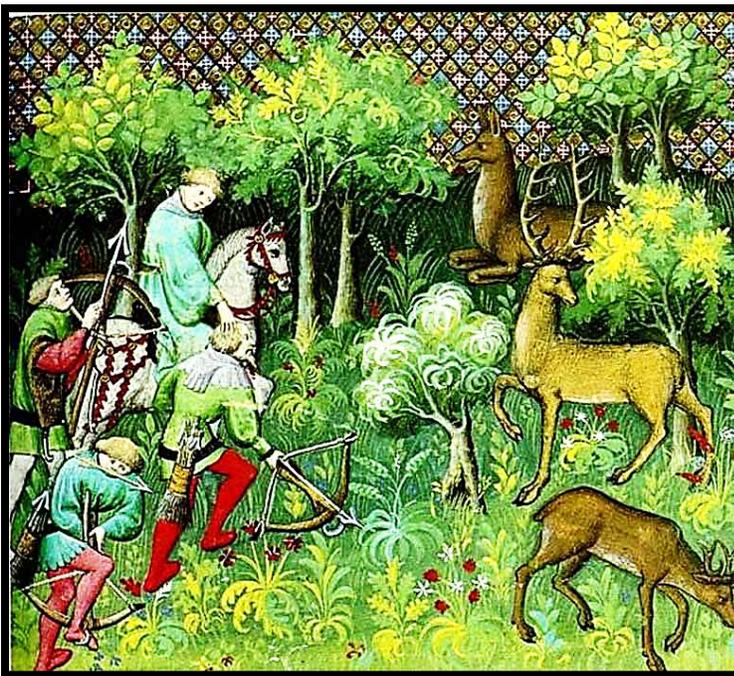




Venturing Into The Symbolic Landscape Of Robin Hood's Sherwood Forest

Jim Willis

The site of Sherwood Forest, legendary home of 'Robin Hood and his Merry Men' lies a bit more than 240 kilometers (150 miles) west of London. In the 1200s, which is usually considered by many to be the time Robin trod these woods, Sherwood covered more than 100,000 acres, roughly a fifth of the county known as Nottinghamshire. Evidence of flint tools used by pre-historic hunter-gatherers have been dug up, indicating the area has been popular for thousands of years. It had been a wooded forest ever since the end of the last glacial epoch and was considered a private royal hunting ground. Any wild game was considered the property of the king, so when a commoner killed game for his family's table, he was considered a poacher. Eating 'the king's deer' was a capital offence, punishable by severe methods, including death.



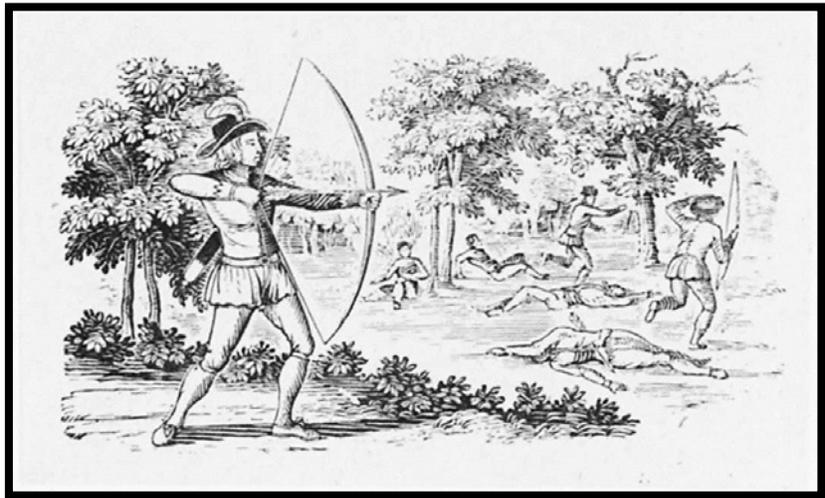
Medieval forest scene, from the Livre de chasse (1387) (Public Domain)

Running right through the middle of the forest lay the Great North Way, a highway of sorts connecting London and York. Any travelers usually went heavily armed in order to protect themselves from robbers who lived outside the law. Ever since those times, such thieves have been called 'outlaws'.

Sciryuda: Woodland Belonging To The Shire

The place was first recorded as a geographical area unto itself in 958 AD. It was called Sciryuda, which means “*the woodland belonging to the shire.*” It became a royal hunting preserve in 1066, following the Norman invasion of England, and was a favorite hunting spot of Kings John and Edward the First. The ruins of King John’s hunting lodge still stand near the village of Kings Clipstone.

In those days, ‘forest’ did not simply refer to a stand of trees. It was a legal term signifying an area subject to royal laws put in place to protect timber and wild game. A ‘forester’ did not just keep track of the health of trees. Sometimes called agisters, wardens (verderers) and rangers, these were all men hired by the Crown to patrol the area. They were well-armed, and were expected to employ even lethal force when necessary.



Altercation between Outlaws and Agisters. Woodcut from 'Robin Hood A Collection of Ancient Poems, Songs Ballads' by Joseph Ritson (1885) (Guttenberg Project)

During the time of the Roman occupation, and extending back all the way to the Iron Age, farming communities, some of which exist to this day, cleared large areas of land, so it was not all covered with trees and woods in various stages of development. Farmsteads were quite common. To this

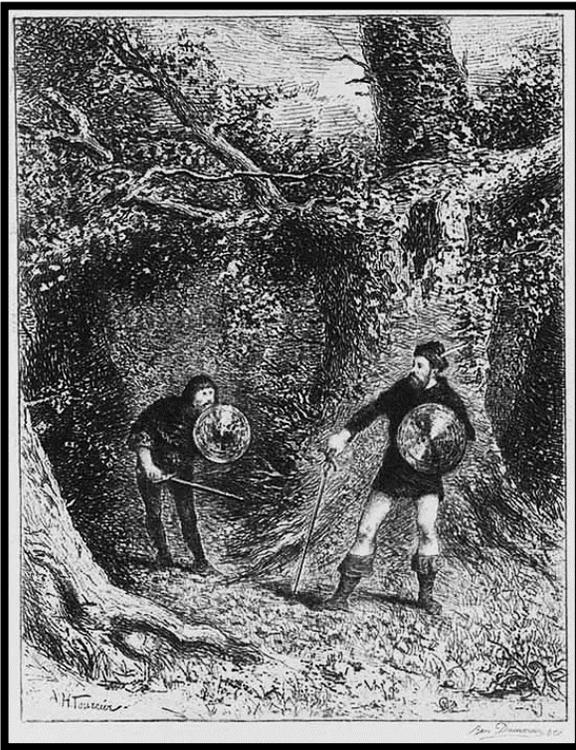


day, Scandinavian influences can be found in towns that end in the letters b and y, such as Thorresby. Danish names tend toward ending in ‘thorpe’, as in Gleadthorpe. Town names ending in ‘feld’, as in Mansfield, illustrate their Roman roots.

Woodcut of Robin Hood, from a 17th-century broadside (Public Domain)

Sherwood Forest Depreciated

The Sherwood Forest of Robin Hood's day would have been comprised of birch and oak trees, interspersed with large, rather open areas of sandy heath and grassland, perfect for grazing herds of deer—creatures of the edges more than dwellers in thick, virgin timber, which is not conducive to low growing shrubs and plants. This was productive, managed land which, when properly harvested, could provide a good living for a rural population. Dead trees and brush, called 'underwood', was gathered and either sold or used in individual dwellings. Techniques called 'coppicing' and 'pollarding' produced poles and laths for building material. Oak bark was used to tan leather. Acorns were fed to domestic pigs. Cattle and sheep shared the pasture-like glades with deer.



Robin Hood in Sherwood Forest by A.H. Tourrier in 'Robin Hood A Collection of Ancient Poems, Songs Ballads' by Joseph Ritson (1885) (Guttenberg Project)

The forest was home to more than farmsteads. By the 12th and 13th centuries, Christian monastic orders thrived on large estates provided by the Crown. Newstead, Thurgarton, and Rufford were examples of just a few of them. The market at Market Warsop is just one example. Most of these faded into history when King Henry VIII invoked what is now called *The Dissolution* in 1536. Monastic land was sold into private ownership and, over the years, usually was converted into country homes and estates. But even then, a few hundred years after the

time of Robin Hood, the peasant classes managed to hold on to a centuries-old way of life.

In 1604, King James I authorized a translation of the Bible that soon became the standard version, still in use today. But he had other interests that went beyond biblical studies. He loved to hunt in Sherwood, but his son, King Charles I, was the last to use it for that purpose. King Charles was executed during the English Civil Wars, and for a long time the forest suffered from lack of management. Two hundred years later, after large areas had been sold or given to nobles and various favorites of the court, private landlords created the estates of Thoresby, Rufford, Welbeck, Wollaton, and Newstead. The aristocratic nature of these estates drew to themselves the title of 'Dukeries', and became very profitable. Timber used in building, furniture production, and the insatiable need for ships to supply the British navy, provided the now-private owners with a good income.



Thoresby Hall, rebuilt 1868–1874 for Sydney Pierrepont, third Earl Manvers (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Robin Hood's Era Of Sherwood Forest



By 1830, the last of the official Crown's land had been sold. But to Robin Hood, all this was in the future. In his day, the forest was inhabited by outlaws, outcasts, and robbers, all hiding from the law. But according to legend, he was the greatest and most noble of them all. His story was one of freedom and justifiable thievery. If the rulers of the land took advantage of the common people, the common people felt they had the right to fight back.

Little John paying the Knight by E Buckman in 'Robin Hood A Collection of Ancient Poems, Songs Ballads' by Joseph Ritson (1885) (Guttenberg Project)

Whether or not they ever did any of the things Robin was supposed to have done, no doubt such stories fired the imagination of the common folk, and gave them all hope. This was the field that produced a bountiful harvest of swashbuckling tales and legends of heroes. But in our day, the symbolism becomes just as important. Maybe even more.

York And London Bracketing Sherwood

Between York and London, two great centers of civilization separated by some 200 miles (279 kilometers), lay the wild land of Sherwood Forest. To travel from one place to the other, you had to pass through the wilderness.



A panorama of 15th-century York by E. Ridsdale Tate. (Public Domain)

The Norman Conquest of England in 1066 had a huge impact on the village of York. The Cathedral of Minster was, in effect, re-founded. Gates and battlements built during the time of the Romans were enhanced and fortified. Two Norman castles were built to control the rivers that were the lifeblood of the town. Parish churches, royal mansions, houses, monasteries, and stone bridges were built. By the time of the Robin Hood stories, York was an economic powerhouse. In 1212 it obtained a royal charter, and a civic government was developed.

All this translates into money, which flowed into and out of the city. And the river of money flowed right through Sherwood Forest on its way south to London and Westminster. But wherever we find money, we find corruption, even in the church of that day. King John is usually referred to as 'Prince' John in the Robin Hood tales, because he was not king yet. His brother, Richard, was off fighting in the crusades. That did not stop Prince John from, for all practical purposes, usurping the crown for himself. To say he was unpopular is to put it mildly.



*King John hunting. British Library
(Public Domain)*

In March of 1201, for instance, he went to York to meet the Scottish king. The meeting never took place, but he was so disappointed in the turnout of citizens of York that he fined each and every one of them £100, “because they did not come out to meet him when he arrived at York, and that they might be quit because they did not accommodate the king’s crossbowmen, and for having acquittance of the hostages which the king exacted from them at his pleasure.”

He made annual visits between 1204 and 1210, ostensibly to purchase wine. York fishermen were warned to have a good supply of fish ready “against the coming of the king.” By 1213 Yorkshire timber was being cut to strengthen defenses, and the sheriff, who was to become one of Robin’s most infamous foes, was mounting a garrison to keep the peace. When Prince John launched a campaign to subdue the north and east country, he made York his headquarters.

During this time, England had no fixed capital city. It moved with the king. But the royal treasury and financial records were kept in Westminster, a small town just upriver from London. London, however, was on its way to becoming a center of trade.



View of London Bridge by Claude de Jongh (1632) Yale Centre for British Art (Public Domain)

In 1066, on Christmas Day, William the Conqueror had been crowned king of England at Westminster Abbey. By 1176, the first stone London Bridge had been built. Various guilds of craftsmen were established. Threadneedle Street was where the tailor's worked. Cows were kept on Milk Street. There was a great livestock market at Smithfield. London was about to boom, even though plague was a constant threat.

Bards On Bandits

To summarize all this, two big centers of economic commerce and trade were separated by Sherwood Forest. Is it any wonder that tales of outlaws and robbers began to be bandied about and set to music? It was a time of ballads, sung by troubadours, that elevated heroes who fought on the side of the common man against the economic power of the elites who sought riches from the subjects who they believed owed them allegiance.



A Bard Telling A Story: A Tale from the Decameron by John William Waterhouse. Lady Lever Art Gallery (Public Domain)

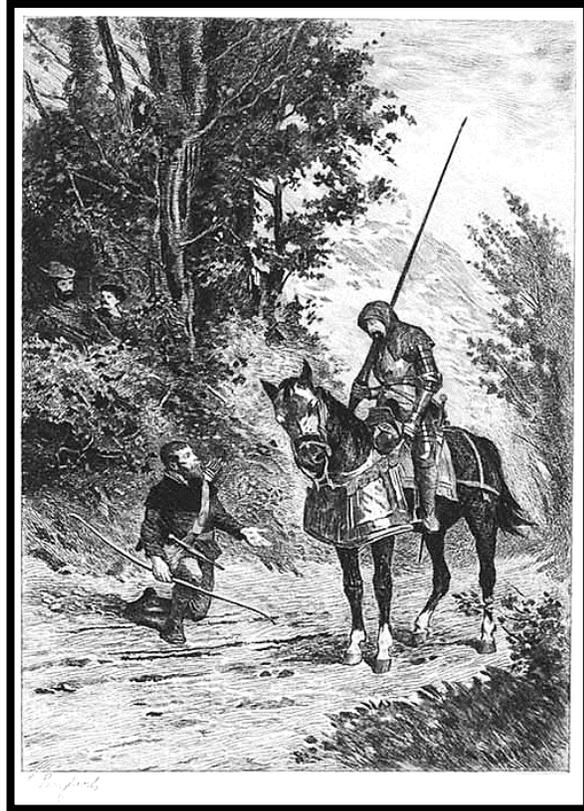
What this means is that England of the early 13th century became, through song and story, a rich ground for symbolism in

the eternal struggle between the power-hungry desires of the rich, who sought to subjugate the poor. The centers of ego-boosted urban economic commerce were pitted against the freedom of the natural world, free of class and caste. The people who formed the symbolism, and presented it in metaphor, were the bards, who wrote and sang the songs. As always, the artists were those who led the way in giving voice to the population in general. They spoke for the common folk, and their ballads live on to this day.

What was the story they told? Just this. Sherwood Forest came to represent the wild lands that gave us birth and nurtured us for millennia after millennia. But we, as a species, grew away from Mother Earth. We gravitated out from our life-supporting center, the womb of our existence. We began to seek after power and economic gain, symbolized by the two opposite poles of London and York. It is no accident that, according to the Bible, the first 'outlaw', Cain, who murdered his brother, immediately went out and built a city. Cities are built on commerce. Commerce is easily perverted into avenues of personal greed. People naturally engage in commerce in order to make money. But, again according to the Bible, "*the love of money is the root of all evil.*" When is enough, enough? Far too often, when someone makes a lot of money, they want to make more. The temptation is to continue on after we make a fortune, not stop.

The Courtesy of Little John from 'Robin Hood A Collection of Ancient Poems, Songs Ballads' by Joseph Ritson (1885) (Guttenberg Project)

But for purposes of the Robin Hood saga, we need to look not so much at the economic realities as the ego-centered people behind them—the ones who profited off the labor of others, often by threat of violence. At the heart of it all lay the pathological narcissism of those in power who wanted even more power. Rich people who wanted more money. Comfortable people who wanted more comforts. Ego-centered rulers who would not stop until they lived the lives of gods on earth.



Voltaire once said: *“The best government is a benevolent tyranny tempered by an occasional assassination.”* He was right. Benevolent monarchies work about as well as any form of government. That is why Christians await the coming of the Messiah, who will institute a benevolent theocracy on earth. But throughout history, such governments have been few and far between, and they never last very long. For every ‘good King Richard’ there is an ‘evil Prince John’, waiting in the wings.

Terra Incognita

Between York and London, however, the two symbolic centers of greed and power, there lay the mysteries of the wildland—Sherwood Forest. Once you ventured outside the shell of civilization, you entered terra incognita. Or perhaps we should say re-entered, because this, you will remember, is the natural world, the world that gave us birth, the world we left behind to build our cities and establish our forms of government and commerce.

Out there in the wild is where humans developed for thousands upon thousands of years. There is where we became a people. Civilization, remember, is only about 12,000 years old, if that. For at least 200,000 years before the first city was built, the wilderness was our home. If anything, the wild is reality. Cities are a temporary aberration. But when we left the wild, when we moved indoors and built walls around ourselves, we quickly forgot how to live in reality. The wild became a fearful place. It was no longer our home, our womb, our place of nurture. In the city, meat comes wrapped in cellophane packages. Milk comes in cartons; vegetables in cans. No longer do we feel at home in the environment that gave us birth. It is foreign to us; a fearful place.



*Robin Hood and Maid Marian living in the wildlands
(Public Domain)*

But one man's fears are another man's freedom. Robin Hood became popular because he left the comforts of civilization. He was shoved out into the wild, where most men would have soon shriveled up and died. Instead, he thrived on it, all the while demonstrating a confidence that at times bordered on arrogance. When the law became a perverted force of power employed by the rich and powerful, he moved outside the system. He became an 'out-law'. He took the cards he was dealt, and played them with style and grace. Where others would have perished, he became a hero.

In short, he trumped the cultural system built by ego-centered, power-hungry, narcissists, and

lived life on his own terms. He made up his own rules, and they had to do with remaining loyal to the rightful king, rewarding friendships and honorable behavior, and championing those who needed his help.

Perhaps that is the first and best lesson we can take from the Robin Hood sagas. They teach us how to live when, usually quite by accident, we discover that we, too, have ventured out of our own reality. At such times we find ourselves siphoned off, working our lives away at dead-end jobs, in order to squeeze by while those above us on the social scale profit from our labor. We wonder how it happened. Who created a world where everything we do depends on our having a job and a boss, whether we like it or not? Without employment, we have no way of providing for our own health. We have no way of buying a home or a car. We cannot provide food for our family's table.



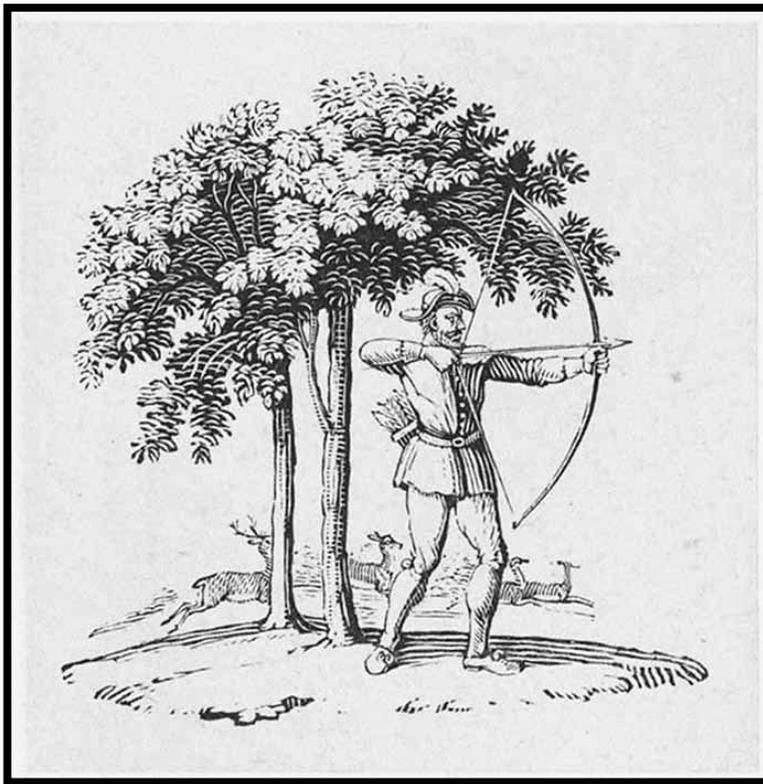
*The Banquet by A.H. Tourrier in 'Robin Hood A Collection of
Ancient Poems, Songs Ballads' by Joseph Ritson (1885)
(Guttenberg Project)*

It did not used to be that way. Way back, when our species was much younger, people knew how to provide for themselves. That is no longer the case. And as much as we might want to drop out and go it alone, economic and social forces have made it almost impossible to do so.

How many of us have daydreamed about moving to a desert island, or venturing forth into the wilderness to live off the land? How often have we read about Robinson Crusoe, the Swift Family Robinson, Jeremiah Johnson, Daniel Boone, or one of the many stories that have grown up about people who simply decided they had enough, and sailed, trekked, or simply wandered off into the wild.

The wild has become a fearful place to most of us. We walk up to the edge, stare into the unknown, and then, too often, turn meekly away and retreat back to our hemmed-in existence. The romance of Robin Hood is that he took the extra step. He remains an inspiration for everyone

who would like to do what he did, and do it with his style.



Robin Hood in 'Robin Hood A Collection of Ancient Poems, Songs Ballads' by Joseph Ritson (1885) (Guttenberg Project)

Whether or not he ever actually ever achieved the adventures credited to him really does not matter. What is important is the essence of the story. But remember that in order to achieve what he did, we have to dare our own symbolic Sherwood Forest—the place that lies at

the center of the two opposite metaphorical poles of York and London. There comes a time when we need to learn new skills, new ways of approaching life, new methods of operation, new ways of thinking. And the place to learn all that is the place that originally gave us birth. It is a wild place, full of fearsome beasts, untamed people, and mysteries. But there were many who dared to do just that—to join Robin out in the wild, learn from him, and live in freedom. It was no accident that history refers to these brave lads as merry, not sad and defeated. They were Robin's 'Band of Merry Men'.

Where is your Sherwood Forest? What do you need to learn in order to live there? How much courage do you have, especially on those long dark nights when you lie awake, contemplating what has become of your life? At such times you need to remember that out there in the wilderness, free from the ego-centered rules of those who would hem you in, there still lies a wild land of mystery. It is different for each of us. But it is there. And it beckons us forward.

This article is excerpted from Jim Willis's upcoming book, "Ego and the Hero (Robin Hood: Victory Through Defiance.)" Published in 2022.

Top Image: Medieval scene. Robin Hood story. (Matrioshka /