Already in 1937, the plot of *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, one of the most popular cinematic versions of the legend, makes use of the motif of the ethnic conflict in 12<sup>th</sup> century England introduced by Walter Scott in his *Ivanhoe* (1819). Transparently distinguishing the heroes and the villains and “[m]ade against the background of the rise of fascism in Europe, the film was a rousing affirmation of democratic and constitutional values against ruthless dictatorship” (Richards, 1999: 431).

The motif of the conflict between the Anglo-Saxons and the Normans has been used in many subsequent adaptations of the legend, yet it seems to be most stressed in John Irvin’s *Robin Hood* (1991), where the issues of not only class struggle, but also the legitimacy of the authorities lie at the core of the conflict. Robin Hood, or rather Sir Robert Hode, is a representative of the few remaining Anglo-Saxon aristocratic families, and at the same time a vassal of Daguerre, a Norman baron. They both live in relative friendship until another member of Norman aristocracy ruins their established state of affairs. When arguing over the punishment of a poacher, caught red-handed in Hode’s part of the forest, Sir Miles Falconet immediately places Robin in a lower social position and refuses him the right to rule independently in his own ancestral domain, to which the enraged Robin orders the Norman party to leave his land. The poaching incident ends up in court, where Sir Miles exhibits an excellent knowledge of law, stressing precedence of the Norman feudal system over the Saxon Common Law, again refusing Robin a recognition as a sovereign ruler (“You may be a Saxon, Sir Robert, but the Saxons no longer rule here”<sup>9</sup>), and forces Baron Daguerre to proclaim Robert guilty and sentence him to public, though symbolic, flogging.

At this point another issue of the underlying conflict is revealed – the question of aristocratic descent. For Robert even one symbolic flog is unacceptable, as it levels him with common thieves and villains, while he is not even a mere nobleman but a descendant of the Lord Chancellor to one of the Saxon kings. The historic prominence of Robin’s family stands in sharp contrast with the well-hidden secret of Baron Daguerre’s descent – the one who rules the county is a grandson of a common pirate. Being publicly offended, preached at and given a humiliating sentence by Norman upstarts infuriates Robert and makes him perform his first true offence – contempt of court by rashly revealing the shameful secret of Daguerre’s family, for which he is proclaimed an outlaw.

Questioning the legitimacy of Norman rule on the basis of family and national heritage is an issue which seems to underlie the friendship of the two lords, yet, as long as both of them recognise their specific social position and treat each other with respect, the conventional balance of power can sustain occasional hiccups. Still, by trying to enforce the dominance of the Norman aristocracy, Sir Miles Falconet ruins the balance and reveals the mechanism of coercion functioning in the troubled friendship by adding his own instruments of pressure on both men and the local society. Not only does he demand that all Saxons be deemed inferior, lords and peasants equally, but also introduces terror (taking Saxon children as hostages and ordering to execute them) as a means of forcing the populace to reveal renegades' whereabouts. Eventually, his influence is rejected and both Daguerre and Robin return to their *status quo* with the previously underlying problems named, recognised and respected.

Sir Robert Hode is a man of difficult character and in many traits similar to his medieval original. Apart from being family-sensitive, he reveals a considerable flaw in his uncontrolled anger which, when sparkled, makes him lose control over his words and deeds as well as eagerly provoke and take part in fights. He easily finds his place among a band of outlaws and, using his knowledge of the Baron's financial schemes and orders, offers them bold and attractive opportunities of robbery, one of which is robbing a church congregation during a mass. The scene of this robbery is unique for both the cinematic and the literary tradition of the legend – in no other retelling do the Merry Men take with them the jewellery of the congregation and the liturgical vessels and crucifixes, therefore committing an act that can be recognised as sacrilege. The incident is striking, though explainable, as the Church may be identified with the Norman ruling class, occupying almost all the higher offices both secular and clerical, and therefore the bishop performing the mass may in fact be a Norman representative performing certain manipulation or control over his Saxon flock, as well as financial abuse (Robin addresses the clergy as 'bloodsuckers'). Moreover, in his 'battle fury' he reveals certain traits of cruelty, or even sadism, himself, as when maliciously reopening Sir Miles's neck wound or threatening the abbot with a knife, while at the same time mocking him about the coldness of steel and recommending prayers and offerings to Saint Robin.

All in all, Irvin's Robin Hood repeats the heightened level of violence depicted in the story known from medieval ballads, and combines it with the conflict between Norman and Anglo-Saxon inhabitants of England. The legitimacy of Norman rule is undermined on the basis of the ignoble ancestry and lack of respect and recognition is given to the 'indigenous' aristocracy, as well as commoners, who are treated by the Normans as livestock. In fact, the

matter of (im)proper descent seems to be the coercion factor for both the Saxons and the Normans, while the higher Church officials are recognised as an instrument of the Norman oppression and therefore oppressed equally with the secular authority.

### **Another cinematic vision – *Robin Hood* (2010)**

It took almost twenty years for the cinematic industry to present a new major adaptation of the famous story. Directed by Ridley Scott and starring Russell Crowe as Robin Longstride, it presents the story of a man who was to become a legend in a truly heroic fashion and fits in a general trend of the hero origins story quite popular in Hollywood lately (e.g. *King Arthur*, 2005). The story starts with King Richard's last battle and death, which results in the great movement of the dispersed English army through the territory of France. Accidentally, Robin becomes the carrier of the royal crown, which he passes to Prince John. The legitimacy of John's rule is not undermined in the story until his meeting with the lords insisting on introducing liberty laws. Robin himself does not oppose the king, but nevertheless expresses his liberal views in a fiery speech very much resembling the mode of William Wallace's speeches in *Braveheart* (1996).<sup>10</sup> John demands loyalty from his people, yet, as Robin points out, he is expected to give something in return to those on whom his power relies. What these common people need is "liberty by law", a change in legal system which would allow them to be independent of their sovereigns' whims. Since at this very moment the king is facing the invasion of a French king and is in great need of an army which would help him maintain the crown, he does reluctantly agree to considering the idea of what was to become the Magna Carta (1215), but very soon afterwards he rejects the project and declares Robin an outlaw. With this act, which in fact is a test of the propriety of his rule, he proves himself a tyrant in whose realm the presence of rebels is justified and deserved (Baraz 2004: 181). Another issue undermining the validity of John's rule is his choice of accomplices, which is reflected in dismissing the experienced ones only to promote Godfrey, a dubious mercenary with no permanent loyalty and national bonds, who, after being sent to collect the newly appointed or overdue taxes as an agent of royal power, terrorises and abuses the folk whenever it suits him.

Also king Richard is not a perfect king. When he explicitly asks for Robin's opinion on the piety of the Crusade, the outlaw states that this campaign was the king's defeat in both earthly and spiritual sense:

When you had us herd two and a half thousand innocent men, women, and children together; the woman at my feet, with her hands bound, she looked up at

me. It wasn't fear in her eyes, it wasn't anger. It was only pity. She knew that when you gave the order, and our blades would descend upon their heads, in that moment: we would be godless. All of us. Godless.

A similar contempt of the same historical event had been expressed almost forty years earlier in Richard Lester's *Robin and Marian* (1976):

On the 12th of July 1191 the mighty fortress of Acre fell to Richard – his one great victory in the Holy Land. He was sick in bed and never struck a blow. On the 20th of August John and I were standing on a plain outside of the city... watching, while every Muslim left alive was marched out in chains. King Richard spared the richest for ransoming, took the strong for the slaves... And he took the children and had them chopped apart. When that was done, he had the mothers killed, and they were dead – three thousand bodies on the plain. He had them opened up so that guts could be explored for gold and precious stones. Our churchmen on the scene, and there were many, took it for a triumph. [...] You ask me and I'm sick of it.

What in the 1976 retelling may have functioned as a veiled commentary on the Vietnam war, in 2010 seems to relate to the war against terror in the territories of Afghanistan and Iraq, where the common denominator for all these conflicts is their often undermined validity. Scott's choice of accentuation proves yet again that the core of the Robin Hood legend is the discourse of authority and justice, the presentation of which varies from one retelling to another. Thus, another characteristic feature of the legend, namely its flexibility and narrative potential, is again defended even when restricted by Hollywood standards, narrative clichés and the overriding need for the spectacular and the profitable. "Clearly, [...] there is more to the Robin Hood film than swashbuckling cinema plain and simple; there is also the medievalist imperative to re-examine the present in light of the past" (Harty 2000: 99).

Many people have noticed that the Robin Hood legend is a universal story with an extraordinary potential of adaptation, where the basic elements need to remain intact and easily recognisable, while the actual details make a particular version of the story a unique and original one. Yet, there is one more element which lies at the core of the medieval story – the recognition of lawful superiors and objection to the illegitimate ones, especially those who abuse their position and amount of power. The objection to unjust treatment is the essence of Robin's outlawry in the Middle Ages and beyond, as in all of the modern versions of the legend discussed above Robin is an alternative ruler, juxtaposed with those who fail or are unwilling to perform their role and duties accordingly. An issue bound to the notion of outlawry is coercion – the pressure exercised on the hero by both society in general and its

particular members, which determines his future code of conduct. The modern Robin Hood experiences coercion in the form of social and family expectations or classifications, the fates ascribed to him and simply physical abuse. These elements enable the medieval hero to serve as a mirror of the outstanding problems of the times contemporary with a particular version of the legend.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the origins of the legend and the dating of the texts see the relevant articles in Knight 1999.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed description of the source along with a relevant fragment see Knight, Ohlgren 1997: 25–26.

<sup>3</sup> “I think the real Robin, if he ever existed, must have been a cold-hearted killer and thief: a gangster, in short. Which is why in my books I have described him as a sort of Godfather of the Greenwood.”(Donald, 2009b).

<sup>4</sup> Gulla explains that when applying coercion, a person may not be aware of the underlying mechanism and therefore may be unable to assess objectively the ethical aspect of his or her deeds. (Gulla 2009: 184). Moreover, such a person excludes other methods of influencing behaviour, which, together with the coerced person’s resistance and defiance, results in the coercing and the coerced sharing the responsibility for the situation. (Gulla 2009: 185).

<sup>5</sup> According to Gulla, the experience of coercion, however, may bring results opposite to the expected ones, as the coerced may also retreat to lack of actions anticipated by the coercing, or continuation of undesired behaviour (Gulla 2009: 184). In the particular case of parent (guardian)-child relationship, aggressive coercive strategies may lead to a retaliating response, resulting ultimately in the escalation of conflict and physical violence on the side of the child (Gulla 2009: 192).

<sup>6</sup> Gulla (2009: 189) points out that the possibility of effective coercive mechanism seems to be crucial for successful governance. Children raised by parents resorting to coercion assume this kind of strategies as a regular manner of dealing with conflicts and achieving their goals, thus learning to use coercion as an advantageous tool.

<sup>7</sup> The common epithet given to outlaws is here at the same time Robin’s coat of arms, taken by him after his retreat to the forest and maintained after the King’s pardon.

<sup>8</sup> For the study of Little John’s role in the legend see Blunk 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Unless marked otherwise, this and the following transcriptions of film dialogues are my own.

<sup>10</sup> For the similarities between the legends of Robin Hood and William Wallace as presented in the cinema see Nollen (1999:201–218). Also, see Knight (2008: 111–114) for a brief account of the developments in the literary tradition.

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