

# THE VIRGIN MARY AND THE ‘GOOD OUTLAW’: AN ANALYSIS OF THE VIRGIN MARY’S PROTECTION OF ROBIN HOOD AND HIS CHRIST-LIKE ROLE IN THE EARLY BALLADS

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## ABSTRACT

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Though Robin Hood’s devotion to the Virgin Mary and her returned protection of Robin Hood in the early ballads is well-established and widely acknowledged by scholars, its profound implications remain highly unexplored. Through a detailed analysis of key ballads such as “A Gest of Robyn Hode” and “Robin Hood and the Monk,” this paper examines how Robin Hood’s symbolic representation of Jesus Christ in the early Robin Hood ballads constructs his maternal relationship with the Virgin Mary, who utilizes her sovereign, supernatural power to protect Robin Hood in return for his devotion. Through a series of parallels between Robin Hood and Jesus Christ, including their manner of death and martyrdom, defiance against corrupt authorities, and commitment to aiding the impoverished, the early ballads establish Robin Hood and Jesus Christ as “good outlawe[s],” devout men alienated from the institutionalized religion of their time. These parallels inform the Virgin Mary’s repeated protection of Robin Hood, her son, throughout the early ballads, manifesting the widespread belief that the Virgin Mary was paramount in the Catholic pantheon in medieval England. By considering the popularity of Marian Miracles stories in late medieval England, many of which feature the Virgin Mary protecting pious outlaws from death, this paper discovers how Robin Hood’s construction as a Christ-like figure, or a “good outlawe,” and his resulting maternal relationship with the Virgin Mary reflects the state of religious unrest plaguing the English people on the eve of the Reformation.

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“Thre messis wolde he here. // The one in the worship of the Fader, / And another of the Holy Gost, / The thirde of Our dere Lady, / That he loved allther moste.”<sup>1</sup> Robin Hood’s devotion to the Virgin Mary throughout the early ballads, including “A Gest of Robyn Hode” and “Robin Hood and the Monk,” is indisputable and thus nearly universally acknowledged by scholars who have analyzed these early works. By replacing “the son,” Jesus Christ, with “Our dere Lady” whom he “loved allther moste” Robin Hood reconstructs the Holy Trinity to reflect his faithfulness to the Virgin Mary, a faithfulness that the Virgin Mary returns by repeatedly protecting Robin Hood. Accordingly, Robin Hood only agrees to loan the knight, Sir Richard, when he proposes the Virgin Mary as security. When Robin Hood worries his money will not be returned, the Virgin Mary ultimately sends him his pay, or, as Robin says, “Our Lady, by her selerer, / Hath sent to me my pay” through the monk.<sup>2</sup> Yet, a lesser-known explanation exists for Robin Hood’s devotion to the Virgin Mary and his resulting revision of the Holy Trinity: Robin Hood himself is a representation of Christ in the early ballads. His very title, “Robyn Hode,” implies his position in the Holy Trinity, as “hode” is defined in the Middle English Dictionary (MED) as “One of the Persons of the Trinity.” Robin Hood symbolically replaces “the Son” in the Trinity to express his devotion to his mother, the Virgin Mary, in return for her protection, establishing himself as the Son, a representation of Jesus Christ. Robin Hood’s embodiment of Jesus Christ formulates him as a “good outlaw:” a sympathetic, non-secular albeit devoutly religious figure who stands in opposition to corrupt religious authorities. The Virgin Mary’s protection of Robin Hood thus not only demonstrates her sovereign supernatural power but accordingly establishes a maternal relationship between Robin Hood and the Virgin Mary, constructing Robin Hood as a symbolic representation of her Son, Jesus Christ, in the early ballads.

The 15th-century ballad “A Gest of Robyn Hode” concludes by illustrating the titular outlaw Robin Hood as nearly unrecognizable from Jesus Christ, presenting a parallelism consistent across the early Robin Hood ballads. The final lines, “Cryst have mercy on his soule, / That dyded on the Rode! / For he was a good outlawe, / And dyde pore men moch god,” invokes both Robin Hood and Jesus Christ, suggesting that either could be “good outlawe” described at the end of the ballad.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, both Robin Hood and Christ are good outlaws. Christ is “numbered with the transgressors” and “ma[kes] intercession for the transgressors,” much as Robin Hood leads and makes intercession for The Merry Men, a group of outlaws.<sup>4</sup> Robin Hood acts as an intercessor, or mediator, for his band of outlaws while meeting with the king, as Christ does for sinners, or transgressors, with God. Both men do “pore men much god,” Robin Hood, by assisting Sir Richard, an honest, impoverished man who

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Ohlgren, eds., “A Gest of Robyn Hode,” ballad, in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), lines 32-36.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 1083-1084.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 1821-1824.

<sup>4</sup> *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), Isaiah 53:12.

surrendered his fortune to protect his son and Jesus, by similarly assisting the impoverished, including a woman who exhausted her fortune on doctors who could not heal her illness.

Robin Hood and Jesus similarly abide by their own moral code, alienating themselves from the often corrupt authorities of their time with the intention of doing “pore men moch god.” Jesus Christ is accused of transgressing the law by misleading the nation, opposing taxes to Caesar, and professing to be the Messiah,<sup>5</sup> not unlike the monk’s claim against Robin Hood that he is a “kynngis felon,” or “king’s felon,”<sup>6</sup> meaning that Robin Hood “breach[es] the king’s peace by opposing the law.”<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, both Robin Hood’s and Jesus Christ’s direct refusal to adhere to the command of the religious and secular authorities of their time results in their betrayal by Judas and the Prioress, respectively, and their inevitable death and martyrdom.

Robin Hood’s construction as a Christ-like figure in the early Robin Hood ballads, especially “A Gest of Robyn Hode” and “Robin Hood and the Monk,” however, do not only establish Robin Hood as a “good outlaw” but also explains his intense devotion to the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, and her returned protection of him until his death. The Virgin Mary protects Robin Hood financially by serving as a borrow when he loans Sir Richard of the Lee 400 pounds, ultimately delivering Robin Hood his repayment through the monk. She similarly protects Robin Hood physically by ensuring he safely escapes jail after the monk reports him to the sheriff while he is at mass. These instances construct the Virgin Mary as a protector of her son, establishing a maternal relationship between Robin Hood and the Virgin Mary, much like that of Christ and the Virgin Mary. However, by establishing the Virgin Mary’s maternal, protective role in relation to her son, the early Robin Hood ballads also suggest that the Virgin Mary possesses a sovereign protective power surpassing that of her son.

Though prior scholarship has certainly explored Robin Hood’s intense devotion to the Virgin Mary and her returned protection of Robin Hood, most studies only mention his devotion to mass and the Virgin Mary in passing, as demonstrated by the singular line indexed in *Robin Hood Legend and Reality* by David Crook under ‘Virgin Mary’: “We are told that Robin, because of his veneration for the Virgin Mary, will not attack any company containing women.”<sup>8</sup> Minimal scholarship has considered how the Virgin Mary’s protection of Robin Hood reflects her sovereign, supernatural power. As Carroll discusses in his paper “The Early Robin Hood and ‘The Myght of Mylde Marye’: Revisiting the Lived Experience of Catholicism in Late Medieval England,” despite many English historians’ suggestions that English Catholics most revered Christ in medieval England and that Mary

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<sup>5</sup> *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), Luke 23:2.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Ohlgren, eds., “Robin Hood and the Monk,” ballad, in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), line 85.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-86n.

<sup>8</sup> David Crook, *Robin Hood: Legend and Reality* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2020), 21.

was seen as a mere intercessor without any independent power, the early ballads of Robin Hood demonstrate not only that the Virgin Mary does possess sovereign power, but also that her power outranks that of her Son, Jesus Christ.

Moreover, little scholarship has recognized how the Virgin Mary's pattern of allegiance to devoted sinners and outlaws in many medieval miracle stories, such as the *Golden Legend*, informs her allegiance to Robin Hood in the early Robin Hood ballads. Though Lesley Coote, in her book *Storyworlds of Robin Hood The Origins of a Medieval Outlaw*, refers to the Virgin Mary as "an equalizer" who "works...through Robin Hood and his outlaws, for example in the case of Sir Richard, whose son is just such a victim, trapped by his lowly social status in relation to his accuser" to enact justice "in a cruel world where right, wrong, justice, and injustice may be treated indiscriminately by both society and the law," she does not consider the countless parallels between Robin Hood and Christ throughout the early ballads, which suggest that Robin Hood is not simply a "trusted servant" that the Virgin Mary works "through," but rather her son, who she protects and works *with*.<sup>9</sup> Coote is correct that the Virgin Mary "will accept no repentance" for the killing (or attempted killing) of Robin Hood and protects her own [Robin Hood] with the ultimate sanctions available to her."<sup>10</sup> However, the Virgin Mary's dedication to Robin Hood is better explained by a maternal relationship rather than a servile one.

Robin Hood demonstrates his devotion to the Virgin Mary countless times in "A Gest of Robyn Hode," however he explicitly establishes his trust in the Virgin Mary as a protector early in the Gest when he agrees to loan Sir Richard 400 pounds only after he pledges his loyalty to the Virgin Mary, offering her as a "borrowe," or security for the loan. Initially, Sir Richard offers "God that dyed on tree"<sup>11</sup> as a "borrowe," to which Robin Hood responds, "'Fynde me a better borowe...Or money getest thou none.'"<sup>12</sup> However, when the knight suggests "Our dere Lady,"<sup>13</sup> the Virgin Mary, Robin Hood enthusiastically answers: "Yet fonde I never to my pay / A moche better borowe."<sup>14</sup> Robin Hood thus offers Sir Richard his assistance only after he expresses his devotion to the Virgin Mary by suggesting her as security. He outright rejects "God," or Christ, as a borrow, even dismissing the knight's suggestion as "japis" or jokes.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Lesley Coote, *Storyworlds of Robin Hood The Origins of a Medieval Outlaw* (London, England: Reaktion Books, 2020), 95-99.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Ohlgren, eds., "A Gest of Robyn Hode," ballad, in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), line 248.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 255-256.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, line 259.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 263-264.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, line 249.

Though Robin Hood scholars frequently cite a story in which God is provided as a borrow for a loan as a potential source that influenced the *Gest*, the shift from God to the Virgin Mary is significant.<sup>16</sup> In the original source, a nobleman holds a burgess's son for ransom, but his family will not pay the nobleman. As a result, the son claims he will obtain the money himself if the nobleman releases him, offering the Lord God as his borrow. Though the story clearly resembles the *Gest*, as Carroll proposes, the shift from "God" to the Virgin Mary as a borrow is striking, especially considering that Robin Hood rejects God as security entirely.<sup>17</sup> Robin Hood's acceptance of only the Virgin Mary as security thus demonstrates his trust in her sovereign protective power, establishing it as an entity both separate from and more powerful than that of God. Moreover, Robin Hood's replacement and rejection of "God that dyed on tree" for the Virgin Mary becomes even more salient considering the parallels between Robin Hood and Jesus Christ constructed throughout the ballad. Because Robin Hood represents Christ, he cannot accept "himself" as security for his own loan, which clarifies his incredulous response to the knight's suggestion. Robin Hood's acceptance of the Virgin Mary as security, considering his role in the *Gest* as a symbolic representation of Christ, thus corroborates their maternal relationship and her role as a protector of her son.

Robin Hood's reconstruction of the Holy Trinity reflects his devotion to the Virgin Mary, affirming her sovereign protective power and solidifying Robin Hood as a representation of Jesus Christ. The narrator of "A Gest of Robyn Hode" describes, "Thre messis wolde [Robin Hood] here. / The one in the worship of the Fader, / And another of the Holy Gost, / The thirde of Our dere Lady, / That he loved allther moste."<sup>18</sup> By attending three masses a day, Robin Hood demonstrates his piety, which was not uncommon for many individuals in medieval England. However, by substituting "the Son" in the Holy Trinity with "Our dere Lady," the Virgin Mary, Robin Hood suggests that he esteems her above Christ. Furthermore, by prioritizing honoring, or praying to, the Virgin Mary above not only Christ but also "the Fader" and "the Holy Gost," Robin Hood exhibits his particular trust in the Virgin Mary as a protector, implying that she possesses a supernatural power not only distinct but also potentially greater than that of God. Though Gray claims that Robin Hood's reconstruction of the Holy Trinity may have been done to elicit "surprise" on behalf of the audience,<sup>19</sup> Carroll's suggestion that Robin Hood, like many Catholics of his time, considered the Virgin Mary "pre-eminent in the

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas H. Ohlgren, *Robin Hood: The Early Poems, 1465–1560 – Texts, Contexts and Ideology* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007), 153–154.

<sup>17</sup> Michael P. Carroll, "The Early Robin Hood and 'The Myght of Mylde Marye': Revisiting the Lived Experience of Catholicism in Late Medieval England," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 43, no. 1 (January 15, 2014): 116–34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0008429813513231>, 130–131.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Ohlgren, eds., "A Gest of Robyn Hode," ballad, in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), lines 31–36.

<sup>19</sup> Douglas Gray, "The Robin Hood Poems," in *Robin Hood: An Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism*, ed. Stephen Knight (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999), 27.

Catholic pantheon,” and believed that “Mary had independent power that far exceeded that of her Son” is a more evident interpretation.<sup>20</sup>

However, Robin Hood does not simply reflect the worldview of his medieval Catholic audience but embodies it by standing in as Jesus Christ in the early ballads. Robin Hood’s surname, “Hode,” in “A Gest of Robyn Hode,” is defined in the Middle English Dictionary (MED) as “One of the Persons of the Trinity.” The MED cites the following excerpt, where “had” is a form of “hode,” as a usage of “hode” to indicate “One of the persons of the Trinity”: “Godd..þet rixleð in þreo had & þah is an untweamet.” The text roughly translates to “God, who rules in three persons, and yet is indivisible.” Robin Hood’s name thus denotes his role as one of the “persons” or “members” of the Holy Trinity. By replacing Jesus Christ, “the Son,” with the Virgin Mary, Robin Hood symbolically positions himself as “the Son,” establishing his maternal relationship; he thus remakes the Holy Trinity to reflect his devotion to his mother and protector, the Virgin Mary. Considering Robin Hood represents Christ within the text, his reconstruction of the Holy Trinity to revere his mother reiterates the widespread Catholic belief that the Virgin Mary has independent power that can surpass Christ’s. By praying to the Virgin Mary and seeking her protection, Robin Hood implies that the Virgin Mary utilizes her ability to answer prayers, exercising her sovereign, supernatural power to protect even her Son, Christ himself.

Beyond Robin Hood’s last name and reconstruction of the Holy Trinity, various parallels within the early ballads construct Robin Hood as a symbolic representation of Christ. Most markedly, both figures are considered “outlaws” or lawbreakers who alienate themselves from religious and legal authorities by enacting their own moral code. In Isaiah 53:12, Jesus Christ is described to be “numbered with the transgressors:” “Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”<sup>21</sup> Likewise, Robin Hood and his men are described as “outlaw[s],” a synonym of “transgressor.” A transgressor, according to the Cambridge English Dictionary, is “a person who breaks a law or moral rule,” whereas, an “outlaw” is “A person excluded from legal protection and rights.... the term ‘outlaw’d was applied to anyone who had committed a serious crime.”<sup>22</sup> Both Robin Hood and Jesus are thus individuals who exist beyond the law, or otherwise challenge the law. Furthermore, much as Jesus Christ acts as an “intercessor” for the “transgressors” with God, Robin Hood makes intercession for “The Merry Men,” his group of outlaws, with the king. When Robin Hood kneels before the king, “so

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<sup>20</sup> Michael P. Carroll, “The Early Robin Hood and ‘The Myght of Mylde Marye’: Revisiting the Lived Experience of Catholicism in Late Medieval England,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 43, no. 1 (January 15, 2014): 130, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0008429813513231>, 130-131.

<sup>21</sup> *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), Isaiah 53:12.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Ohlgren, eds., “A Gest of Robyn Hode,” ballad, in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), 5n.

dyde all the wylde outlawes,” following his example.<sup>23</sup> Robin Hood acts as both a leader and an example for his men, as Christ is for his apostles, and for the “transgressors,” or sinners, who follow him.

Robin Hood ultimately serves as a mediator between the outlaws and the king, making peace with him by saying, “I aske mercy, my lorde the kynge, / And for my men I crave,” to which the king responds, “Yes, for God.”<sup>24</sup> Notably, the king also asks for “mercy” from Robin Hood, asking, “‘Mercy then, Robyn,’ sayd our kynge, / ‘Under your trystyll-tre, / Of thy goodnesse and thy grace / For my men and me!’”<sup>25</sup> Robin Hood thus acts as an intercessor for both his men and the king, as Jesus makes intercession for the “transgressors.” The king’s description of Robin Hood’s “goodness” and “grace,” terms typically associated with Jesus Christ, despite his outlawry, establish Robin Hood’s moral authority and his role as a Christ-like figure capable of proffering forgiveness and establishing peace. Notably, the king also asks Robin Hood for mercy under his “tre,” alluding to Christ’s cross. In the MED, “tre” is defined as “in legends: the tree used for Christ’s cross,” and the term is consistently utilized throughout the *Gest* as such.<sup>26</sup> The imagery of the “tre” alludes to Jesus Christ’s crucifixion and the intercession he makes with God on behalf of the thief, or “transgressor,” who is crucified beside him. When the repentant thief asks for Jesus to “remember [him]” when Jesus goes into his “kingdom,” Jesus responds, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise,” forgiving the thief for his sins, and making intercession with God.<sup>27</sup> The intercession that occurs at Jesus Christ’s “tre” and Robin Hood’s “tre” thus resemble one another; both Christ and Robin Hood act as intercessors, demonstrating their “goodnesse” and “grace” and showing “mercy” to “transgressors,” or sinners.

Perhaps the most evident merging of Robin Hood as Jesus Christ occurs in the final stanza of “A Gest of Robyn Hode,” as Robin Hood bleeds out and ultimately dies due to the Prioress’ betrayal. In lines 1821-1824, the narrator exclaims, “Cryst have mercy on his soule, / That dyded on the Rode! / For he was a good outlawe, / And dyde pore men moch god.” The vague pronoun “he” in these final lines is interchangeable, indicating that either Robin Hood or “Cryst...That dyded on the Rode” could be the “good outlawe” the narrator refers to. The word “dyde” is repeated within the final stanza and contains multiple meanings associated with both death and doing good, evincing the martyrdom of both Robin Hood and Jesus Christ. According to the MED, “dyde” can denote “An action, a deed; god,” “a marvelous act, miracle,” and “Of persons, animals, bodies, parts of bodies: dead, no longer alive.” The term is explicitly implemented in all three contexts within the final stanza simultaneously.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 1640-1641.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 651-653.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 645-648.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 248, 316, 404, 438, 492, 586, 1212, 1226, 1362.

<sup>27</sup> *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), Luke 23:43.

Jesus Christ and Robin Hood both die, both commit good “deeds” by “doing pore men much gode,” and both are ultimately martyred.

The very similarity in the manner of death of both figures underscores the interchangeability of Robin Hood and Jesus Christ within the text. As the Prioress “betrayed” Robin Hood,<sup>28</sup> Judas “betray[s]” Jesus Christ.<sup>29</sup> Both men trust their betrayers and consider them kin or friends. The Prioress is described as Robin Hood’s “kynne,”<sup>30</sup> and Jesus describes Judas as someone he shares an intimate friendship with, declaring, “The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me.”<sup>31</sup> Both men die by wounds and lacerations: Robin Hood by “leten blode”<sup>32</sup> and Jesus by crucifixion, with nails driven through his hands and feet,<sup>33</sup> and a spear pierced in his side.<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, the final lines of the Gest exemplify the parallels in Robin Hood and Jesus Christ’s manners of death, establishing their martyrdom and thus corroborating their characterization as “good outlawe[s].”

Robin Hood and Jesus Christ are indeed “good outlawes.” They adhere to their own moral code, estranging themselves from the corrupt authorities of their time with the intention of doing “pore men moch god.” Robin Hood, for instance, supplies the honest knight in “A Gest of Robyn Hode” with 400 pounds when he discovers the knight only possesses ten shillings and is at risk of losing all his property to bail his son, who killed a knight in a joust.<sup>35</sup> As Little John, Robin Hood’s second-in-command, explains, Robin Hood provides “alumus to helpe a gentyll knyght, / That is fal in poverté,”<sup>36</sup> much as Jesus Christ assists the poor in the Bible, such as an ill, impoverished woman who spent all her fortune on doctors who could not heal her. When the ill woman touches Jesus’ cloak, it heals her, and Jesus turns to her and says, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.”<sup>37</sup> Both Robin Hood and Jesus Christ assist the poor in return for a display of honesty. Robin Hood questions the knight about how much money he possesses to determine whether his story is true, which Lesley Coote describes as “a form of secularized confession.”<sup>38</sup> The

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<sup>28</sup> Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Ohlgren, eds., “A Gest of Robyn Hode,” ballad, in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), line 1819.

<sup>29</sup> *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), Matthew 26:21-25.

<sup>30</sup> Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Ohlgren, eds., “A Gest of Robyn Hode,” ballad, in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), line 1804.

<sup>31</sup> *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), Matthew 26:21-25.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Ohlgren, eds., “A Gest of Robyn Hode,” ballad, in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), line 1816.

<sup>33</sup> *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), see Matthew 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:33; John 19:18.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, John 19:34.

<sup>35</sup> Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Ohlgren, eds., “A Gest of Robyn Hode,” ballad, in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), lines 209-216.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 275-276.

<sup>37</sup> *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), Mark 5:24-34.

<sup>38</sup> Lesley Coote, *Storyworlds of Robin Hood The Origins of a Medieval Outlaw* (London, England: Reaktion Books, 2020), 102.



knight's confession is not unlike that of the impoverished woman in the Bible, who "came and fell at [Jesus'] feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth" about touching his cloak.<sup>39</sup> In response to her honesty, Jesus provides his blessing. Ultimately, Jesus Christ and Robin Hood provide their support and resources to those in need, demonstrating their "good[ness]."

Yet, for all their "good[ness]," Jesus Christ and Robin Hood remain "outlawes." Both men challenge the law and the corrupt authorities of their time while attempting to help the misfortunate and enact their own moral authority. In Luke 23:1-12, Jesus is accused of transgressing the law: "Then the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying, 'We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Messiah, a king.'" Accordingly, the same quality that renders Jesus Christ an outlaw, his "king[ship]," renders him "good." Jesus heals the impoverished woman because she believes in him and his "kingdom," and the penitent thief is similarly absolved of his sins because he expresses a similar belief in Jesus's "kingdom." As he undermines authority, Jesus Christ also helps those in need, rendering him a "good outlawe," like Robin Hood. Jesus Christ is accused of a form of theft—refusing to pay taxes and thus undermining the crown. Robin Hood is referred to as "kynngis felon," or "king's felon,"<sup>40</sup> by the monk in "Robin Hood and the Monk," meaning that he "breach[es] the king's peace by opposing the law."<sup>41</sup> However, the authorities whom Robin Hood steals from, specifically the monks in "A Gest of Robyn Hode" and "Robin Hood and the Monk," are both highly corrupt figures whose clear breaches of integrity position Robin Hood as a moral authority, establishing him as a "good outlaw" like Jesus Christ.

The parallels between Robin Hood and Jesus Christ thus construct Robin Hood's maternal relationship with the Virgin Mary, who protects Robin Hood as her son while he steals from corrupt religious authorities such as the monk in "A Gest of Robyn Hode." As discussed previously, Robin Hood entrusts the Virgin Mary as a "borrow" in order to loan the impoverished knight 400 pounds. Ultimately, the Virgin Mary exercises her sovereign protective power to deliver Robin Hood his "pay" through a dishonest monk. The monk lies about how much money he carries, claiming only to possess "twenty marke."<sup>42</sup> However, when Little John examines the monk's coffers, he finds "Eyght hundred pounde and more."<sup>43</sup> Little John reacts by saying to Robin Hood: "'Syr,' he sayd, 'the monke is trewe ynowe, / Out Lady hath doubled your cast.'"<sup>44</sup> When Robin Hood steals the monk's money, he

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<sup>39</sup> *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), Mark 5:24-34.

<sup>40</sup> Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Ohlgren, eds., "Robin Hood and the Monk," ballad, in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), line 85.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-86n.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Ohlgren, eds., "A Gest of Robyn Hode," ballad, in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), line 971.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, line 988.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 991-992.

acknowledges it as “pay” delivered to them from the Virgin Mary through the monk, “For he [the monk] is of her abbay,” the Abbey of St. Mary’s.<sup>45</sup> The Virgin Mary thus supports Robin Hood, effectively acting as security for Robin Hood’s loan to aid the knight to the detriment of a dishonorable clergy member. She not only serves as a financial protector but also supports Robin Hood’s “good outlaw[ry],” prompting him to transgress the law by stealing from the dishonest monk in order to aid the honest knight. Ironically, Little John highlights the monk’s “trewe[ness],” which Robin Hood attributes to the Virgin Mary, saying, “Our Lady is the trewest woman / That ever yet founde I me.”<sup>46</sup> According to the MED, “trewe” is defined as both “Steadfast in fidelity to friends, kin, country, etc., loyal” and “The payment in money, goods, etc. owed.” As such, the Virgin Mary demonstrates her “trewe[ness],” or loyalty to Robin Hood, by delivering his payment through the dishonest monk. Though the monk himself is not “trewe,” the Virgin Mary exerts her own “trewe[ness]” through him as a vessel to protect her son. Ultimately, the Virgin Mary exerts her sovereign protective power to support Robin Hood as a “good outlawe,” much like Jesus Christ, fulfilling a maternal role.

The Virgin Mary similarly protects Robin Hood in “Robin Hood and the Monk” after Robin Hood steals from another corrupt monk who reports Robin Hood to the sheriff while he is praying, thus violating the ancient privilege of sanctuary.<sup>47</sup> Robin Hood demonstrates his devotion to the Virgin Mary, praying for her maternal protection, when he enters the Saint Mary’s church in Nottingham: “Whan Robyn came to Notyngham, / Sertenly withouten layn, / He prayed to God and myld Mary / To bryng hym out save agayn.”<sup>48</sup> The narrator emphasizes the Virgin Mary’s repeated protection of Robin Hood by emphasizing “agayn” by rhyming it with “layn.” By rhyming these two words, the narrator suggests the Robin Hood’s integrity contributes to his continued protection. Robin Hood’s honesty, despite his outlawry, juxtaposes the monks’ dishonesty, foreshadowing the monk’s ultimate death. Robin Hood’s evident devotion to his mother, the Virgin Mary, contrasts the malice of the monk who, despite being a member of the clergy, violates the ancient privilege of sanctuary by betraying Robin Hood while he attends mass. Ironically, despite his transgressions of the law, Robin Hood displays greater religiosity than the monk, who violates religious law in order to betray Robin Hood. Like Jesus Christ, Robin Hood is ultimately a “good outlawe” betrayed by religious authorities despite his piety. Thus, the Virgin Mary exercises her sovereign power to protect Robin Hood as her son, even to the detriment of corrupt religious authorities.

The Virgin Mary thus protects Robin Hood after he is captured by the sheriff, exercising her sovereign protective power through Little John, who ultimately slays the monk and rescues Robin

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, line 944.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 995-996.

<sup>47</sup> Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Ohlgren, eds., “Robin Hood and the Monk,” ballad, in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), 83-86n.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 67-70.

Hood from prison. Little John attributes Robin Hood's welfare to his intimate relationship with the Virgin Mary, reassuring the Merry Men, "He [Robin Hood] has servyd Oure Lady many a day,/And yet wil, securly; / Therfor I trust in hir specialy / No wyckud deth shal he dye."<sup>49</sup> The alliteration of *s* sounds on the words "servyed," "securly," "specialy," and "shall" emphasize how Robin Hood's continual devotion to the Virgin Mary ensures his future safety. By transitioning from the past to the future tense, Little John suggests how Robin Hood's continued devotion to his mother will guarantee his future protection on her behalf, even at the expense of the monk.

As Coote describes in her book, the monk is "guilty of trying to kill [Robin Hood], which in her eyes is an unforgivable sin."<sup>50</sup> The Virgin Mary thus acts accordingly, working through Little John as she did through the monk in "A Gest of Robyn Hode" to protect Robin Hood. She ultimately "protects her own [Robin Hood] with the ultimate sanctions available to her;"<sup>51</sup> Little John kills the monk by "smot[ing]" his "hed"<sup>52</sup> after declaring, "And I shal be the munkis gyde, / With the myght of mylde Mary."<sup>53</sup> Little John thus attributes his "taking care of" or killing the monk to "the myght of mylde Mary," indicating that the Virgin Mary employs Little John as a vessel for her sovereign power in order to protect Robin Hood as her son— a symbolic representation of Jesus Christ within the ballad. Little John's utilization of the noun "myght," which the MED defines as "(a) supernatural power of God, a god, a devil; miraculous power; also, mighty one, the Almighty," implicates that the power the Virgin Mary exerts through Little John to protect Robin Hood is a sovereign, godly power belonging exclusively to the Virgin Mary. Ultimately, the Virgin Mary's power enables Little John to save Robin Hood by killing the monk and "gat[ing] Robyn Hode out of prison."<sup>54</sup> Considering Robin Hood's characterization as Jesus Christ within the ballad, his reliance on the Virgin Mary's protection corroborates Carroll's assertion that "English Catholics saw Mary as a supernatural being with independent power, far more powerful than Christ, and who demanded cultic devotion in exchange for exercising that power to the benefit of her devotees."<sup>55</sup> The Virgin Mary indeed demonstrates the extent of her sovereign power by protecting her son, as illustrated in the early Robin Hood ballads, in addition to other devout outlaws who resemble him.

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 133-136.

<sup>50</sup> Lesley Coote, *Storyworlds of Robin Hood The Origins of a Medieval Outlaw* (London, England: Reaktion Books, 2020), 99.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Ohlgren, eds., "Robin Hood and the Monk," ballad, in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), line 203.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 139-140

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, line 319

<sup>55</sup> Michael P. Carroll, "The Early Robin Hood and 'The Myght of Mylde Marye': Revisiting the Lived Experience of Catholicism in Late Medieval England," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 43, no. 1 (January 15, 2014): 130, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0008429813513231>, 126.

In both “A Gest of Robyn Hode” and “Robin Hood and the Monk,” the Virgin Mary exerts her sovereign power to protect Robin Hood, thus supporting him in his outlawry, which is typically directed towards corrupt religious figures. However, the Virgin Mary’s history of siding with devout outlaws above dishonest religious authorities transcends Robin Hood and is transparent in other medieval stories, such as the Marian *Miracles* stories. As Coote describes, “...in the world of the *Miracles*, as in the world of Robin Hood, clerical sinfulness draws greater condemnation, and stronger punishment, than the sins of the ordinary laity.”<sup>56</sup> The Virgin Mary instead favors outlaws, individuals who, like her son Jesus Christ or Robin Hood as Jesus Christ, are targeted by authorities despite their obvious piety. These individuals, unlike corrupt religious authorities, receive her supernatural assistance because they remain devout despite their sinfulness or, like Jesus Christ and Robin Hood, simply alienated from the secular and non-secular authorities of their time. One such story in William of Malmesbury’s twelfth-century anthology *Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary* features Ebbo the thief, who “deeply loved our Lady Mary.” When Ebbo is captured and hanged, the Virgin Mary rescues him from death by suspending him in the air to ensure the noose does not kill him.<sup>57</sup> A similar story also exists in Jacobus de Voragine’s *The Golden Legend*, another twelfth-century anthology of saints’ lives and other miracles. In this story, a thief is likewise rescued from hanging by the Virgin Mary due to his intense devotion.<sup>58</sup> These instances demonstrate both the Virgin Mary’s independent protective power as well as her appreciation of piety over adherence to the law.

Like Robin Hood, who represents her son, Jesus Christ, the outlaws of the *Miracles* stories are devout and honest, earning the Virgin Mary’s trust over corrupt religious figures like the monks, “who love their money so well that they attempt to conceal it, not only from Robin Hood but from the Virgin herself.”<sup>59</sup> The Virgin Mary thus utilizes her sovereign protective power to enact justice, whether it be through assisting Robin Hood as her son, Jesus Christ, or intervening directly in civilians’ lives as she does in *Miracles*. As Coote acknowledges, “Justice, then, is an issue with which the Virgin Mary is very concerned. In legal terms, she is an equitable judge, more interested in the spirit rather than the letter of the law.”<sup>60</sup> The Virgin Mary exercises her power to enact her own justice by assisting devout

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<sup>56</sup> Lesley Coote, *Storyworlds of Robin Hood The Origins of a Medieval Outlaw* (London, England: Reaktion Books, 2020), 99.

<sup>57</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, trans. by R. M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2015), 103.

<sup>58</sup> Chartier, Roger. “The Hanged Woman Miraculously Saved.” In *The Culture of Print: Power and the Uses of Print in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Roger Chartier and Linda G. Cochrane, 59-91. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987, 73.

<sup>59</sup> Lesley Coote, *Storyworlds of Robin Hood The Origins of a Medieval Outlaw* (London, England: Reaktion Books, 2020), 93.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

outlaws like her son in the *Miracles*, “often appear[ing] as an advocate on behalf of her devotees, at a spiritual tribunal of some kind in which her son is the judge.”<sup>61</sup>

Coote’s observations regarding the *Miracles* translate directly to the early Robin Hood ballads, where the Virgin Mary supports and protects Robin Hood, who in turn enacts justice by supporting and protecting the Virgin Mary’s devotees. Because Robin Hood is “her son” in the early ballads, he acts as “the judge” in various “spiritual tribunals.” These tribunals include Robin Hood’s “truth test[s],” such as his successful truth test with the knight and his failed truth test with the monk in “A Gest of Robyn Hode.” Ultimately, the truth tests determine the fate of both individuals in the *Gest*; Robin Hood gives the knight a loan, with the Virgin Mary as a borrow, and steals the monk’s money, considering it his “pay” from the Virgin Mary. The Virgin Mary institutes justice by supporting and protecting Robin Hood as her son in the early ballads, much as she directly institutes justice in the *Miracles* stories—by exercising her sovereign protective power.

Considering the extensive popularity of Robin Hood stories in late medieval England, on the eve of the Reformation, Robin Hood’s characterization as a Christ-like figure protected by the Virgin Mary, despite his outright defiance of institutionalized religion, is highly significant. The early Robin Hood ballads not only corroborate the idea that, for many medieval Catholics, the Virgin Mary possessed a sovereign power surpassing even that of her son but also that she utilized that power to defy institutionalized religion by supporting Robin Hood as her son, in addition to other “good outlaws” who resembled him. Robin Hood’s own representation of Christ as an outlaw, especially alienated from corrupt monks, suggests a general distaste among the English audience of the time with what Carroll refers to as “reformist critiques” of “clerical laxity and a lack of interiorized piety among the general population.”<sup>62</sup> Robin Hood’s own piety and construction as a Christ-like figure, in contrast with his targeting of institutionalized religious figures, reflects the tension between intense religiosity and alienation from institutionalized religion that many medieval audience members experienced on the eve of the Reformation.

Various reformists in medieval England pointed to the fact that Robin Hood stories were particularly popular among people who were not particularly devout, condemning the Church of Rome for religious deficiency among the general population.<sup>63</sup> However, there is also evidence that Robin Hood ballads were utilized in sermon exempla. As such, Catholic preachers likely employed the popularity of the Robin Hood ballads to not only “seize and retain the attention of a preacher’s

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Michael P. Carroll, “The Early Robin Hood and ‘The Myght of Mylde Marye’: Revisiting the Lived Experience of Catholicism in Late Medieval England,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 43, no. 1 (January 15, 2014): 130, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0008429813513231>, 118.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

congregation”<sup>64</sup> and prevent listeners from “ever noddynge”<sup>65</sup> during sermons but also appeal to an increasingly alienated audience to promote certain “devotional behaviors.” Robin Hood, as a symbolic representation of Christ frustrated with clerical corruption, would be a sympathetic, albeit evidently devout example. Furthermore, his intense devotion to the Virgin Mary and her returned maternal protection would attract many Catholics at the time, who viewed the Virgin Mary as “pre-eminent in the Catholic pantheon.”<sup>66</sup> Ultimately, the early success of Robin Hood stories can be attributed at least partially to the increasing alienation of the English people from institutionalized religion during the late medieval period prior to the Reformation. Further studies might explore the popularity of Robin Hood and other outlaw stories and their implications for their late medieval audience’s relationship with religion, including their potential contributions to the English Reformation. For instance, the outlaw stories of the *Miracles*, which are often cited as source material or inspiration for the early Robin Hood ballads, might be analyzed more extensively in further research.

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<sup>64</sup> Jones, D. *Friars’ Tales: Thirteenth-Century Exempla from the British Isles*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011, 14.

<sup>65</sup> Michael P. Carroll, “The Early Robin Hood and ‘The Myght of Mylde Marye’: Revisiting the Lived Experience of Catholicism in Late Medieval England,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 43, no. 1 (January 15, 2014): 130, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0008429813513231>, 120.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

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